Can Plato’s Apology Provide a Common Ethical Vocabulary for South Africa?

Andrew Domanski
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

Abstract

South Africa, like many other countries, has lost its moral compass: it is sorely in need of a set of ethical values or norms capable of winning the respect and adherence of all sectors of its heterogeneous population. The central argument in this article is that such a set of values is to be found in Plato’s Apology, in which Socrates features as an exponent and a living practitioner of those values. The values are identified, enumerated and examined. Taken collectively, they stand as a universal moral code which cuts across all ethnic, racial, religious, linguistic and political differences, and is accordingly capable in principle of providing a common ethical vocabulary for a country like South Africa.

1. Introduction

What was Plato’s primary purpose in writing the Apology? To this question, a number of answers can be given. In this article, I argue that Plato’s primary concern was not to provide an historically accurate account of the trial of Socrates; it was not to suggest that Socrates was unjustly treated by his fellow Athenians; it was not to produce a work of literature in the form of a courtroom drama; it was not to provide a case study of Athenian criminal procedure in operation; it was not, finally, to describe Athenian political, social or legal values at the start of the fourth century BCE. These aims, I suggest, are all of secondary importance.

Instead, Plato’s primary object in writing the Apology was to provide, through the mouth of his beloved teacher and friend, Socrates — the wisest of the Greeks according to the oracle of Delphi — a manual of spiritual and ethical values, together with an eye-witness description of a living practitioner of those values; it was to ensure that posterity would not forget the living example set by Socrates through his words and conduct before, during and after his trial. In any analysis of the Apology, therefore, every sentence, every word, must be weighed in the light of this primary object. In
this article, I identify and describe a selection of these values, as they emerge from the speech made by Socrates before the Assembly. I argue further that the totality of these values stands as a template or model of the character of an enlightened individual, irrespective of time, place or other context. Finally, I argue that in its present circumstances, South Africa stands in pressing need of a common ethical vocabulary, which the Socratic values enumerated in this article are collectively capable of providing.

2. The Trial

Why was Socrates on trial before the Athenian assembly? The short and brutal answer is that his fellow citizens could no longer endure his constant questioning and interrogation of them. It was Socrates’ relentless quest for truth that drove him to engage and challenge his fellow citizens at every turn over many years. The immediate aim of Socrates was to establish whether the person under interrogation knew the things he claimed to know, and to demonstrate in almost every case that in fact he did not. Socrates sought to discover and lay bare the values and priorities of his fellow citizens: while they often claimed to put the pursuit of truth and virtue before the accumulation of worldly goods, Socrates showed them through his cross-examinations that this was in reality not usually the case.3

The effect of these cross-examinations was to arouse intense discomfort, resentment, and even hatred towards Socrates: many egos were bruised. The inevitable result was that Socrates made enemies, many of whom were present in the assembly on the day of his trial.4 Socrates had also his loyal followers and devotees who understood well that his intention in acting as he did was never to hurt, to injure, or to make enemies.5 While he foresaw, lamented and feared the hostility aroused by his constant cross-examination of his fellow citizens, he felt that he had no choice in the matter. He had a divine commission, a mandate from God to interrogate ‘all who appear to know’. Necessity was laid upon him by the divinity within himself. Thus Socrates says:6

I went to one man after another, being not unconscious of the enmity which I provoked, and I lamented and feared this: But necessity was laid upon me — the word of God, I thought, ought to be considered first.

Later on, he adds:7

God orders me to fulfil the philosopher’s mission of searching into myself and other men.

Thus Socrates saw his unrelenting interrogation of his fellow-citizens as a duty imposed on him by God: it was plainly not a function that he enjoyed or desired to perform.8 It was a case of simple obedience to the dictates of
duty, discharged by one who was at all times attuned to the promptings of the divinity within. This explains why Socrates initiated the interrogation of others, instead of — as we might expect — engaging in conversation only those who actively approached him and sought access to his wisdom. Socrates paid a heavy personal price for his devotion and obedience to the divine command, for, as he explains to the assembly:  

[M]y occupation quite absorbs me, and I have no time to give either to any public matter of interest or to any concern of my own, but I am in utter poverty by reason of my devotion to the god.

In the passages just quoted, the divine command is conveyed to Socrates through the agency of his daimon, the inner sign or voice which spoke to him from his earliest years. Socrates makes frequent mention of his daimon. In his own life, he paid careful heed to its injunctions, which were invariably couched in the negative. In other words, the daimon would restrain or forbid Socrates from following a particular course of action, but never commanded him to perform any positive act.

In the middle ground between the devoted followers of Socrates, who were few in number, and the many Athenian citizens who felt hostility towards him, there was a third class of persons who attended and listened to his interrogations. These included the sons of well-to-do Athenian citizens who had time on their hands, and derived amusement from seeing pretenders to knowledge being cut down to size by Socrates.

