

Plato on the Social Contract
(Excerpt from *Crito*)

Plato discusses the nature of the social contract, while at the same time discussing Socrates' reasons for not trying to escape when he had the chance. The setting for the discussion is the final night of Socrates' life. Knowing that he has been sentenced to death by the Athenian jury (on the charge of turning the young away from the traditional gods of Athens), one of his friends, Crito, suggests that he allow them to bribe the guards into allowing Socrates to escape. Socrates' refusal to do this is based on what has become known as the social contract theory.

The social contract is an unspoken and unwritten agreement between any community and its residents: society provides assistance to educating children, and the basic rules for marriage, and educating children (which produces reasonably healthy children who have a minimum of learning), and the residents agree to obey society's laws.

Socrates brings the state of Athens into an imaginary discussion, in which the State provides reasons why Socrates shouldn't try to escape his impending doom. The word "State" has been capitalized, to show that it represents a sovereign government, and not simply a "state" in the sense of a section of a nation.

1. Socrates: Imagine that I am about to play truant (you may call the proceeding by any name which you like), and the laws and the government come and interrogate me: "Tell us, Socrates," they say; "what are you about? Are you going by an act of yours to overturn us -- the laws and the whole State, as far as in you lies? Do you imagine that a State can subsist and not be overthrown, in which the decisions of law have no power, but are set aside and overthrown by individuals?"

2. "And was that our agreement with you?" the law would say; "or were you to abide by the sentence of the State?" And if I were to express astonishment at their saying this, the law would probably add: "Answer, Socrates, instead of opening your eyes: you are in the habit of asking and answering questions. Tell us what complaint you have to make against us which justifies you in attempting to destroy us and the State? In the first place did we not bring you into existence? Your father married your mother by our aid and begat you. Say whether you have any objection to urge against those of us who regulate marriage?" None, I should reply. "Or against those of us who regulate the system of nurture and education of children in which you were train? Were not the laws, who have the charge of this, right in commanding your father to train you in music and gymnastic?" Right, I should reply. "Well, then, since you were brought into the world and nurtured and educated by us, can you deny in the first place that you are our child and slave, as your fathers were before you? And if this is true you are not on equal terms with us; nor can you think that you have a right to do to us what we are doing to you. Would you have any right to strike or revile or do any other evil to a father or to your master, if you had one, when you have been struck or reviled by him, or received some other evil at his hands? -- you would not say this?"

3.And when we are punished by her, whether with imprisonment or stripes, the punishment is to be endured in silence; and if she leads us to wounds or death in battle, thither we follow as is right; neither may anyone yield or retreat or leave his rank, but whether in battle or in a court of law, or in any other place, he must do what his city and his country order him; or he must change their view of what is just: and if he may do no violence to his father or mother, shall much less may he do violence to his country” Then the laws will say: "Consider, Socrates, if this is true, that in your present attempt you are going to do us wrong. For, after having brought you into the world, and nurtured and educated you, and given you and every other citizen a share in every good that we had to give, we further proclaim and give the right to every Athenian, that if he does not like us when he has come of age and has seen the ways of the city, and made our acquaintance, he may go where he pleases and take his goods with him; and none of us laws will forbid him or interfere with him. Any of you who does not like us and the city, and who wants to go to a colony or to any other city, may go where he likes, and take his goods with him . But he who has experience of the manner in which we order justice and administer the State, and still remains, has entered into an implied contract that he will do as we command him. And he who disobeys us is, as we maintain, thrice wrong: first, because in disobeying us he is disobeying his parents; secondly, because we are the authors of his education; thirdly, because he has made an agreement with us that he will duly obey our commands; and he neither obeys them nor convinces us that our commands are wrong; and we do not rudely impose them, but give him the alternative of obeying or convincing us; that is what we offer, and he does neither.

Study Questions for Plato's *Crito*

The numbers for each question refer to the paragraph of the same number. That is to say, questions 2A and 2B would both be answered in paragraph 2.

1. What does the State imply would happen, if its citizens were able to violate its laws at will?

2A. What two reasons does the State give Socrates for its claim on his obedience?

2B. The State tells Socrates that it is just like what family member, to its citizens?

3A. Finish this quote: "Whether in battle or in a court of law, or in any other place, he must do what his city and his country _____."

3B. If, after becoming an adult, Socrates didn't approve of the laws and customs of Athens, what could he have done?

3C. Since Socrates hadn't left the city, the State said that he had entered into what?