

Plato, *Crito*

A new translation by Sophie Grace Chappell, who writes of her talk:

“The idea is that what’s going on in the *Crito* is a conflict between a conception of justice as procedural, as consisting in keeping various kinds of rules, e.g. promise-keeping and fidelity to contracts, and a conception of justice as corrective: as the correction of *in*justices. Crito urges Socrates to flee because he believes in corrective justice. Socrates insists on staying because he believes in procedural justice.

I believe the corrective/ procedural contrast is fundamental to political philosophy: broadly, the left is correctivist, the right is proceduralist. We won’t get far in thinking about justice until we recognise that there is something importantly correct in both conceptions.”

1. 43a-44b: Socrates is at peace in his prison cell

The scene: Socrates’ cell in the city prison in Athens, 399 BC. Crito is already in the cell, silently watching over the sleeping Socrates.

43a

SOCRATES (*waking up*)

What brings you here at this hour, Crito? Isn’t it early still?

CRITO

Yes, it’s very early.

SOCRATES

How early, exactly?

CRITO

Well, it’s not light yet.

SOCRATES

I’m surprised that the prison guard was prepared to grant you entry.

CRITO

He is quite used to me by now, Socrates, I’ve spent so much time here already. Also, he had a little favour from me.¹

SOCRATES

Have you just come in, or have you been here a while?

CRITO

Oh, a fair time.

(*Perhaps he has been there all night.*)

43b

SOCRATES

Then why didn’t you wake me up at once, instead of sitting there by me in silence?

¹ Bribery was commonplace in Athens then, and few people were above giving or accepting bribes. Socrates was, but clearly his followers including Crito were not. More about bribes at 44b-45b.

CRITO

By Zeus, no, Socrates—I couldn't do that. I just wish I myself were not in such a state, so sad and sleepless. Whereas you all this time—I have been astonished to observe how sweetly you sleep. It seemed fitting not to wake you, to let you pass this time as pleasantly as possible. Often before now, throughout your life, I have thought you were blessed in your temperament. And now I think that all the more in your present ordeal. You seem to bear it so easily and gently.

SOCRATES

Really, Crito? Don't you think it would be pretty out of order for a man as old as me to make a fuss about it if I have to die?

43c

CRITO

Other men of your age² have been caught in ordeals like this, Socrates, and their age didn't at all stop *them* from making a fuss about what fortune had brought them.

SOCRATES

True. But anyway, why have you come here so early?

CRITO

I come with news, Socrates. I'd call it troubling news, though apparently you wouldn't. But to me, and to all your companions, it does seem troubling, and really serious. Maybe I am one of the ones who takes it worst of all.

SOCRATES

What news? Has the ship from Delos arrived—the ship whose arrival means that it is time for me to die?³

43d

CRITO

No, it hasn't got here yet, but I think it will arrive in port today, going by what I have been told by some people who have come to Athens from Sunium, where the ship was yesterday. It's clear from what they say that it *will* arrive today, and so that your life will have to end tomorrow.

SOCRATES

Well, Crito, fair fortune shine on us! If that's what pleases the gods, so be it. All the same, I don't believe the ship will arrive today.

44a

CRITO

Why not?

SOCRATES

I'll tell you. I am obliged to die the day after the ship comes.

² Crito himself is another man of Socrates' age!

³ The background circumstances are explained by Plato at the beginning of his dialogue the *Phaedo*, 58a-b: every summer the Athenians celebrated the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur by sending a ship of pilgrims to the holy island of Delos, about 100 miles away in the Aegean. From the ship's departure until its return was a "sacred truce" during which no one was executed at Athens. Socrates' execution is therefore to take place as soon as the ship returns. It has now reached the coastline of Attica at Sunium, about 40 miles from Peiraeus, the harbour of Athens, so will reach harbour some time soon, probably in the next day or so.

CRITO

Yes, according to the men in charge of the arrangements.

SOCRATES

I really don't think it will get here tomorrow; I think it will be the day after. My reason for thinking this is a dream that I had a little earlier, this very night—so perhaps it is a good thing, in a way, that you didn't wake me.

CRITO

Really, though? What dream was this?

SOCRATES

I seemed to see a beautiful woman, shapely in form,

44b

dressed in white robes, who called to me and said: "Socrates, 'on the third day you will come to rich-earthed Phthia'."⁴

CRITO

What a bizarre dream, Socrates.

SOCRATES

But a very clear one, Crito, at least to me.

CRITO

Only too clear, apparently.

