

Alex Janiak

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Socrates' View of Ignorance in The Apology

Socrates, one of the most renowned philosophers throughout history, dedicated his life to exploring the fundamental questions of existence and the nature of knowledge. At the core of his philosophy was the idea that true wisdom begins with the recognition of one's own ignorance. The observation of the relationship between ignorance and wisdom is especially illuminating in Plato's *Apology* – a Socratic dialogue portraying Socrates' trial. Within the dialogue, Socrates gives a defense speech in which he provides a convincing argument to the jurors of Athens against the generational slander of his name as well as the validity – and frivolousness – of the claims brought against him. Socrates is ultimately sentenced to death, but, in his speech he is able to define ignorance as thinking you know something when you don't – in another sense, a lack of epistemic humility. The following essay will explain how in the *Apology*, Socrates derives his definition of ignorance, the paradox of this definition, and how he views man's fear of death as ignorant.

Socrates begins his defense speech by first attempting to refuting his earlier accusers who say that “Socrates is guilty of wrongdoing in that he busies himself studying things in the sky and below the earth; he makes the worse into the stronger argument, and he teaches these same things to others” (*Apology* 19b). In defense, Socrates claims that his reputation is caused by “human wisdom” and tells a story to show why. He says he heard that the oracle at Delphi said that no one was wiser than him. Thinking he was not wise at all, Socrates sought out to disprove the oracle by questioning those who called themselves wise. He found that not only were they

not actually wise regarding their profession, he was wiser because he did not think he knew when he didn't know (*Apology* 21a-e). This is where Socrates primarily introduces and defines ignorance. During his investigation, he finds that the people who claimed to be wise in their professions were actually ignorant because they knew less than they claimed to know. In other words, they overextended their knowledge and understanding. This overextension caused them to be blinded to the faults in their knowledge, and thus Socrates was able to show that they claimed to know something incorrectly.

Socrates's definition of ignorance also makes sense intuitively. When speaking to someone who one would think is "ignorant", it is likely that either they are claiming to know something they don't actually know or they are unwilling to accept that their knowledge is incorrect in face of valid evidence. Although the latter is not shown in Socrates' dissection, it still fits under his definition. If someone is presented with valid evidence that contradicts what they claim to know but refuses to change their opinion, then that person thinks they know something when they don't and are thus ignorant.

At the end of the investigation, Socrates comes to the conclusion that the wisdom of those he investigated was overshadowed by their ignorance. He finds that it is better to be neither wise nor ignorant than to be both (*Apology* 22e). This conclusion reveals that Socrates' view of ignorance is not simply a lack of general knowledge, for it is possible to have wisdom and ignorance in the same person. Rather, it is a lack of self-knowledge, or knowledge regarding oneself. If you knew yourself, you would know what you knew and what you didn't know, and thus would not be ignorant. In the same sense, this definition of ignorance can be viewed as a lack of epistemic humility. Those who are ignorant overestimate their knowledge.

This definition of ignorance that Socrates proposes, thinking you know something when you don't, is somewhat paradoxical as well. If Socrates knows that he is not ignorant because he knows that he does not know, does that not mean he knows something? This is specifically illuminated when Socrates tells the jurors that the Delphic oracle said: "This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless" (*Apology* 23b). Put differently, Socrates knows that what he knows is worthless, but finds that he knows more than others, and is thus wiser, because he knows that his knowledge is worth nothing. Socrates' view of wisdom is paradoxical in nature, knowing that you know nothing, and is also the counterpart to his view of ignorance, not knowing what you don't know.

Socrates' last mention of ignorance in the *Apology* occurs in his discussion of death. After explaining to the jurors what he had done to develop a negative reputation, he clarifies that he had followed down that dangerous path because he believes that one should only focus on whether your actions are right or wrong and not account for the risk of life or death (*Apology* 28c). To support his statement, he compares the fear of death to thinking you are wise when you are not and says: "No one knows whether death may not be the greatest blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest evils" (*Apology* 29a-b). Through this, Socrates shows that he views the fear of death as akin to ignorance. Those who fear death are terrified of something they can't possibly know; they don't know what happens after death but still act as if they do. Socrates' lack of fear of death is an example of his wisdom and lack of ignorance seen through a different medium.

In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates provides a convincing defense of himself while at the same time offering insight into the nature of ignorance and wisdom. In his speech, Socrates defines ignorance as thinking you know something when you don't and wisdom as knowing what you

don't know. The paradoxical nature of this definition, as well as his belief that the fear of death is akin to ignorance, demonstrates his simple yet insightful perspective on knowledge, life, and existence.

Works Cited

Plato, *Apology*, Cambridge: Hackett Publish Company, Inc, 2002. Print.