

LECTURE 3.1: Backgrounder to Reading the CRITO Dialogue

Note: Please read this LECTURE with your text opened to the Crito reading (Cahn/Markie, pp. 33-42)

43a-44b – P opens the dialogue with a scene designed to emphasize yet again how different S is from most men. The time is approaching for his execution, yet he sleeps peacefully – as though he had not a care in the world. His dream confirms what he had concluded at the end of the trial: Death is not an evil to be feared but is more like the soul coming home again after many hardships.

44b-46a – C loses no time in trying to persuade S to escape. He piles upon reason. To help you identify the various reasons offered by Crito to persuade Socrates to escape, be guided by the following questions (**NOTE: As you are reading the Crito reading, try to answer mentally the following questions**):

Q1 – List at least 7 reasons C urges upon S for making his escape.

NOTE: Most of these reasons are prudential in nature, not moral. The one that does appeal to “what is right” seems to come out of the Sophist’s playbook: What is right, C says, is to preserve one’s own life whenever one can.” Several of the reasons appeal to “what people will think” or “how things will look” if S does not take this opportunity. This leads S to ask why one should pay any attention at all to what the majority of people say

Q2 – What does C say in response to this question, and what is S’s reply? **Q3** – What does S indicate as the “greatest good”?

46b-49a – Characteristically, S says they must “**examine**” whether to act in this way.

Q4 – What kind of man does S here say that he is?

S reminds C that he has always maintained that one should pay attention only to the opinions of some people, the “most reasonable” people. He then invites C to reexamine this conviction in light of his present situation – his facing imminent death. Does it “stand fast” even now? Perhaps it will now appear unserious, nothing more than “play and nonsense,” and S will want to change his mind.

The examination is conducted, as so often, in terms of an analogy: S draws a comparison between the health of the body and the health of the soul. S points out that you don’t listen to just anybody when it comes to matters of bodily health. The same must also be true when it is a matter of the soul’s well-being. You want to listen to those who are wise, not to the opinions of

the many. So what must people think if S escapes or does not escape is, strictly speaking, irrelevant. It should be set aside. Reluctantly perhaps, C agrees.

Q5 – What corrupts and ruins the soul, according to S? What benefits it?

Q6 – Which, body or soul, is more valuable? Why do you think S says that?

Q7 – S says that 3 kinds of life are: the same”: the good life, the beautiful life, and the just life. Think about the lives you are familiar with. Do you agree? Is it really the just people whose lives are beautiful and good?

They agree, then that the right thing to do is the only thing they should have in mind when making the decision. The question is simply this: Is it just or unjust to escape? Will escaping bring benefit or harm to the soul?

49a-50a – The next principle S brings up for reexamination is this: that one should never willingly do wrong. Why not? Because doing wrong is “harmful and shameful to the wrongdoer.” Again we see S emphasizing that we harm our souls by doing wrong, which makes us into worse people than we otherwise would be.

Q8 – What corollary to this “never do wrong” principle does S draw out in **49b-d**?

Q9 – S says this is not something the majority of people believe. Do you believe it?

Note that **injuring** is not the same as **inflicting harm**. Remember, S was a soldier, and a good one. He even cited his military experience with pride in his defense before the jury. But soldiers inflict damage on other soldiers, perhaps even kill them. Moreover, Athens is about to execute S, but he says nothing to suggest that capital punishment is wrongdoing or injury. It may, then, be justifiable – in war or according to law – to inflict harm. Still, we must never injure each other. Injury is unjust harming of another.

What is wrong, S says, is doing injustice in return for an injustice done to you. Wrong done to you never justifies your doing wrong. The reason is simply that doing injustice is always wrong, always a corruption of the soul. When you consider how to act, according to S, you should never think about revenge, or paying back, or getting even. All these motivations look to the past, to what has happened to you, and you should look only to actions that will promote excellence – in your soul and in others. That is the way to care for your soul, and C says that he agrees.

S says they should examine next whether one should always keep agreements made (49e). C agrees immediately, so we come to the major part of the argument.