2. 44b-46a: Crito's attempt to persuade Socrates to escape

CRITO

But look, you extraordinary man, there is still time even now. Listen to me, Socrates, and be saved. Please understand that, if you die, it is not just a one-off misfortune for me. It isn't just that I will be deprived of a companion whose like I will never find again. It is also that many people will think—people who do not know us very well—

44c

that I could have saved you if I had been willing to spend more money, but I couldn't be bothered. Really, what could be more shameful than the reputation I'd have for that? The reputation of being more concerned for my money than my friends? The multitude⁵ will never believe that you yourself chose not to get away from here, though we were eager to make your escape happen.

SOCRATES

Your *reputation*? With the *multitude*? Bless you, Crito, what concern of ours is that? It is not them, but the men of most discernment, whose views we should take account of. And they will understand why we did all this just the way we're going to do it.

⁴ Homer, *Iliad* 9.363: the context is Achilles' proposal to abandon his involvement in the Trojan war and return to the peace of his own palace in Phthia. Socrates takes the line as applicable to his own situation: he too, he infers, will be out of his wars and at peace "on the third day", i.e. the day after tomorrow from the time of speaking.

⁵ For "the multitude" Crito uses a phrase that has passed into English: *hoi polloi*.

44d

CRITO

Come on, Socrates, you can see that we *do* have to take account of the views of the multitude too. These very circumstances you're in right now show that the multitude can bring about not just the smallest of evils, but pretty much the greatest evils there are, if someone's good name with them has been ruined.

SOCRATES

If only the multitude *could* bring about the greatest evils, Crito! Because if they could, they would also be able to bring about the greatest *goods*. And then all would be well.⁶ But as things are they can't do one or the other: they aren't able to do anything wise, or anything foolish either. They just act as it comes to them.

44e

CRITO

If you say so. But tell me this, Socrates. Are you thinking about the consequences for me and your other companions?⁷ Are you worrying that, if you escape from here, then the informers will make trouble for us for having abducted you from here, so that we will be forced either into losing all our property or into paying lots of fines⁸—and lots of other bad things besides? If it is this sort of consequence that you are thinking about,

45a

then wave that worry goodbye. For us, if you ask me, it is justice to save you.⁹ We have to take this risk—and greater risks too, if it comes to it. So listen to us, and do what we advise—nothing else.

SOCRATES

Yes, I am thinking about that consequence, Crito. And lots of other consequences too.

CRITO

Well, really, don't worry about it. The amount that we would need to pay to those who are prepared to save you and get you away is not that large anyway. Also, don't you see how cheaply paid-off the informers are? We won't need to spend that much on hush-money.

45b

My money is available to you, and I should think it's plenty. But if you are so soft on me that you don't think *my* funds should be spent—well, there are friends from other cities who are ready to

⁶ Cp. what Socrates says at 48c about “those who are as quick to put men to death as they would be to bring them back to life, if they could—and in both cases without thinking clearly about it: I mean the multitude.”

⁷ Literally “Is it that you are thinking-in-advance about me?” There is no word in the Greek for “consequences”, but it is natural to translate using that English word.

⁸ Crito means that if he organises Socrates' rescue then he will have to pay off informers (*sycophantai*, another word that has passed into English, though with a change of meaning). Paying them off will be expensive; but if he doesn't pay them off, then the informers will inform, which may lead to the confiscation of Crito's estate by the city of Athens.

⁹ This is the first occurrence in the *Crito* of the central word *dikaios*, “just”, and its cognates such as *dikaioisyne*, “justice”, *adikos*, “unjust”, and (*anti*)*adikein* “to do an injustice (in return)”. There is a tendency to translate all these words into English by way of right/ wrong and their cognates, and hence to assume an automatic connection between them and words like “ought” and “should”. This is a crucial mistake. For one thing, it leads us to treat Socrates as asking, not the quite sensible question “Should we ever do what is unjust?”, but the barely intelligible, and very different, question “Should we ever do what is wrong?” For another, for Plato *dikaioisyne* is the name of one of the four or five central virtues (the others are courage, wisdom, self-control, and perhaps holiness, *andreia*, *sophia*, *sphrosyne*, *hosiotetes*). What we call *right* action is a genus, and actions in line with these virtues are all species of that genus; so it is a confusion of genus and species to translate *dikaios* as “right”.

pay. One of them, Simmias of Thebes, has imported a cache of silver for this very purpose; Cebes is ready to pay too, and so are lots of other people.¹⁰ So as I say, do not give up hope of saving yourself. And don't let it be a burden to you—as you were suggesting at your trial¹¹—that if you escaped, you would have no idea what to do with yourself. If you leave Athens, plenty of places elsewhere

45c

will welcome you. If you want to go to Thessaly, I have guest-friends there who will make a huge fuss of you, and provide you with safety too; nothing will trouble you in Thessaly.