The hostility aroused, albeit unintentionally, by his interrogations mounted to the point where a consensus developed that Socrates had to be got rid of. Plato makes no express reference to this consensus, but the speech made by Socrates before the assembly contains clear pointers. The result was that three Athenian citizens, Meletus, Anytus and Lycon took it upon themselves to contrive and press two charges against Socrates. These were the charges of corrupting the youth of Athens and of impiety, that is, of failing to honour the gods of the State, and preferring instead to worship divinities of his own choosing. That there was no substance in these charges, and that the trial was no more than an exercise in window-dressing, a process of going through the motions, are easily demonstrated. The purpose of the exercise being to rid Athens of Socrates, the majority of those present in the assembly on the day of the trial would have been well content to see him imprisoned or sent into exile. But the uncompromising stance adopted throughout by Socrates made the imposition of the death penalty ultimately unavoidable. Most Athenians certainly had no wish to make a martyr of Socrates. He, however, left them with no choice in the matter. The process which had been set in motion had to proceed to its inexorable conclusion.

The tragedy that underlies the Apology is the complete failure of the
enemies of Socrates, and indeed of the majority of Athenian citizens, to understand how blessed Athens was to have been placed under the loving protection of an enlightened sage. Such a blessing is rare indeed in the course of human affairs. Socrates’ constant questioning of his fellow citizens, besides causing him pain and discomfort, brought him no financial gain, caused him to neglect his family and his personal affairs, and left him almost penniless. For the act of putting Socrates to death and thus spurning the divine gift to the city, Athens, as Socrates warned the Assembly, would pay a heavy price.\(^\text{16}\)

When Socrates proposed, in all seriousness and without a trace of irony, that the appropriate sanction for his conduct over many years would be maintenance for life in the Prytaneum at the expense of the State, the majority took this to be the ultimate affront, one which ensured that he would have to die.\(^\text{17}\) Yet Socrates had no intention of insulting his audience. The failure of Athens to understand the blessing that had been bestowed upon the city is perhaps understandable, for it may well be that it takes one sage to recognise another. Plato and other disciples of Socrates who were present at the trial were well aware that their teacher was no ordinary person, in spite of Socrates’s own oft-repeated disavowal of the knowledge which others claimed he possessed.\(^\text{18}\)

3. **Who was Socrates?**

The picture of Socrates drawn above is in close consonance with Plato’s own portrayal of his teacher in the *Apology, Crito*, and particularly, *Phaedo*. This portrait shows Socrates to have been an exceptional and highly evolved human being, entirely ordinary and yet quite extraordinary. He was the son of Sophroniscus, a humble stone-carver. The similarities between Socrates and another, who came 400 years later, are too compelling to ignore. The latter was the son of a carpenter. Like Socrates, he was subjected to an unfair trial. Like Socrates, he was surrounded by devoted, but unsolicited disciples. He too came to proclaim Truth: where Socrates said ‘Seek virtue before wealth’,\(^\text{19}\) Jesus said ‘But seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you’.\(^\text{20}\) Like Socrates, Jesus was put to death by people who did not understand him.\(^\text{21}\) It can be said, broadly speaking, that the teaching of Socrates and Plato was the way of reason, while that of Jesus was the way of love.

Just as Jesus, the son of a carpenter, was a carver of souls, so Socrates, the son of a stone-cutter, was a sculptor of souls. Consider the following description by the Neoplatonist philosopher, Plotinus:

> If one wants to know the nature of a thing, one must examine it in its pure state, since every addition to a thing is an obstacle to the knowledge of that
thing. When you examine it, then, remove from it everything that is not itself; better still, remove all your stains from yourself and examine yourself, and you will have faith in your immortality.\(^{22}\)

If you do not yet see your own beauty, do as the sculptor does with a statue which must become beautiful: he removes one part, scrapes another, makes one area smooth, and cleans the other, until he causes the beautiful face in the statue to appear. In the same way, you too must remove everything that is superfluous, straighten that which is crooked, and purify all that is dark until you make it brilliant. Never stop sculpting your own statue, until the divine splendour of virtue shines in you ... If you have become this ... and have nothing alien inside you mixed with yourself ... when you see that you have become this ... concentrate your gaze and see. For it is only an eye such as this that can look on the great Beauty.\(^{23}\)

The carving of stone, as of wood, calls for precision and fine attention. So too does the sculpting of a soul. Plotinus describes here the sculpting of one’s own soul, but Socrates went beyond, and his great service to Athens was his sculpting of the souls of others. This process of sculpting souls is seldom comfortable for the beneficiary. In carrying out his great task, Socrates used as his tool the mighty power of dialectic. With this tool, he refuted the opinions, beliefs, dogmas and theories of many pretenders to knowledge.

