

yourselves in the play by Aristophanes, where Socrates is lifted around, proclaiming that he is walking on air, and uttering a great deal of other nonsense about things of which I know nothing whatsoever.⁹ I mean no disrespect for such knowledge, if anyone really is versed in it – I do not want any more lawsuits brought against me by Meletus¹⁰ – but the fact is, gentlemen, that I take no interest in these things. What is more, I call upon the greater part of you as witnesses to my statement, and I appeal to all of you who have ever listened to me talking (and there are a great many to whom this applies) to reassure one another on this point. Tell one another whether any one of you has ever heard me discuss such questions briefly or at length; and then you will realize that the other popular reports about me are equally unreliable.¹¹

Socrates denies that he is a professional teacher.

The fact is that there is nothing in any of these charges; and if you have heard anyone say that I try to educate people and charge a fee,¹² there is no truth in that either – though I think that it is a fine thing if a man has the ability to teach, as in the case of Gorgias of Leontini, Prodicus of Ceos and Hippias of Elis.¹³ Each one of these is perfectly capable of going into any city and actually persuading the young men to leave the company of their fellow-citizens, with any of whom they can associate for nothing, attach themselves to him, pay money for the privilege, and be grateful into the bargain. There is another expert too from Paros who I discovered was here on a visit. I happened to meet a man who has paid more in sophists' fees than all the rest put together – I mean Callias, the son of Hipponicus;¹⁴ so I asked him (he has two sons, you see): 'Callias,' I said, 'if your sons had been colts or calves, we should have had no difficulty in finding and engaging a trainer to make them excel in the appropriate qualities; and this trainer would have been some sort of horse-dealer or agriculturalist. But seeing that they are human beings, whom do you intend to get as their instructor? Who is the expert in perfecting the virtues of people in a society? I assume from the fact of your having sons that you must have considered the question. Is there such a person or not?'

'Certainly', said he. 'Who is he, and where does he come from?' said I, 'and what does he charge?' 'Evenus of Paros,¹⁵ Socrates,' said he, 'and his fee is 500 drachmae.' I felt that Evenus was to be congratulated if he really was a master of this art and taught it at such a moderate fee.¹⁶ I should certainly become a proud and gentlemanly figure if I understood these things; but in fact, gentlemen, I do not. **Socrates' Oracle and Pursuit of Wisdom**

Socrates explains what his own activity has been. The oracle of Apollo has declared that he is the wisest of men, and he has been trying to find men wiser than he is as part of his search for the god's meaning. The section begins in Socrates' conversational manner, but the narrative which follows is stylistically very like that of other Athenian speeches for the lawcourts.

Here perhaps one of you might interrupt me and say, 'But what is it that you do, Socrates? How is it that you have been misrepresented like this? Surely all this talk and gossip about you would never have arisen if you had confined yourself to ordinary activities, but only if your behaviour was abnormal. Give us the explanation, if you do not want us to draw our own conclusions.' This seems to me to be a reasonable request, and I will try to explain to you what it is that has given me this false notoriety; so please give me your attention. Perhaps some of you will think that I am not being serious; but I assure you that I am going to tell you the whole truth.

I have gained this reputation, gentlemen, from nothing more or less than a kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom do I mean? Human wisdom, I suppose. It seems that I really am wise in this limited sense. Presumably the geniuses whom I mentioned just now are wise in a wisdom that is more than human – I do not know how else to account for it, because I certainly do not have this knowledge, and anyone who says that I have is lying and just saying it to slander me. Now, gentlemen, please do not interrupt me even if I seem to make an extravagant claim; for what I am going to tell you is not a tale of my own; I am going to refer you to an unimpeachable authority. I shall call as witness to my wisdom (such as it is) the god at Delphi.¹⁷

You know Chaerephon,¹⁸ I presume. He was a friend of mine

21a from boyhood, and a good democrat who played his part with the rest of you in the recent expulsion and restoration.¹⁹ And you know what he was like; how enthusiastic he was over anything that he had once undertaken. Well, one day he actually went to Delphi and asked this question of the god – as I said before, gentlemen, please do not interrupt – what he asked was whether there was anyone wiser than myself. The Pythian priestess replied that there was no one. As Chaerephon is dead, the evidence for my statement will be supplied by his brother²⁰ here.

b Please consider my object in telling you this. I want to explain to you how the attack on my reputation first started.²¹ When I heard about the oracle's answer, I said to myself, 'What is the god saying, and what is his hidden meaning? I am only too conscious that I have no claim to wisdom, great or small; so what can he mean by asserting that I am the wisest man in the world? He cannot be telling a lie; that would not be right for him.'²²

c After puzzling about it for some time, I set myself at last with considerable reluctance to check the truth of it in the following way. I went to interview a man with a high reputation for wisdom, because I felt that here if anywhere I should succeed in disproving the oracle and pointing out to my divine authority, 'You said that I was the wisest of men, but here is a man who is wiser than I am.'

d Well, I gave a thorough examination to this person – I need not mention his name, but it was one of our politicians that I was studying when I had this experience – and in conversation with him I formed the impression that although in many people's opinion, and especially in his own, he appeared to be wise, in fact he was not. Then when I began to try to show him that he only thought he was wise and was not really so, my efforts were resented both by him and by many of the other people present. However, I reflected as I walked away: 'Well, I am certainly wiser than this man. It is only too likely that neither of us has any knowledge to boast of; but he thinks that he knows something which he does not know, whereas I am quite conscious of my ignorance. At any rate it seems that I am wiser than

he is to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know.'