And anyway, Socrates, I don't think you are undertaking a just action in betraying yourself when it is possible for you to be rescued. You are in such a hurry to have happen to you exactly what your enemies are so keen to bring on you—exactly what those who want to destroy you were so keen to bring about.

And besides this, I think that you are betraying your own sons. You could

45d

complete their upbringing and their education; instead, off you go abandoning them, and for your part,¹² they will just have to cope with whatever comes to them afterwards.¹³ Most likely they will come to the same sort of fate as other orphans meet in their orphanages. Either you shouldn't make children at all, or you should share their hardships with them, both in their upbringing and in their education. I think you are taking the easy way out. What you should do is choose as a good and brave man would choose—after all, you claim that you've been intent on virtue all your life. But as for me,

45e

I am ashamed on your behalf, and on behalf of us your companions. For it might look like we have handled your whole case with a kind of unmanly feebleness: the fact that your case went to court in the first place, when it didn't need to; and the conduct of the case—how that turned out. To cap it all, as the most ridiculous thing in the whole affair, it will look like we have let this chance to save you slip—through feebleness, and through cowardice too.

46a

We had the chance, and we did not rescue you—and you did not rescue yourself either. Yet your rescue was perfectly possible, if we had made the slightest effort to help you.

Socrates, you need to ask yourself where this is all leading. Won't it end up, not only in harming you and harming us, but in shaming us all as well?

This is why I tell you you should think about escaping. Or rather: you should already have thought about it. By now you shouldn't need to think about it any more; it's too late for that. For there's only one thing to think. And we need to get the rescue organised this very night—tonight. If we delay any more after that, it's no longer possible. So, Socrates, follow my instructions in every respect—without any diversions.

¹⁰ Simmias and Cebes are the main characters besides Socrates in another Platonic dialogue, the *Phaedo*, which is an immediate sequel to the *Crito* both historically and thematically: it is staged in the same prison-cell, and it is about life after death. *Crito* appears in the *Phaedo* too, but does not say much.

¹¹ *Apology* 37d: “A fine life exile would be for a man of my age, surviving by swapping one city for another—and always being driven out.”

¹² *To son meros*, literally “with respect to your part”. The phrase is worth marking, because Socrates picks it up from *Crito*'s use of it here at 50b, and makes it play an important role in the later discussion.

¹³ Literally “whatever they may encounter”. Here *Crito* is picking up a phrase of Socrates', who used exactly these words at the end of 44d. This kind of sharp rhetorical interchange is very common in Plato.

Scene 3: 46b-48b: Socrates' first reply to Crito

(3a) "My opinions have not changed" (46b-46c)

46b

SOCRATES

My dear Crito! Your intense zeal about this is precious indeed—provided it is also rightly directed. But if not, then it's all the more troublesome for its intensity.

Well, we need to examine whether this *is* the thing to do, or not. Because I am someone who will be convinced by nothing except by the argument that appears best to me about this question, when I think it through. That's nothing new; I've always been like this. And I can't now just banish the arguments that I used to make in earlier times, simply because this ill fortune has come my way. No, those arguments still seem pretty much the same to me:

46c

I venerate and honour just the same arguments as I used to. So unless we are able to find better things to say in this present case, know well that I shall not give way to you, not even if the power of the multitude should try to spook us even more than it is trying to right now—threatening us as if we were children, with "chains" and "forms of execution" and "confiscations of property". So, what would be the most measured way for us to examine these questions?

(3b) Expert vs. non-expert opinions (46c-48b)

Suppose we begin by taking up this argument that you have offered about public opinions. Weren't we right to say what we used to say—

46d

that we should pay attention to some opinions, but not to others? Or was that the right thing to say only when I hadn't yet been sentenced to death? Now that I have been condemned, has it somehow become obvious that we said all that just for the sake of the argument, when in truth it was childish play and drivel?

What I want to examine, Crito, together with you, is whether I now see the argument differently now that I am in this situation, or whether it still looks the same to me. Should we wave the argument goodbye, or should we be convinced by it? For as I was saying: I believe something like this did use to be frequently said, and said by those who believed they were not talking in vain: that of the various opinions that people hold,

46e

we ought to make a great deal of *some* of them, but not of others. By the gods, Crito, doesn't that seem right to you? For you are not in my predicament: you are not going to die tomorrow.

47a

So the present situation should not knock you off balance.