4. **Spiritual and Ethical Values embodied in the Speech of Socrates**

Against this background, I turn now to the main focus of this article, namely a description of some of the ethical and spiritual values embodied in the speech made by Socrates before the Athenian assembly. These values are not claimed to be exclusive to Socrates, but are rather qualities which would be manifested by any human being who has attained a certain level of inner development through a process of self-examination or inner sculpting as described earlier. Such attainment does, however, demand an exceptionally strong desire for spiritual liberation on the part of the aspirant. On the face of it, Socrates addresses his words to his accusers and to his supporters in the assembly. But, in truth, his words have a universal quality, and he lays down the spiritual law for mankind as a whole.\(^{24}\)

The following selection of values and precepts, embodied in the speech of Socrates, is far from exhaustive. Moreover these precepts frequently overlap one another: they are not discrete, mutually exclusive principles.

4.1. **The use of speech exclusively in the service of truth**\(^{25}\)

To Socrates, the substance of what is said, whether in a public speech or in private conversation, is all that matters. Style, eloquence and polish are of
no consequence, if what is said is not true. This is the credo of a dialectician, and Socrates was the master dialectician in the Western tradition. He is openly scornful of the use of speech to persuade an audience or win an argument, in cases where the substance of the words spoken is less than truthful. In the opening lines of his speech, he draws a sharp and vital distinction between his accusers’ use of rhetoric, or speech which aims at attaining a predetermined result or objective (in casu the conviction of Socrates), and his own unwavering devotion to dialectic, or unpremeditated speech employed in pursuit of truth, wherever that pursuit may lead. The words of modern rhetoricians such as salesmen, politicians and courtroom lawyers are of the former type. Words of truth arise in the present moment, and therefore possess freshness, vitality, simplicity and spontaneity. In contrast, prepared speeches, ipso facto products of the past, often convey a sense of staleness. There is a world of difference between, on the one hand, a dialogue in which one participant seeks to defeat his opponent and, on the other hand, a conversation in which the participants seek the truth of the matter in hand together, and the insights of the one illuminate and strengthen those of the other. This latter form of discourse lies at the heart of the dialectical process, in which the question matters more than the answer, the journey more than the destination.

A master dialectician like Socrates, who graphically describes his function in the metaphor of the gadfly and horse, was a divine gift to the Athenians. The discomfort of being awakened from the sleep of ignorance by the questioning of Socrates blinded them to the rarity and value of this gift. In the end, they spurned it by putting Socrates to death, his warning to them notwithstanding.

4.2. Fearlessness, even in the face of death

Fearlessness is exalted in the great scriptures as the first mark of the spiritual man. Not surprisingly, fearlessness is the hallmark of the life of Socrates, of his conduct throughout the trial and during the days leading up to his death.

During the trial, and afterwards, Socrates showed that he lived by the principles he espoused. Appearing in a court of law for the first time in his life, in his seventies and unrepresented, he confronted the assembly of 501 Athenian citizens with words that came to him unrehearsed. Socrates informed the assembly that should he be released on condition that he refrains from further enquiry and speculation, he could not comply, but would simply continue to carry out his divine mandate of examining himself and others: for Socrates, as for Antigone, divine command must always prevail over man-made law. This is merely a single instance of a broader Socratic principle: What matters is always to do the right thing, whatever the cost – even if the cost be
death.\textsuperscript{36} The example that Socrates gives of this principle is his own courage and devotion to duty whilst engaged on active service in the Athenian army earlier in his life: on more than one occasion, he remained where the generals had placed him, like his comrades, facing danger and death. The analogy is clear: for Socrates now, in the face of death, to renounce his mission of searching into himself and others would be to desert his post and so violate divine command.\textsuperscript{37}

Socrates goes on to relate two further events in his life, both of which illustrate his refusal to yield to injustice from fear of death.\textsuperscript{38} the first was his conduct at the trial of the generals who had failed to collect the bodies of slain Athenians after the battle of Arginusae, during the Peloponnesian War.\textsuperscript{39} In the second episode, Socrates declined to join the party ordered by the Thirty Tyrants to arrest Leon the Salaminian. In both cases, Socrates was willing to die rather than to carry out an unrighteous or unholy deed.\textsuperscript{40}