After this I went on to interview a man with an even greater reputation for wisdom, and I formed the same impression again; and here too I incurred the resentment of the man himself and a number of others.

From that time on I interviewed one person after another. I realized with distress and alarm that I was making myself unpopular, but I felt compelled to put the god's business first; since I was trying to find out the meaning of the oracle, I was bound to interview everyone who had a reputation for knowledge. And by Dog,²³ gentlemen (for I must be frank with you), my honest impression was thus: it seemed to me, as I pursued my investigation at the god's command, that the people with the greatest reputations were almost entirely deficient, while others who were supposed to be their inferiors were much more noteworthy for their general good sense.

I want you to think of my adventures as a cycle of labours²⁴ undertaken to establish the truth of the oracle once for all. After I had finished with the politicians I turned to the poets,²⁵ dramatic, lyric, and all the rest, in the belief that here I should expose myself as a comparative ignoramus. I used to pick up what I thought were some of their most polished works and question them closely about the meaning of what they had written, in the hope of incidentally enlarging my own knowledge. Well, gentlemen, I hesitate to tell you the truth, but it must be told. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that any of the bystanders could have explained those poems better than their actual authors. So I soon made up my mind about the poets too: I decided that it was not wisdom that enabled them to write their poetry, but a kind of instinct or inspiration,²⁶ such as you find in seers and prophets who deliver all their sublime messages without knowing in the least what they mean. It seemed clear to me that the poets were in much the same case; and I also observed that the very fact that they were poets made them think that they had a perfect understanding of all other subjects, of which they were totally ignorant. So I left that line of inquiry

too with the same sense of advantage that I had felt in the case of the politicians.

d Last of all I turned to the skilled craftsmen.²⁷ I knew quite well that I had practically no understanding myself, and I was sure that I should find them full of impressive knowledge. In this I was not disappointed; they understood things which I did not, and to that extent they were wiser than I was. However, gentlemen, these professional experts seemed to share the same failing which I had noticed in the poets; I mean that on the strength of their technical proficiency they claimed a perfect understanding of every other subject, however important; and I e felt that this error eclipsed their positive wisdom. So I made myself spokesman for the oracle, and asked myself whether I would rather be as I was – neither wise with their wisdom nor ignorant with their ignorance – or possess both qualities as they did. I replied through myself to the oracle that it was best for me to be as I was.

The results of Socrates' interrogations: odium, poverty, wealthy youths who enjoy imitating him, and charges that he is responsible for corrupting them.

23a The effect of these investigations of mine, gentlemen, has been to arouse against me a great deal of hostility, and hostility of a particularly bitter and persistent kind, which has resulted in various malicious suggestions, and in having that term 'wise' applied to me. This is due to the fact that whenever I succeed in disproving another person's claim to wisdom in a given subject, the bystanders assume that I know everything about that subject myself.²⁸ But the truth of the matter, gentlemen, is likely to be b It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, 'The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless.'

That is why I still go about seeking and searching in obedience to the divine command, if I think that anyone is wise, whether citizen or stranger; and when I decide that he is not wise, I try

to assist the god²⁹ by proving that he is not. This occupation has kept me too busy to do much either in politics or in my own affairs; in fact, my service to God has reduced me to extreme poverty.

Furthermore the young men – those with wealthy fathers and plenty of leisure – have of their own accord³⁰ attached themselves to me because they enjoy hearing other people cross-questioned. These often take me as their model, and go on to try to question other persons; whereupon, I suppose, they find an unlimited number of people who think that they know something, but really know little or nothing. Consequently their victims become annoyed, not with themselves but with me; d and they complain that there is a pestilential busybody called Socrates who fills young people's heads with wrong ideas. If you ask them what he does, and what he teaches that has this effect, they have no answer, not knowing what to say; but as they do not want to admit their confusion, they fall back on the stock charges against any seeker after wisdom: that he teaches his pupils about things in the heavens and below the earth, and to disbelieve in gods, and to make the weaker argument defeat the stronger. They would be very loath, I fancy, to admit the truth: which is that they are being convicted of pretending to e knowledge when they are entirely ignorant. They were so jealous, I suppose, for their own reputation, and also energetic and numerically strong, and spoke about me with such vigour and persuasiveness, that their harsh criticisms have for a long time now been monopolizing your ears.

Conclusion of the narrative concerned with Socrates' activities and of Socrates' reply to the 'Old Accusers'.

There you have the causes which led to the attack upon me by Meletus³¹ and Anytus³² and Lycon, Meletus being aggrieved on behalf of the poets, Anytus on behalf of the professional men and politicians, and Lycon on behalf of the orators.³³ So, as I 24a said at the beginning, I should be surprised if I were able, in the short time that I have,³⁴ to rid your minds of a misconception so deeply implanted.

There, gentlemen, you have the true facts, which I present to