Well then, consider: don't you think it an adequate view to say that we should not respect *all* the opinions that people hold—rather, we should respect some opinions, but not others? And not *everyone's* opinion—rather, we should respect some people's opinions, but not other people's? What do you think? Doesn't that seem the right thing to say?

CRITO

(eventually)

Yes, it seems right.

SOCRATES

So we should respect the beneficial views, but not the harmful ones?

CRITO

Yes.

SOCRATES

And aren't the beneficial views, the views of the wise? Whereas the harmful views, are the views of the foolish?

CRITO

Of course.

SOCRATES

Come, then: what was our view about the following? Suppose someone becomes an athlete,

47b

and puts in some athletic performance. Does he pay attention to everyone's praise and blame? To everyone's view about his performance? Or only the view of the one person, whoever it may be, who is a doctor, or an athletic trainer?

CRITO

Only that one person.

SOCRATES

So the athlete should fear that one person's blame, and welcome that one person's praise—but not the praise or blame of the multitude.

CRITO

Yes, clearly.

SOCRATES

And therefore, the athlete must do what that one person thinks right, and train for athletics as the trainer directs, and eat and drink as the trainer directs—the trainer being the one person who understands and is an expert. He should do that rather than listen to all the others.

CRITO

That's right.

47c

SOCRATES

Very well. Now suppose the athlete disobeys his trainer. He does not respect his opinion or care about what he praises. And he *does* respect the arguments of the multitude, who have no expertise at all. If the athlete behaves like this, won't he pay the price in harm?

CRITO

How could he avoid it?

SOCRATES

And what is this harm? What aspect of the athlete is it that is harmed by disobeying his trainer?

CRITO

Clearly, it is his body that is harmed.

SOCRATES

You're right. Well then, Crito, isn't the same true in other cases? So we don't need to go through them all. But isn't the same true about what is just and unjust, shameful and honourable, good and bad—the things that we are now deliberating about? Our question is whether we should

47d

follow the opinion of the multitude, and be afraid of that, or rather the opinion of the one who is an expert—if anyone is: whether we should be in awe of him, and afraid of his view rather than all the others? It seems to be true that if we don't follow him, then we will be corrupting and maiming a vital part of ourselves—the part that is made better by what is just, and destroyed by what is unjust. Is that right, or is this all meaningless?

CRITO

No, Socrates, it's right; or at least, this is what I think.

SOCRATES

Well, then. The part of us that is made better by what is healthy and destroyed by what is disease-bearing: that part of us we can ruin by listening to the opinion of non-experts, like the athlete who disobeys his trainer. If that happens, and that aspect of us is wrecked,

47e

is our life worth living then? The aspect I mean is evidently the body, isn't it?

CRITO

Yes.

SOCRATES

So is our life worth living with a miserable, ruined body?

CRITO

No, it's completely worthless.

SOCRATES

What about the aspect of us that is harmed by what is unjust, and improved by what is just? Suppose that that aspect of us is ruined. Is our life worth living then? This aspect of us, whatever it is, that has to do with injustice and justice—

48a

do we take that to be of less value than the body?

CRITO

No, not at all.

SOCRATES

But rather, of *more* value?

CRITO

Yes, by far.

SOCRATES

Then, my best of men, we mustn't at all be concerned with what the multitude will say to us. What we should be concerned with is what is said by the man who understands about just and unjust things—that one man; and what truth itself says.

So you did not broach this subject the right way, when you began [44d] by saying that we should be concerned with the opinion of the multitude about what is just, and honourable, and good, and their opposites.

48b

“But after all,” someone could reply, “the multitude are able to kill us!”

CRITO

Yes! People could say that! And they *will*, Socrates.

SOCRATES

Yes, they will.

4. 48b-49d: The creed of Socrates

SOCRATES

But still, you extraordinary man, the argument we have now gone through still looks exactly the same as before—at least to me. And this statement too—consider whether or not we think *this* is still true: that we shouldn't attach great importance to *living*, only to *living well*.

CRITO

Yes, that's still true.

SOCRATES

And that living *well* is the same thing as living *honourably and justly*: is that still true, or not?

CRITO

It's still true.

SOCRATES

Then if we agree on these points, what we should consider is whether it is just for me to try to get out of this prison without the permission of the city of Athens;

48c

or unjust. If it turns out to be just, then let's try it; if not, we should forget it. But these worries that you mention, about expenditure of money, and reputation, and about the upbringing of children: these are, in truth, the kind of worries that would occur to those who are as quick to put men to death as they would be to bring them back to life, if they could—and in both cases without thinking clearly about it: I mean the multitude. Whereas for us, since the argument so constrains us, there is nothing else that we should consider except the question that we have just mentioned: will we be acting justly if we give our money and our thanks to the people

48d

who will get me out of here? Will we be acting justly in getting out, or letting ourselves be got out? Or will we, in truth, be acting unjustly if we do any of these things?