50a-54d – In this section, we have a **dramatic piece of rhetoric**. P gives us a **dialogue within the dialogue in the form of an imaginary “examination” of S of the laws of Athens**. It is rhetorical all right; but **it contains an argument**. S will look to this argument, this *logos*, in

making his decision. Remember that S says he is the kind of man who listens only to the best logos. So it is the argument that we must try to discern.

S indicates the conclusion of the argument right off: that escaping will constitute an attempt to injure the laws, and indeed the whole city, insofar as it is in S's power to do so. It is this proposition that the laws have to prove. If they can do so, it will follow immediately that S must not escape, because an escape attempt will amount to doing injury. It will also be no good for S to reply, "Well, the laws injured me by convicting me unjustly!" because we have already agreed that one must not return injury for injury.

How will escaping injure the laws of Athens? This part of the argument begins with the laws claiming that they are to be honored more than mother, father, or all one's ancestors.

Q10 – What reasons are offered by the laws for this claim?

Q11 – What alternatives does Athens offer its citizens if they do not agree with or like the laws?

Q12 – Could S have left Athens at any time if he was not pleased with the laws?

Q13 – What conclusion follows from the fact that S stayed?

So the situation is this: In virtue of his long residence in Athens, S has agreed to be a citizen under the laws, to accept their benefits and "live in accordance" with them. This agreement was made without any compulsion and in full knowledge of what was involved. There can be no doubt that it is a just agreement. Further, S and C have already agreed that just agreements must be kept. But it is not yet clear how breaking this agreement will injure the laws and the city of Athens.

A **clue** is found in **54b**, where the laws say that S wronged not by them, but by men. No legal order can exist without application and enforcement, courts and punishments, and part of voluntarily accepting citizenship is agreeing to abide by the decisions of the legally constituted courts. There can be no doubt that the court that convicted S was a legal court. It should also be noted that S does not criticize the Athenian law against impiety on which he was tried. If the jury made a mistake and decided the case unjustly, that cannot be laid at the door of the laws. Such things can always happen. So the laws did S no injustice. (Though even if they had, that would not, on S's principles, justify his doing wrong in return.)

The situation then is this: To escape would be tantamount to an attack on the authority of the court to decide as it did. If this court lacks authority over its citizens, what court has such authority? To attack the authority of the court is to attempt, insofar as it is possible for one man, to destroy the legal system, and the city, as a whole. "Or do you think it is possible for a city not to be destroyed if the verdicts of its courts have no force but are nullified and set at naught by private individuals?" (**50b**)

The argument is complex, and it may be useful to set it out in skeleton form (**Note:** P is premise and C is conclusion).

P1. One must never do wrong.

a. Because to do wrong is ‘in every way harmful and shameful to the wrongdoer.’ (49b)

b. Because doing wrong harms the part of ourselves that is “more valuable.” (48a)

P2. One must never return wrong for wrong done. (This follows directly from P1.)

P3. To injure others (treat them unjustly) is to do wrong.

C1. Therefore, one must never injure others. (This follows from P1 and P3.)

P4. To violate a just agreement is to do injury.

P5. To escape would be to violate a just agreement with the laws. (Here we have the argument presented in the dialogue between S and the laws.)

C2. Therefore, to escape would be an injury to the laws. (This follows from C1 and P4)

P6. To escape would be wrong. (This follows from P3 and C2.)

C3 (Over all, conclusion) Therefore, Socrates must not escape. (This follows from P1 and P6.)

The above reasoning is the one that S finds convincing, and C has nothing to say against it. So it is the one S will be content to live – and die – by. Once again, it is better to suffer injustice than to do it, even if that means losing one’s life to avoid committing an unjust act.

There remains the task of countering the considerations C has put forward in favor of escape. In **53a-54a**, the laws address these arguments point by point.

Q14 – Go back to your list in Q1, and state the rebuttal offered by the laws. Who is more persuasive – Crito or the laws?

54d-e – **Corybants** are priests of Earth and the fertility goddess Cybele, who express their devotion in ecstatic dances, oblivious to what is going on around them. The dialogue ends with P once again emphasizing the very real piety of S. He quietly accepts the verdict of the logos as guidance from the god. The voice of reason, as far as it can be discerned, is the voice of the divine.