Even at his trial, Socrates could not refrain from self-examination, as he turned to consider the human fear of death,\textsuperscript{41} a topic in which he had a direct and immediate interest. Neither then nor at any time after the trial did Socrates show any trace of the fear of death, which he strongly condemned as ignorance of the most disgraceful sort. This fear presupposes that death is an evil of sorts, and is therefore founded on the pretence of knowing what we do not know, and cannot possibly know until the moment of our own death. It was a primary concern of Socrates throughout his life to expose and refute such claims to knowing what we do not know, wherever he encountered them. It would, in his view, be an equally ignorant and unreasonable act to welcome and embrace death beforehand, as being a great good (which it may or may not turn out to be). The code by which Socrates lived and died was that he knew nothing, and knew that he knew nothing:\textsuperscript{42} the only appropriate attitude towards death is to wait and see. Only a soul which is serene, courageous and strong would be capable of such complete acceptance of whatever death may bring. These were qualities which Socrates displayed in abundance before, during and after his trial. Thus, when Crito arrived to visit Socrates in his death cell early one morning, the visitor was in a state of anxiety and agitation. He was astonished to find Socrates enjoying a deep and untroubled sleep.\textsuperscript{43} Moreover, when Socrates learned from Crito that he was to die on the following day, his attitude was one of complete and immediate acceptance.\textsuperscript{44}

\textbf{4.3. Deep piety, devotion, humility, and surrender to a higher power or divinity}\textsuperscript{45}

Socrates stands as the archetype of a fully developed human being: in him, an intellect of unsurpassed acuity is balanced by a ‘heart’ quality of deepest devotion. This is supremely ironic in two respects. First, a widely held, and
entirely erroneous, view of Socrates is that he was a master of reason in whom devotion and love had no part to play. Secondly, there is the ultimate absurdity of the fabricated charge of impiety brought against Socrates.

A cursory perusal of the dialogues of Plato provides ample evidence of his teacher’s deep piety. Here are a few examples chosen at random. At the end of the conversation recorded in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates reminds his companion that, before departing the idyllic scene, they ought to offer up a prayer to the local deities. Socrates then utters these memorable words:46

> Beloved Pan, and all ye other gods who haunt this place, give me beauty in the inward soul; and may the outward and inward man be at one. May I reckon the wise to be the wealthy, and may I have such a quantity of gold as a temperate man and he only can bear and carry. – Anything more? The prayer, I think, is enough for me.

Again, at the start of the *Republic*, Socrates states that he had gone down to the Piraeus with Glaucon on the previous day, primarily in order to offer up his prayers to the goddess Artemis.47 Later in the same dialogue, Socrates, on the eve of making a momentous discovery of justice, offers up a prayer for guidance.48 And on at least four occasions during his speech before the Assembly, Socrates declares his trust in and obedience to God.49

Karen Armstrong explains that, until late antiquity, the Greeks saw no impassable gulf between God and humanity:50

> Their philosophers had agreed that as rational animals, human beings contained a spark of the divine within themselves; a sage like Socrates who incarnated the transcendent ideal of wisdom was a son of God and an avatar of the divine.

Plato himself was in no doubt about the absurdity of the charge of impiety brought against his teacher. In the Seventh Letter, he speaks of the restored democracy in Athens:51

> [S]ome of those in power brought my friend Socrates to trial on a monstrous charge, the last that could be made against him, the charge of impiety; and he was condemned and executed.

Socrates was constantly attuned to the voice of his inner divinity, the *daimon*.52 It was a voice which he obeyed unfailingly throughout his life, down to the day of his trial and afterwards, in his death cell. Socrates expressed this obedience in his unwavering devotion to his divinely-imposed duty of examining himself and his fellow-citizens, and reminding them to put Truth first at all times.53
4.4. The possessor of wisdom does not claim it exclusively for himself: He offers his teaching freely, without expectation of reward, to anyone who sincerely desires it\textsuperscript{54}

Socrates never claimed to possess any wisdom which is not also attainable by others.\textsuperscript{55} Moreover, he insisted that any wisdom which expressed itself through him was not his own, but was rather a gift of God. He draws a sharp distinction between human wisdom, which is worthless, and the true or divine wisdom which shines through a person of spiritual attainment, but can never be exclusively appropriated by any human being.\textsuperscript{56} In his willingness to share his wisdom with all who sought it, Socrates displayed the rarest and purest form of generosity.

4.5. He is wise who knows nothing, and knows that he knows nothing\textsuperscript{57}

Again and again, Socrates makes this puzzling assertion. His meaning is that unless and until our accumulated mental baggage of preconceived ideas, beliefs, opinions and theories are jettisoned; unless and until our minds become clear, empty, uncluttered and receptive to whatever arises in the present moment; unless and until our arrogant claims to knowledge are surrendered and replaced by a genuine humility and openness, the divine wisdom cannot manifest in us. Only by regaining this completely innocent state of not knowing, is it possible for us to launch an authentic inquiry into any great question, such as the nature of justice, how the young may best be educated, how the state may best be governed, the nature of the human soul, and so on. The notion of being comfortable with not knowing is not one which is easily embraced by the Western mind. And yet the renunciation of our habitual claims to knowledge would be a vital contribution towards healing our troubled age.