Once we are sure that we are bringing about injustices, perhaps we shouldn't even be asking ourselves questions like these: "Won't we have to die if we do nothing and stay here?", or "If we stay here won't we have to undergo something terrible?" And all along we shouldn't be thinking about any question except this: whether we are acting unjustly.

CRITO

(With a mighty effort to get the conversation back on track—his track)

This is all very well, Socrates. But the question is—what are we going to *do*?

SOCRATES

(Continuing imperturbably)

Yes, my dear Crito, just that is what we should examine together. And if you have any counter-argument to make against

48e

what I have to say, then make it, and I will agree to it. But if not, then—bless you—please stop repeating the same words to me again and again. Stop telling me that I ought to get away from here against the Athenians' wishes. For it is important to me to act with your agreement in this matter, and not against *your* wishes. So, ask yourself whether we have adequately stated the first principle of our inquiry;

49a

and try and answer my question about that exactly as seems most right to you.

CRITO

(Resignedly)

All right, I'll try.

SOCRATES

So: should we willingly do what is unjust *in no way whatever*? Or should we do what is unjust in *some* ways, though not in *others*? Is doing what is unjust *never* good and *never* honourable—which is what we agreed again and again in the time before my imprisonment?

Or is it as I have described: even in this short time, all those earlier agreements of ours have been turned head over heels?

49b

Have we failed all along, Crito, to see that even at our age, old men in a serious conversation with each other, we are really no different from children?

No! Absolutely not: we were right in what we said then. It makes no difference whether the multitude agree or not. It makes no difference whether the consequences for us are even worse than they seem to be; nor indeed if they turn out to be less bad. In any of these cases, to act unjustly will turn out to be a bad thing for the person who acts unjustly, and a shameful one too.

Is that what we agree on, or isn't it?

CRITO

It's what we agree on.

SOCRATES

Therefore, injustice should never be done.

CRITO

Indeed not.

SOCRATES

Therefore, despite what the multitude think, injustice should never be done *back*, in return for injustice; *because* injustice should never be done.

49c

CRITO

Apparently not.

SOCRATES

What about doing harm, Crito? Should we do harm, or not?

CRITO

Of course we shouldn't, Socrates.

SOCRATES

Well then: is it justice for someone who has been harmed to do harm *back*, as the multitude think? Or is that injustice?

CRITO

It is never just.

SOCRATES

For there is no difference between harming people, and doing injustice to them.

CRITO

You're right.

SOCRATES

Therefore, we should not do injustice in return for injustice, nor harm any person, no matter what they may have done to us.

But be sure, Crito,

49d

that when you state your agreement to this, you don't state agreement to what you don't actually believe. For I know that only a few people think that we should not do injustice in return for injustice, or ever will. Between those who do think this, and those who don't, there can be no deliberation in common. In fact, when either side notices the other's conclusions, they are bound to despise each other.

So now, you must examine carefully whether you are in the company of those who think that we should not do injustice in return for injustice, nor harm anyone. If you too agree with that, then we can begin our discussion from this point: that it is never right either to do injustice, or to do injustice in return, or to defend yourself when you have been harmed by returning harm for harm. Or do you *disagree*, and do not share in this first principle?

5. 49e-50c: The dialogue with the Laws of Athens (1): Harming the city, and breaking an agreement with the city

SOCRATES

49e

For my part at least, this is what I always did think, and what I still do think. If you, for your part, have formed any other view, then tell me and instruct me about it. But if you still think what you used to think before, that we should not do injustice in return for injustice, nor harm anyone, then hear what comes next.

CRITO

No, I agree with you; I too still think that. So go on.

SOCRATES

Here then is my next assertion—or rather, my next question. Suppose someone has agreed to do something, and that the thing that they have agreed to do is just. Should they do that thing, or not?

CRITO

They should do it.

SOCRATES

From these points, see what follows. If we leave here without the agreement

50a

of the city, aren't there some whom we harm? And aren't they the very ones whom we least ought to harm? And if we do that, are we keeping to previous agreements that we made, and that are just agreements—or are we breaking them?

CRITO

Socrates, I can't give an answer to what you're asking me, because I don't understand.

SOCRATES

Look at it this way. Suppose we were on the point of sneaking away from here—or whatever you want to call it, if not “sneaking away”—and the Laws and the common interest of the city came to us, and stood before us, and asked us this:

“Tell me, Socrates, what is this that you have in mind to do?”

