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A Demonstration of Justice through the Personification of the Law:

Socratic and Platonic Irony in Plato's *Crito*

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A Demonstration of Justice through the Personification of the Law:

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The page number begins in the header of the first page with content.

In the text, note numbers are super-script and located at the end of the sentence.

In *The Republic*, through Socrates, Plato defines justice as "minding one's own business."<sup>1</sup> By not interfering with the affairs of others, one is just. In *Crito*, Plato personifies the Law to illustrate to the reader his definition of justice. However, this seems ironic; Socrates remonstrates Crito for worrying about the opinion of the many, yet he uses the Law, which is an institution of the many, to explain to Crito that his judicial conviction must stand. This is because Plato uses irony as a literary device to illustrate his theory of justice. Irony takes two forms in *Crito*: Socratic and Platonic. Socratic irony revolves around the character of Socrates—the words he says, the arguments he makes, and the actions he performs while speaking. Socratic irony occurs when a contradiction or "inconsistency between theses [Socrates] propounds" occurs within a dialogue, or from one dialogue to another.<sup>2</sup> Platonic irony, on the other hand, occurs when "the 'dramatic'" elements of the dialogue are made for the reader to learn or understand a lesson or context, even if the characters within the dialogue do not understand the message.<sup>3</sup> While within the dialogue Socratic irony is more local in nature, Platonic irony is more global; Socratic irony is found in the dialogue of Socrates only while Platonic irony is found within the overall plot or message of the text.<sup>4</sup> In *Crito*, the personification of the Law contains both Socratic and Platonic irony; not only does it illustrate a contradiction to Socrates' refutation of

1. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Sir Desmond Lee, (London: Penguin, 1987), 145.

2. Charles L. Griswold, "Irony in the Platonic Dialogues," *Philosophy and Literature*, 26, no.1 (April 2002): 91, doi:10.1353/phl.2002.0012.

3. Griswold., "Irony in the Platonic Dialogues," 93.

4. Griswold, 94.

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the many, but by personifying the Law, Plato illustrates the Socratic view of the importance of one remaining just.

Socrates' rejection of the opinion of the many and his acceptance of the opinion of the Law, a construct of the many, demonstrates a Socratic irony. Crito's petition for Socrates to escape is based on his fear of other people's opinions: "[p]eople who do not know you and me will believe that I might have saved you if I had been willing to give money."<sup>5</sup> To this, Socrates reminds Crito that he "begin[s] in error" when he "regard[s] the opinion of the many about just and unjust, good and evil, honorable and dishonorable;" indeed, Socrates states that he and Crito "must not regard what the many say of us."<sup>6</sup> Here, Socrates argues that the opinions of the many do not have merit. However, when Socrates uses the argument of the Law to further his point, he contradicts his argument that the opinions of the many do not matter.

Historically, Athenian law was not only constructed by the representatives of the many, but it also was given authority by the many.<sup>7</sup> When Socrates uses the personified Law to make his argument to stay and die, he seems to place himself in a strange juxtaposition. Speaking as the Law, Socrates argues that "he who has experience of the manner, which [the Law] order justice and administer the state, and still remains, has entered into an implied contract that he will

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5. Plato, *Crito*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1657/1657-h/1657-h.htm>.

6. Plato, *Crito*.

7. Mitchell Miller, "'The Argument I Seem to Hear': Argument and Irony in the *Crito*," *Phronesis* 41, no.2 (1996): 130, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.vccs.edu:2048/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=7b63f823-9264-4226-8672-9eb2b0ec2a39%40sessionmgr198&vid=5&hid=123>.

do as we command."<sup>8</sup> Because Socrates has chosen to live in Athens his entire life, he has chosen to live under the laws of the many; therefore, he must abide by his death sentence. On one hand, Socrates rebuffs the idea that the opinion of the many has merit; on the other hand, he uses an institution created by the many to illustrate that his death sentence must be carried out, thus, taking the form of Socratic irony. Yet, this irony is more than a mere contradiction.

The personification of the Law has a larger message within the context of the dialogue: the value of justice. Socrates views his possible escape as immoral and tells Crito that "neither injury nor retaliation nor warding off evil by evil is ever right."<sup>9</sup> As the personified Law, Socrates makes the argument that because the state raised and nurtured him like a parent, he does not "have the right to strike or revile or do any other evil" because if he does so, he will "destroy [the state] in return."<sup>10</sup> However, the Law is endorsed by the many, and, as illustrated with Socrates conviction and death sentence, the Law consents to revenge of those it deems enemies, thus inflicting injury upon them. Therefore, the Laws are unjust.<sup>11</sup> The opinion of the many influences the law, yet Socrates' constructs the Law as one entity. Even though the Law has been unjust to Socrates, if he goes against the conviction given to him by the Law, Socrates is no longer minding his own business; he would be interfering with the business of the Law. Therefore, Socrates must stay and face his sentence to remain just. By having Socrates use the Law to illustrate to Crito the value of justice while simultaneously illuminating the injustice of

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8. Plato, *Crito*.

9. Plato

10. Plato

When citing the same source concurrently, shorten the note further.

11. Miller, "The Argument I Seem to Hear," 133.

Socrates' conviction, Plato deploys irony masterfully to teach the reader about the relevance of Socrates' commitment to justice.

In Plato's *Crito*, both Socratic and Platonic irony are employed through the personification of the Law as a literary device to demonstrate the importance of being just. On one hand, Socrates claims that the opinion of the many is of no consequence. Yet, on the other hand, he personifies the Law, a construct of the many, to argue the reasons to accept his fate, illustrating Socratic irony. However, by personifying the Law, Plato shows the reader the injustice that Socrates has suffered by the many. The Platonic irony thereby emphasizes the overall moral of the *Crito*: no injustice should ever be reciprocated with another injustice. In *Crito*, both levels of irony, Socratic and Platonic, invite the reader to think deeply about the meaning of justice as well as to examine its distribution in everyday life.

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Bibliography



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Griswald, Charles L. "Irony in the Platonic Dialogues." *Philosophy and Literature* 26, no.1 (April 2002): 84-106, doi: 10.1353/phl.2002.0012.

Miller, Mitchell. "'The Argument I Seem to Hear': Argument and Irony in the Crito." *Phronesis* 41, no.2 (1996): 121-137,  
<http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.vccs.edu:2048/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=7b63f823-9264-4226-8672-9eb2b0ec2a39%40sessionmgr198&vid=5&hid=123>.

Plato. *Crito*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett, (Project Gutenberg, 2013),  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1657/1657-h/1657-h.htm>

—. *The Republic*. Translated by Sir Desmond Lee. London: Penguin, 1987.

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