The Socratic state of not knowing was neatly described by the American plant breeder, Luther Burbank in a lecture entitled ‘How to Produce New Fruits and Flowers’, delivered to members of the American Pomological Society:\textsuperscript{58}

In pursuing the study of any of the universal and everlasting laws of nature, whether relating to the life, growth, structure and movements of a giant planet, the tiniest plant or of the psychological movements of the human brain, some conditions are necessary before we can become one of nature’s interpreters or the creator of any valuable work for the world. Preconceived notions, dogmas and all personal prejudice and bias must be laid aside. Listen patiently, quietly and reverently to the lessons, one by one, which Mother Nature has to teach, shedding light on that which was before a mystery, so that all who will, may see and know. She conveys her truths only to those who are passive and receptive. Accepting these truths as
suggested, wherever they may lead, we have the whole universe in harmony with us. At last, man has found a solid foundation for science, having discovered that he is part of a universe which is eternally unstable in form, eternally immutable in substance.

In the *Apology*, Socrates gives a striking example of the claim to knowing what one does not know: he shows that the fear of death, widespread today as it was in his own time, is founded on supreme arrogance. In deriding the fear of death, Socrates can hardly be accused of delving into a question in which he does not have a direct, immediate personal interest. Socrates himself, far from fearing death, looks forward to what lies beyond the death of the physical body:

Above all, I shall then be able to continue my search into true and false knowledge; as in this world, so also in the next; and I shall find out who is wise, and who pretends to be wise, and is not.

Thus, for Socrates, it is business as usual, before or after death. In the closing sentence of the *Apology*, Socrates repeats that God alone knows whether it is better to live or to die.

An extreme example of a confrontation between one who claims to possess specialized knowledge and one who disowns any such knowledge is to be found in the exchanges between Thrasymachus and Socrates in the *Republic*.

4.6. The essential practice or method prescribed by Socrates and Plato in the pursuit of virtue is self-examination, from which nobody is exempt

Socrates insisted that people *must* interrogate their most fundamental prejudices or else they would lead superficial, expedient lives. As he explained to the assembly:

It is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day, for the unexamined life is not worth living.

The core spiritual practice which Socrates and Plato prescribe for every individual is careful, sustained examination of one’s inner world. What is required of us, in other words, is continuous, clinical, objective, non-judgmental, empirical examination of our feelings, thoughts, likes, dislikes, fears, anger, lust, greed, spite, prejudices, beliefs, opinions, ideas, values, reactions and so on. There is no room in this process for guilt, remorse, or self-criticism – it is simple, detached, scientific observation of the workings of the mind in the light of consciousness. The practice of self-examination
may seem simple, but to sustain it is not easy: it calls for a determined, unremitting effort on the part of the individual.

So much for the ordinary individual. In the case of an enlightened being such as Socrates, however, divine command imposed a duty which went far beyond mere self-examination: as he reminded the assembly more than once, he was under obligation to examine also his fellow-men, and to remind them constantly of their primary human duty of self-examination in pursuit of virtue. This is the function of a spiritual teacher, a sculptor of souls, the very rare vocation to which Socrates had been called. It is hardly surprising that his constant questioning of his fellow-Athenians resulted in bruised egos, for many people misconstrued his cross-examinations as personal attacks upon themselves. In fact nothing could have been further from his mind, for such a course of action, by its very nature, would have been incapable of bringing him personal gain of any kind.

4.7. A wrong or evil inflicted on another, for example an unjust killing, a driving into exile, or a deprivation of civil rights, injures the wrongdoer more severely than the victim.

The judges who tried Socrates, by imposing an unjust sentence of death, injured themselves more than him. As for Socrates himself, he explains to the assembly that no evil can befall a good man, either in life or after death. It is for this reason that Socrates does not view the sentence of death as an evil.

Here it is important to distinguish between what is, and what is not an injury, in the view of Socrates and Plato: A just sentence, be it of death, imprisonment or of some other kind, imposed on a wrongdoer, injures neither the judge nor the wrongdoer: for the wrongdoer, such a sentence is a corrective benefit, not an evil. An unjust sentence, like the death sentence imposed on Socrates, injures the judges but not the innocent victim.

In the great spiritual traditions of East and West, harmlessness is viewed as a hallmark of a sage: it is never his intention to harm any living creature. The intention of Socrates was always to educate and enlighten, never to injure.

4.8. No public figure (for example a politician) who honestly strives against the many lawless and unrighteous deeds which are done in a state will live long: he who would fight for the right, if he would live even for a brief time must have a private station (for example, that of a philosopher) and not a public one.