50b

Is what you're contemplating, anything but an attempt, for your part,¹⁴ to destroy us, the Laws, and the entire city? Or do you think that a city can go on existing, and won't have been overthrown, if the legal verdicts reached in it have no power, but can be invalidated and annulled by individual citizens?”

What shall we say, Crito, in answer to this question, and others like it? Someone might have plenty to say, if he were an orator for example, about the overturning of the legal principle that lays down that the courts' verdicts are authoritative.

50c

¹⁴ Cp. 45d, 54c.

So should we say to the Laws: “The city acted unjustly towards us, and did not reach the correct verdict”? Is that how we should answer their question?

CRITO

By Zeus, yes, Socrates.

SOCRATES

Then what if the Laws give us this answer?— “Socrates, that wasn’t the agreement between us and you. This was what we agreed: that you would abide by whatever decisions the city reached.”¹⁵

6. 50c-51c: The dialogue with the Laws of Athens (2): The analogy with parenthood

SOCRATES (speaking for the Laws)

We might be surprised by them saying this. But, perhaps, the Laws would go on:

“Socrates, don’t be surprised by what we say. Simply answer our question—since you yourself have been in the habit of using question and answer. Come now: what grudge do you have against us,

50d

and against the city, that you are trying to destroy us? Didn’t we Laws, in the first place, oversee your birth? Wasn’t it by means of us Laws that your father married your mother, and fathered you? So tell us then. What if anything is it that you find fault with, and say is out of place, in those of us Laws that have to do with marriage?”

“No,” I would say, “I find no fault in them.”

“Or do you find any fault with those of us Laws that have to do with the nurture and upbringing of the child, by means of which you too were educated? Didn’t the Laws that are assigned to these matters order things well, when they commanded your father

50e

to educate you in the arts and in gymnastics?”

“Yes,” I would say, “that was wisely ordered.”¹⁶

“Very well then. Since you have been born, bred, and educated like this, could you really say, first, that you were anything but our offspring and our servant, both you and your parents? And since that is so, do you think that what is justice between yourself and us Laws is settled on the basis of *equality*? Do you think that when we Laws undertake to do something to you, it is justice for you to do something back? What was justice between yourself and your father was not settled on the basis of equality; nor between you and your master, whenever you happened to have one. Things

¹⁵ In the Greek, these two sentences are phrased as rhetorical questions expecting the answers No and Yes respectively. But Socrates evidently means both sentences as straightforward assertions. So I have rephrased them that way. Why then does Plato himself not phrase them as assertions? Perhaps, because he is less sure about these two moves than Socrates seems to be.

¹⁶ In later writings such as *Meno* and *Protagoras*—not to mention the *Republic*—Plato’s view of Athens’ educational arrangements will be anything but favourable; and his criticisms of it will be put on Socrates’ lips. This passage therefore raises interesting questions. Does Plato change his mind, and decide later on that Socrates was wrong, here, to express his approval of Athens’ laws about education? Or is this passage actually ironic in some sense? The point could be that Socrates’ acquiescence in his own execution is conditional on his acquiescence in Athens’ laws in general; and he does *not* in fact acquiesce—or at least Plato later comes to think he should not have acquiesced. A separate question is how much education in Athens was the matter of any *laws* at all; which might perhaps indicate a second kind of irony in this passage; or alternatively, show that *nomoi* does not just mean laws, strictly speaking, but customs as well.

weren't set up so that you could retaliate when something happened to you, or, if something bad was said of you,

51a

so that you could answer back; or hit back if someone struck you; or anything like that. As with your father, so with your fatherland and the Laws. Suppose we take it in hand to destroy you, because that is what we judge is justice. Will it be permissible for you to try to destroy us the Laws and your fatherland? And will you say that when you do this you are acting justly—you with your ever so genuine concern for virtue? Are you really so wise that you have failed to see that your fatherland is more to be honoured and revered and held as holy than your mother, and your father, and all your ancestors—

51b

and that it should hold a higher place both among the gods, and also with men of understanding? Yes, you should revere your fatherland, and obey and be submissive to your fatherland when it is angry with you—more even than you should to your father. Whatever your fatherland commands, you should either persuade it not to command, or obey the command; if your fatherland demands that you undergo something, you should undergo it, and hold your tongue. If your fatherland commands that you be beaten, or put in chains; if your fatherland sends you to war to be wounded or killed; you must obey the command. *This* is what justice is. And you may not shrink from the fight, or run away, or desert your post. In war, in the lawcourt, everywhere: you must do whatever the fatherland and the city commands—

51c

unless you can convince them of your own view of the nature of justice. When it is impious to be violent to your mother or father, isn't it far worse to be violent to your fatherland?"

