

Study Questions for *The Trial and Death of Socrates*

What does it mean to be a good person? To be a good citizen? What is the role of government in our lives? Must we obey an unjust law? *The Trial and Death of Socrates* raises such questions, even as it presents the last days of one of the great men of Western civilization. During his life, Socrates' teachings by turns inspired, challenged and infuriated his fellow Athenians. More than two millennia later, his thought continues to have a profound impact on people throughout the world. As best we know, Socrates did not write down any of his teachings himself. It was left to his greatest student, Plato, to do so in what have come to be known as the Dialogues of Plato. *The Trial and Death of Socrates* consists of four of those dialogues. **Your assignment is to read three of them: *The Apology*, *Crito*, and the short excerpt from *Phaedo*. (You do not have to read *Euthyphro*, but are certainly free to do so.)** These readings will begin to introduce us to important issues regarding civic life and government in general and so better prepare us to study American civic life and government in particular.

*The Trial and Death of Socrates* is not an easy read, but then few great books are. Reading great books is a little like playing against the best athletes in your sport. It's a great challenge but worth it because it leaves you stronger and better for the effort. (Imagine what would happen to your athletic skills if you always and only played the weakest competition.) Be prepared for the fact that you may need to reread a section several times to fully understand it. In fact, my strong suggestion is that you read each dialogue once to get a general sense of it, and then reread it more slowly, being careful to look up words you don't understand and thinking more carefully about the points being made. Doing so will greatly help your comprehension. (And the good news is that the dialogues, although dense, are relatively short.)

Below are some study questions regarding the dialogues. Use them to help you think about some of the important matters raised in the dialogues. **Also, at the beginning of the school year you will be given a test on this reading, and the test questions will be based largely on issues addressed by the study questions.**

General Context:

1. Where is Athens located? Look on a map and compare its location to other great ancient civilizations, e.g., Egypt, Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq), Persia (modern-day Iran), and Rome.
2. When did Socrates live? How many centuries earlier did he live than Christ? Than our own time?

*The Apology*

1. Socrates' accusers bring a number of charges against him, including "making the worse argument the stronger" and "studying things in the sky and below the earth." What might be meant by each of these charges? (Regarding the "sky and earth" charge, consider Greek teaching about the role of their traditional gods.)
2. If the charges are true, how might such actions be corrupting of the young (perhaps the most serious charge against Socrates), and what danger do they pose to public order?
3. The oracle of Delphi proclaims Socrates the "wisest of men". How does Socrates go about investigating this claim? Does he think it true? In what sense? Why would Socrates' efforts in this matter make him unpopular?
4. What charges does Meletus bring against Socrates? In refuting the charges, Socrates makes several different arguments—can you identify three of them? Finally, can you detect how Socrates cleverly sidesteps having to defend against one of Meletus' charges?
5. It has been said that Socrates saw his life's work as "care for the soul." What does this seem to mean in terms of his encounters with his fellow Athenians? Why does he compare himself to a gadfly?
6. What fear does Socrates express about taking part in politics or public life? Do you think some of his concerns hold true for politicians and government officials in our own time? Why or why not?
7. When Socrates is found guilty, he has a chance to suggest his own punishment. What does he suggest, and why do you think the jury refuses his suggestion?
8. At one point, Socrates tells the jury, "The unexamined life is not worth living." (38a) This is one of his most famous sayings. What do you think he meant by it?

*Crito*

1. What does Crito hope to persuade Socrates to do? What are some of the arguments he uses in doing so?
2. Look up the word *analogy*. What is it, and how does Socrates make use of an analogy in arguing against relying on the opinions of the majority?
3. What does Socrates get Crito to agree to regarding doing evil or harm to others? Which argument of Socrates from *The Apology* does this discussion remind you of?
4. In a key section of *Crito*, Socrates engages in a hypothetical dialogue with the "laws" of Athens. What fundamental agreement do the laws claim Socrates would break if he ran away rather than accept his punishment? What evidence do the laws give that Socrates had clearly entered into this agreement?
5. *Crito* suggests why government and the rule of law are so important to a people living together. What might be some of the benefits these institutions bring? What might happen in their absence?
6. What if laws or verdicts are wrong or unjust? Should they still be obeyed? What seems to be Socrates' answer? Is he convincing?

Death Scene from *Phaedo*

1. According to Socrates, what kind of characteristics should a man strive for in caring for his soul?
2. What is unusual about the court officer's attitude toward Socrates, and how does this help us better understand Socrates' impact on others?
3. Throughout all three dialogues, Socrates' beliefs about the afterlife increasingly become apparent. What are those beliefs and how do they help explain his attitude toward death?