

## The Trial of Socrates

*The Athenian philosopher Socrates (469?-399 BCE), under sentence of death, refuses the pleas of his friends to escape.*

**Socrates:** Then consider the matter in this way: - Imagine that I am about to play truant . . . , and the laws and the government come and question me: 'Tell us, Socrates,' they say; 'what are you doing? Are you not going as far as you can to overthrow us - the laws and the whole state? Do you imagine that a state can exist when the decisions of law have no power, but are set aside and trampled upon by individuals?' . . . shall we reply, 'Yes; but the state has injured me and given an unjust sentence.' Suppose I say that?

**Crito :** Very good, Socrates.

**Socrates:** 'And was that the issue?' the law would answer; 'or were you to abide by the sentence of the state?...

Then the laws will say, 'Consider, Socrates, if we are speaking truly that in your present attempt you are going to do us an injury. For, having brought you into the world, and nurtured and educated you, and given you and every other citizen a share in every good which we had to give, we further proclaim to any Athenian by the liberty which we allow him, that if he does not like us when he has become of age . . . he may go where he pleases and take his goods with him. None of us laws will forbid him or interfere with him. But he who has experience with the manner in which we order justice and administer the state, and still remains, has entered into an implied contract that he will do as we command him. And he who disobeys us is, as we maintain, thrice wrong; first, because in disobeying us he is disobeying his parents; secondly, because we are the authors of his education; thirdly, because he has made an agreement with us that he will duly obey our commands...

*Although he could have saved himself by admitting errors, Socrates chose death. He said:*

"A man who is worth anything should not calculate the chance of living or dying, but whether he is doing the right thing and behaving like a good man or a bad one... It would be strange (wrong~ if, when I had been given orders by our generals, I stayed where they put me but now when, as I believe, God has commanded me to enquire critically into myself and other men, I were to leave my post (run away) through fear of death....

So if you release me now and say to me, 'Socrates, this time we'll let you off, but on this condition, that you will not engage in such criticism any more. If we catch you doing so again you shall die'--if you said that I would answer:

'Men of Athens, I honor and love you, but I shall obey God rather than you, and while I live and have the strength to do it I shall continue my pursuit of understanding, saying to anyone whom I meet, "You, my friend, a citizen of the great Athens, aren't you ashamed of amassing so much wealth and prestige as you can but paying so little, if any, attention to understanding the truth and you soul's progress?" And if the man protests and says he does care, I do not let him get off so easily, but I question and cross-examine him; and if I think he has no goodness in him but only says he has, I upbraid him for his false set of values. And I shall keep doing this with everyone whom I meet, for you must realize that this is my assignment from God, and I believe no greater good has ever happened in our city than this service of mine."

**SOURCE:** Plato, *Crito*, translated by B. Jowett, in Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*. By permission of the Clarendon Press, Oxford. 1953, Vol. I, 379-81. Adapted.