How shall we answer all this, Crito? Do the Laws speak truly, or not?

CRITO

I think they do.

7. 51c-53a: The dialogue with the Laws of Athens (3): Socrates could have opted out of his agreement but he never did

SOCRATES (speaking for the Laws)

"Consider, then, Socrates," I think the Laws might say. "If we speak the truth about this, then what you are planning to do to us is not justice. For we gave birth to you, we brought you up, we educated you, we gave you and all the other citizens

51d

every good thing we were able to. All the same, we say that we have given this freedom to any Athenian who wishes to use it, once he has surveyed and inspected the affairs of the city and us, the Laws: if we do not please him, he can leave, take all his possessions, and go away wherever he likes. Not one of us, the Laws, is an obstacle to you. If any of you wants to go into exile because we and the city do not happen to please you, none of us will forbid it. Anyone who feels that way can go to some other city as a resident alien—

51e

he can go wherever he likes, and he can keep his property with him too.¹⁷

But suppose any of you chooses to remain here, having already seen the way we the Laws make decisions in court, and the rest of how we run the city. We say that a man like that has in effect already made an agreement with us that he will do whatever we command. And if someone won't accept this, we say he commits a threefold injustice. First, he is disobedient to us as his birth-givers, and secondly, he is disobedient to us as his upbringers; and thirdly, when he has already agreed that he will obey us, he neither does obey, nor convinces us that we have done something dishonourable.

52a

But we made a proposal to him; we did not merely give him a brusque order to do whatever we want. We put before him two choices: either to persuade us that he was right, or to do what we say. And he is not doing either.

What we say, Socrates, is that you too are guilty on these charges, if you really do what you are thinking of doing. And you are not guilty on them in a small way; you are one of the guiltiest people in the whole of Athens.”

And if I said, “Really? Why?” the Laws might justly retort that I am one of the people who has most obviously made this agreement with them in the whole of Athens. They might say:

52b

“Socrates, we have the strongest evidence that you approve of us Laws and of the city. You have spent more time in the city than every other Athenian! You would never have done that if you did not approve of it more strongly than every other Athenian. You have never left the city to go sightseeing, nor ever gone anywhere else, except when you were in the army. You have done no other travelling, like other people do. You have never been gripped by a desire to get to know any other city or any other laws. No, we Laws of Athens

52c

and our city have been enough for you. This is how emphatic you have been in your love of us, and in your agreement to live as a citizen under us as your laws. And above all, you so approve of this city that you brought your children into being here.

Yet further: even while you were on trial, you could have proposed exile as your sentence if you had thought it good; you could have left Athens then, and then done with the city's consent what you are now trying to do without its consent. No, you went all high and mighty and claimed that you would not make a fuss about it¹⁸ if you had to die; and you chose, as you yourself said, death rather than exile.¹⁹ But now you show no respect for those own arguments of your own, nor do you show us, the Laws, any respect; you are trying to destroy us, and you are doing

52d

exactly what the vilest slave would do: you are trying to sneak off, in defiance of the contracts and agreements that you made with us about how you would live in the city.

First then you must answer this question from us: Aren't we right to say that that you have agreed to live according to us the Laws—by your actions if not by your words? Isn't that true?”

What shall we say in answer to all this, Crito? Can we do anything but agree?

CRITO

We're bound to agree, Socrates.

¹⁷ That is: his goods will not be confiscated by the state if he departs simply out of choice. Some Greek city-states did confiscate exiles' goods in this way, including Athens if the exile was convicted of some crime.

¹⁸ Same word as at 43b.

¹⁹ Cp. *Apology* 37a-d.

SOCRATES (speaking for the Laws)

“Then,” they might say, “what are you doing but

52e

breaking your contracts and agreements with us? Which you made not because you were compelled to, or tricked into it, or forced to make a decision quickly. No, you have had seventy years, and for all those years you were at liberty to leave the city, if we the Laws did not have your approval, or if the agreements that you made did not seem just to you. But you made no decision in favour of Sparta or Crete, though those are two states that you were always saying were well-governed—nor in favour of any of the other

53a

Greek or foreign states. You left this city less often than the lame and the blind and the other citizens with disabilities. Very clearly, that was how much more than the other Athenians you approved of the city and of us the Laws; for no one could approve of a city without approving of its laws.

But now you won’t hold to your own promises? Well, you will if you listen to us, Socrates.

8. 53a-54d: The dialogue with the Laws of Athens (4): the bad consequences and dishonour of running away

SOCRATES (speaking for the Laws)

And if you do keep these promises, then you will not look absurd, as you will if you leave the city. For really, ask yourself: what good it could do you yourself, or your friends, if you overrode your agreement with us and went wandering off?