Socrates explains that the inner voice of his daimon has consistently
forbidden him from entering into politics. His lifelong devotion to his \textit{daimon} has preserved Socrates from, \textit{inter alia}, the political assassination which would surely have been his lot had he taken up a public station. There are many modern examples of those who have paid with their lives for their courage in openly opposing unethical practices underpinned by powerful vested interests. Socrates therefore wisely chose not to come forward and offer advice publicly to the State: his vocation was instead to engage his fellow-citizens in private conversation. Ironically, even this course of action was ultimately to cost him his life.

4.9. \textbf{We ought never to bribe or seek favours from public officials or functionaries, in particular from a judge. We should neither encourage a judge nor should a judge allow himself to be encouraged in the habit of perjury.}^{75}

Socrates refused to bring his family before the Assembly to plead on his behalf.\textsuperscript{76} He added:\textsuperscript{77}

\begin{quote}
[T]here seems to be something wrong in asking a favour of a judge, and thus procuring an acquittal instead of informing and convincing him. For his duty is not to make a present of justice, but to give judgment; and he has sworn that he will judge according to the laws, and not according to his own good pleasure.
\end{quote}

Justice, therefore, is not a gift that a judge is free to bestow or withhold, as his fancy takes him.

The mark of a sage like Socrates is complete impartiality in his dealings: he seeks no favour, special treatment or dispensation for those closest to him.\textsuperscript{78}

4.10. \textbf{Other Precepts and Values}

Here follows, without commentary, a list of some other values and precepts which Socrates either conveys in his speech, or makes manifest through his conduct in the \textit{Apology}.

One’s speech should always be plain, simple and straightforward;\textsuperscript{79} Reason ought always to be the rule of one’s speech and actions;\textsuperscript{80} In any proposed course of action, the factor to be considered above all else is whether one is doing right or wrong. All other factors, for example the fear of danger or death, and the force of public opinion (which includes the noxious contemporary doctrine of political correctness) are of secondary importance at best;\textsuperscript{81} The primary human duty is to attend to the improvement of one’s soul and the pursuit of virtue: all other goods like abundant wealth, success and health will then follow;\textsuperscript{82} The inner and the
outer man should always be as one;\textsuperscript{83} One should never demean oneself or compromise one’s dignity, even in the face of death itself;\textsuperscript{84} One should make it one’s aim to seek unshakeable inner peace, certainty and complete acceptance of whatever life may bring;\textsuperscript{85} The quest for truth does not end with the death of the physical body;\textsuperscript{86} Nothing ever happens by chance;\textsuperscript{87} Forgiveness is a mark of a spiritual man, who never bears a grudge if he has suffered a wrong.\textsuperscript{88}

Taken collectively, these precepts present a vivid picture of a man who has attained the pinnacle of inner human development. But more: a fully realized person like Socrates sets a living standard of human perfection, against which we may measure ourselves in our thoughts, feelings and actions. He stands as a template or model of the character of an enlightened individual, irrespective of time, place or other context.

According to a distinguished modern historian, Veronica Wedgwood:\textsuperscript{93}

Plato . . . put into the mouth of his dead master words of incomparable dignity, irony and force. They reflect the spirit of Socratic teaching but probably bear little resemblance to what he actually said at his trial. The surviving recollections of a more prosaic, but no less devoted disciple, Xenophon, are different . . . Plato undoubtedly added something of his own original and richly furnished mind. Xenophon may have been the more accurate reporter.

There are many who share this view. To what extent is it historically accurate? What if Plato’s picture of Socrates as a great spiritual teacher, a man of truth and wisdom, bears little or no relation to historical reality? What if that picture is no more than a product of Plato’s literary genius? Suppose, as a worst-case scenario, that Wedgwood’s view is historically correct. Would that fact in any way invalidate the spiritual and ethical principles which Plato’s \textit{Apology} puts into the mouth of Socrates, the principles which have been examined in this article? The answer has to be an unequivocal ‘no’. The same teachings have been enunciated in different words by Jesus and by other spiritual teachers of mankind. These teachings are timeless, immutable, immortal; they are applicable everywhere and in every age. They possess an inherent truth and vitality which transcend place, time and circumstance.

5. \textbf{Application: Socratic Values and Precepts as a Common Ethical Vocabulary for contemporary South Africa}

Mr Justice Edwin Cameron\textsuperscript{90} of the Constitutional Court recently quoted Breyten Breytenbach as saying ‘Morally, South Africa is a failed state’. South Africa, like many other countries, has indeed lost its moral compass. In the view of the learned judge – a view which I wholeheartedly share – what
South Africa sorely needs at this time is a common ethical language or vocabulary, an ethical lingua franca. The need, in other words, is for a set of ethical norms or values that enjoy widespread general acceptance by the people of this country.