53b

For it is pretty evident that you will put those friends too at risk of having to flee, and of losing their city and being financially ruined.

As for yourself, Socrates, if you go to one of the closest other cities to Athens, to Thebes or Megara—both of which have excellent laws—you will arrive there as an enemy to those cities, and whoever actually cares about those cities will be very suspicious of you; they will think of you as a destroyer of the laws. So you will simply confirm the verdict of the Athenian court: when they see you go there, the jurors here will conclude that their decision was correct.

53c

For a man who is ready to undermine the laws is a man who is ready to undermine and corrupt young and foolish men as well—which is exactly what you were accused of.

What then? Will you avoid all the well-governed towns, and the most orderly-living of men? If you do that, will it really be worthwhile for you to go on living? Or if you don’t avoid the well-governed towns, how will you have the brass neck to carry on with your arguments? For what sort of arguments will you be able to make *there*, Socrates, in those other well-governed cities? Will you present the same kind of arguments that you present here, that the greatest goods for humans are virtue, and justice, and law-abidingness, and the laws themselves? Don’t you think that this, as a deed of Socrates’, would simply look absurd? That’s what you have to think.

53d

Or will you, instead, shun well-governed places like those, and go rather to Thessaly, to the guest-friends of Crito? Thessaly, that nest of disorder and impropriety! No doubt the Thessalians would

be delighted to hear your hilarious story about sneaking off from the prison, maybe in some disguise or other—a peasant’s double-hided coat, or whatever else people dress up in for a great escape, and cutting off your beard and hair as well. Won’t everyone then make this reproach? ‘Socrates is an old man, with only a short part of his life left to him, probably;

53e

and yet he clung on to life so desperately that he was prepared to transgress the greatest of the laws?’

Well, maybe no one in Thessaly will reproach you like that, if you don’t make any enemies. But if you do, Socrates, then you will hear a lot of defamatory talk about yourself. So you will live more basely than all men, as dishonourably as a slave. And what will you have to do in Thessaly except wine and dine—as if you had left Athens for Thessaly merely to go to a party? All those arguments of ours

54a

about justice and the rest of virtue—where will they be then?

Or is it supposed to be on your sons’ account that you want to live: to bring them up and educate them? Really? So will you take them to Thessaly for their upbringing and education? Will you make them exiles—so that they too can join in the Thessalians’ debauchery?

Or suppose that isn’t what you do. Suppose, instead, you have your sons brought up here, while you are alive but elsewhere. It looks like they will be better raised and educated if they don’t spend time with you! You might say ‘Well, my friends will take care of them.’ But that implies that you think your friends would take care of them if you went away to Thessaly, but would not take care of them if you went away to the afterlife! If any of those who call themselves your friends are any use at all,

54b

then you should expect them to take care of your sons in either case.

No, Socrates: be persuaded by us Laws who brought *you* up. Do not put your children, or your life, or anything else, ahead of what is just. That way, when you come to the world of the afterlife, you will have everything that you have done to say in your defence to those who rule that world. Running away will obviously not make things better in this life for you, nor for any of your friends; nor will it be the choice that is more just or reverent; nor will it be better when you come to the next life.

Instead of running away, you depart this life now—if you are willing to—as a victim of injustice.

54c

But it is not *us*, the Laws, who have inflicted this injustice; rather it is men who have treated you unjustly. Whereas if you escape from this prison, you will be doing a shameful injustice in return for injustice, and harm for harm. You will be overturning your own agreements and covenants with us the Laws. You will be doing harm to the very things you least should harm. And you will also be harming yourself, and your friends, and your fatherland, and us the Laws. And we will be angry with you while you are alive, and in the other world, our brothers, the laws of the afterlife, will not receive you kindly, because they will know that, for your part,²⁰ you tried to destroy them.

54d

So do not let Crito convince you to do what he says; be persuaded by us.”

²⁰ Cp. Footnote 12.

9. 54d-54e: Conclusion to the dialogue

SOCRATES

Crito, my dear friend: know for sure that these are the words I seem to hear, as Bacchic revellers seem to hear the playing of flutes; the echoing of these arguments reverberates within me, and makes me unable to hear the sound of any others. And know for sure as well that—as I see things now—anything you speak against these words, you will speak in vain. But all the same, if you think that you will get anywhere, do speak on.

CRITO

No, Socrates, I have nothing to say.

54e

SOCRATES

Well then, Crito, let it rest. And let us do as I have advocated, since this is the way the god leads us.