Where are we to find such a common vocabulary, given that South Africa, more than most countries, has an ethnically, racially, religiously, linguistically and politically heterogeneous population? The hackneyed view of the secular liberal intelligentsia would have us believe that the elusive ethical consensus is not to be found in religion. If by ‘religion’ is meant denominational religion, this view is clearly correct, for to seek to found an ethical consensus upon the precepts of any one religious denomination in South Africa (say Christianity) would be to antagonize and alienate the adherents of other denominations. The result, in other words, would be to defeat the object of the exercise.

The discussion so far, however, overlooks the vital fact that the overwhelming majority of the people of this country practice religion in one form or another. South Africa, like it or not, is nominally at least a deeply devotional country. It follows that the common ethical code we seek can only be spiritual in nature.

The spirituality which will be capable of producing a nationwide ethical consensus cannot be the exclusive preserve of any religious denomination; it cannot be found in any belief system; it cannot require us to take on trust any religious dogma, doctrine or creed; it cannot, finally, be provided through the intermediation of any church, religious leader or institution. Such a spirituality must, I argue, be universal in the sense that it springs from the divine, inborn common essence of every human being. Such a spirituality must embody the ethical core values which lie at the heart of all the great religions, and which are neither exclusive to, nor in conflict with any of them.

An entirely apposite set of spiritual precepts and values is the one which has been considered in this article. Socrates, we have seen, was one who embodied and lived a universal spirituality, which is not the exclusive preserve of any nation, ethnic group, religion or belief. It is precisely to the ancient spiritual wisdom expressed in the Socratic, Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy that we must turn in order to find the common ethical language which is alone capable of healing our contemporary divisions, strife, mistrust, dishonesty, corruption and criminality. This is the central argument of this article.

The set of Socratic values and precepts collected above is, to repeat, of general validity and application: it is applicable to every profession, to every individual, to every collective body, governmental or otherwise, to adherents of every religion, to people of every nationality or ethnic group. The ethical
vocabulary comprised in this set of values is no less applicable to African societies than to any other: its origin in ancient Greek philosophy is of no relevance in this context.

For a set of ethical norms like those manifested by Socrates to take up permanent residence in the national consciousness, it is vital that these values and precepts be introduced to, and inculcated in children as early in life as possible. To carry out this educational process on a national scale would be a formidable, but infinitely worthwhile undertaking. It would give to children a foundation and preparation for life more useful by far than much of what is taught to them in our schools. The detailed working out of such an educational scheme lies of course beyond the scope of this article.

The difficulties, however, of introducing these values into school curricula are difficulties of practice and application, rather than of principle. In other countries, similar problems have been successfully addressed. In principle, this article rests on the premise that the adoption of the Socratic values and precepts, or their like, would provide a valuable remedy for the present ills of South Africa.

The simple choice laid before us by Socrates and Plato is either to adopt these values as a working model, or to ignore them. The adoption and practice in our own lives of these values, or their like, would be far from easy. But the alternative is worse: if we choose to ignore them, we sentence ourselves to live in a world of deepening duplicity, greed, disease, corruption and dishonesty. The choice is ours, and ours alone.

1. Many modern commentators do indeed treat the Apology at one or more of these comparatively shallow levels. An example of such a commentator is the civil libertarian IF Stone The Trial of Socrates Archer Books, New York (1989). Another is Luis E Navia, whose failure to understand Socrates and his mission extends to making such statements as ‘At the end of his life, the perplexed Socrates remains as perplexed as he always was’: Socrates: A Life Examined Prometheus Books, New York (2007).


3. Apology 21d, 23c, 29b, 29e−30b, 38a, 41b, 41e. Unless otherwise stated, I rely throughout this article on Benjamin Jowett’s translation of the Apology.

4. Apology 18d, 22e−23a, 23d, 24a−b, 28a, 37c−d, 41c.

5. Apology 25d−26a, 37a−b.

6. Apology 21d.

7. Apology 28e; see also Apology 23b, 29d, 30a, 30e−31a, 33c, 37e−38a.

8. Apology 21e.


11. Apology 31d.

12. Apology 33c.

13. Apology 24c–d, 25c, 26a–b, 27e.

14. Socrates’s cross-examination of Meletus before the assembly, however, exposes a fatal contradiction which makes nonsense of the charge of impiety: after charging Socrates with worshipping deities other than the recognized gods of Athens, Meletus accuses Socrates in court of being an outright atheist: Apology 26b–28a.


16. Socrates reminds his fellow Athenians in the assembly of the rare gift that God has bestowed on the city, and warns them of the consequences of spurning such a gift: Apology 30a, 30c–31b, 39c–d.


18. Apology 20c, 21b, 21d.

19. Apology 30b, 36c, 38a, 41e.


21. Note the remarkable parallels between the trial of Socrates and the trial of Jesus a few centuries later: Jesus was charged by the temple authorities, the Sanhedrin, with blasphemy, that is with ‘diminishing the honour of God’: see Frank McLynn Famous Trials New York (1995) 12-15 passim. See also Apology 28a and Anastasios Ladikos ‘The Trials of Socrates and Jesus Christ: A Comparison’ 2007 Vol 8(2) Phronimon 73. Is it the inevitable fate of men like Socrates, Jesus and others to be despised, rejected and put to death by those incapable of understanding them?


23. Plotinus Enneads 1.6.9.8–26 quoted in Hadot loc cit note 22.


25. Apology 17a–b.

27. Elsewhere in Plato’s dialogues, Socrates is willing to concede that rhetoric – the use of speech to persuade and to win an argument – can play a useful part in human discourse: see, for example, *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias passim*.


30. This is the point that rhetoricians like Thrasy-machus in the *Republic* consistently fail to grasp. See also Armstrong *op cit* note 29 at 67.

31. *Apology* 30e.

32. *Apology* 31a–b.

33. See, for example, *Bhagavad Gītā* 16.1, 12.15.

34. *Apology* 17d–18a.

35. *Apology* 29c–d.


38. *Apology* 32a–e.


40. *Apology* 32d.

41. *Apology* 29a–d.

42. This central tenet of the Life of Socrates is explored in depth below: See notes 57–8 and text thereto.

43. *Crito* 43a–c.

44. *Crito* 43e.

45. *Apology* 19a, 28e, 29d, 30a, 35d.


47. *Republic* 327a.


49. *Apology* 19a, 28e, 29d, 30a, 35d. See also Kofi Ackah ‘Plato’s *Euthypro* and Socratic Piety’ *Scholia* NS Vol 15 (2006) 17–34.


52. This is not the place to enter into the linguistic complexities surrounding the words *daimon* and *daimonion*, which occur frequently in Plato’s dialogues. Suffice it to say that the neuter noun *daimonion* was in use from the 5th century BC. One view is that it came into use to counter the anthropomorphic view of the gods as either male or female. Its use appears to coincide with the advent of philosophy. I am indebted to Rosemary Rowe for this information and this view. See also note 10 above, and text thereto.
53. Apology 20e–21a, 21e–23c, 37e, 40c–41d.
54. Apology 19d–20c, 31b–c, 33a–b.
55. Apology 20d–e, 23b, 38c.
56. Apology 23a–b.
57. Apology 20c, 21b, 21d, 23a–d, 29a–b, 41b, 42c.
59. Apology 29a–b: see text to notes 41–2 above.
60. Apology 41b transl Jowett.
61. Apology 42a transl Jowett.
63. Apology 23a–b, 29d–30c, 33c, 37e–38a.
66. See Pierre Hadot Philosophy as a Way of Life Oxford (1995) passim. If carried out with sustained determination, self-examination is ultimately capable of leading its practitioner to the conviction that his Self, or inmost spiritual identity beyond name and form, is identical to that of every other living being. But this is a discovery which interested and earnest seekers must make for themselves.
67. See text to notes 3–9 above.
68. Apology 21e, 31a–c, 33c.
69. Apology 30c–d.
70. Apology 41c–d.
71. Extended treatment of Plato’s views on the nature and effect of punishment is to be found in Gorgias and Laws, both passim. See also two articles by Anastasios Ladikos: ‘Plato’s View on Crime and Punishment’ 2000 Vol 2 Phronimon 166; ‘Plato’s Views on Capital Punishment’ 2005 Vol 6(2) Phronimon 49.
72. Apology 37a–b; Bhagavad Gītā 16.2.
73. Apology 31c–33a.
74. Apology 31d; see notes 10–11 and text thereto.
75. Apology 35b–d.
76. Apology 34d–35b.
77. Apology 35b–c.
78. Apology 41e.
79. Apology 17d–18a, 24a.
80. *Apology* 27c–28a, 40c–41c, 37b.
81. *Apology* 28a–29d, 32a–e, 39a–b.
82. *Apology* 29e–30b. This principle is entirely consonant with the biblical injunction in Matthew 6.33: ‘But seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added onto you’.
83. *Apology* 33a–b: Our outward conduct ought always to reflect truthfully our inner state of being irrespectively of the company in which we find ourselves.
85. *Apology* 40a–c.
86. *Apology* 41b.
87. *Apology* 41d.
88. *Apology* 41d.
90. Speaking at the Launch of the Wits Centre for Ethics (‘WiCE Launch’) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, on 6 August 2009.
91. This view was voiced at the WiCE Launch by Justice Cameron and Professor Loyiso Nongxa, Vice Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand.
92. A figure of 90% may well be on the conservative side.
93. Socrates was quoted by Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane at the WiCE Launch (see note 90 above).