COLLOQUY · A DIALOGUE

The Other Apology, or Socrates in Toronto

Socrates comes down to Union Station on a Friday in October, and eleven people say sorry to him in the first hour. A litigator from Buffalo hears every one of them as a confession. Through the tunnels, on the King car and down Spadina to the lake, they try to find out what the word means.

Richard Verver · October 2026

For Noah MacDonald, and for the First Peoples of Turtle Island.

Persons of the dialogue

- **Socrates,** barefoot
- **Garrett,** a litigator from Buffalo, in Toronto for an examination for discovery
- **Priya,** a litigator from Toronto, on the other side of it
- **Joy,** a nurse at St. Michael's Hospital
- **Mrs. Pereira,** coming from the noon Mass at the cathedral
- **Tiago,** her grandson, seven, on a PA day
- **The Operator** of a westbound 504 King streetcar, heard but not seen

Scene: The Porch of Union Station; the tunnels under King Street; a streetcar going west; Spadina Avenue; the little beach with the yellow umbrellas near the foot of it. A Friday in October.

I. The Porch of Union Station

The great hall, under the departures board. Garrett comes up from the Buffalo train with a roller bag. Socrates is standing on the marble in his bare feet.

Socrates. I came down this morning to Union Station, stranger, to see the city. In the first hour, eleven people confessed to me.

Garrett. Confessed to what?

Socrates. That is what I hoped you could tell me. You have the look of a man who knows what a confession is.

Garrett. I'm a litigator. Buffalo, insurance defence. So yes. The best day of my year is when the other side has one.

Socrates. Then you are the very man. Here is the first. A woman came round that pillar with a coffee, and I stood on her foot, and she said: *sorry*.

Garrett. You stood on her foot.

Socrates. I am not used to shoes, and so I am not used to other people's.

Garrett. *(looking down)* Where are your shoes?

Socrates. I walked barefoot on the ice at Potidaea. A Toronto October will not kill me. But tell me what she confessed.

Garrett. Nothing. She was being polite. Up here they say it about everything. You get used to it.

Socrates. I am not used to it, which is why I ask. When a man in Buffalo says it, what does he mean?

Garrett. If he says it to my client's insured after a fender-bender? He means the case is over. That's a statement of a party opponent. I put it in front of the jury and I sit down.

Socrates. So *sorry* is an admission of fault.

Garrett. That's what the word means. "I'm sorry. I did it."

Socrates. Good. We have a definition, and it is a lawyer's, so it should be sturdy. Let us test it as you would test a witness. Whose fault did the woman admit?

Garrett. Hers, I guess.

Socrates. But I stood on her foot.

Garrett. Then yours.

Socrates. Can one person admit another person's fault?

Garrett. Not in my courtroom.

Socrates. Then either she admitted a fault she did not have, and she is a liar, or she admitted nothing, and your definition is wrong. Is she a liar?

Garrett. She seemed nice.

Socrates. So do I, and I am told I am very annoying. Here is another. A man with a large bag walked into that board, the one with the trains on it, and said sorry to it.

Garrett. To the board.

Socrates. To the board. Can a board be wronged?

Garrett. No.

Socrates. Then by your definition he confessed to a train schedule.

Garrett. Fine. It's not an admission. It's a reflex, like "bless you." It doesn't mean anything. It's a noise.

Socrates. A second definition: *sorry* is a noise. I like it better. It is humbler, and I also make noises that mean nothing. Tell me, did everyone on your escalator make this noise?

Garrett. Pretty much. One guy cut in at the top and didn't say anything, and everybody looked at him like he'd —

Socrates. Like he had what?

Garrett. Like he'd done something.

Socrates. By the dog, Garrett! They heard the noise by its absence. Does anyone in Buffalo turn to stare at a man who fails to sneeze?

Garrett. No.

Socrates. Then it is not a noise like a sneeze. A noise is heard when it is made. This one is heard when it is not made. Your second definition has gone the way of the first.

Garrett. You're a lot of work for a guy with no shoes.

Socrates. So the Athenians said. In the end they took a vote on it.

II. The Tunnels

Down the stairs into the tunnels under the city. Priya hurries up, phone in hand.

Priya. Garrett! Sorry, sorry, I'm so sorry I'm late.

Garrett. *(to Socrates)* Write that down.

Priya. It won't help you. Section two.

Socrates. Section two of what?

Priya. The *Apology Act*. B.C. passed one in 2006, Ontario in 2009. An apology isn't an admission of fault, and you can't put it in evidence to prove one. Also, the reporter's sick, so we're adjourned to Monday. Sorry.

Garrett. I took the train all the way from Buffalo.

Priya. I know. Sorry.

Socrates. Then you are both free, and I am always free. Walk with me. I want to know what this law says the word is.

They walk. The tunnel is long and bright, and everyone in it is looking at a small screen.

Socrates. I have described a place like this before. Underground, a long passage, and everyone watching shadows on a little wall he carries in his hand.

Priya. The PATH. Thirty kilometres of it. You can get from the train to your desk without seeing the sky.

Socrates. And when they walk into one another?

Priya. They look up. They say sorry.

Socrates. So the word is the moment the prisoner turns around. Tell me what your law says it is.

Priya. Sympathy or regret, a statement that you're sorry, or any words or actions showing "contrition or commiseration, whether or not the words or actions admit fault."

Socrates. Contrition I know. What is commiseration?

Priya. Being wretched with someone. *Com*, with; *miser*, wretched.

Socrates. So the law says the word may mean "I did wrong," or it may mean "I am wretched with you," and either way the court shall not hear it.

Garrett. You can say it was your fault, and they still won't use it?

Priya. Not the apology. If you tell me you were drunk, that's a fact, and I'll use it. If you tell me you're sorry, that's yours.

Garrett. New York keeps introducing a bill for one, for doctors. It keeps sitting in committee. And most of the states that have one only protect the sympathy part. "I'm sorry you were hurt" is safe. "I'm sorry, I nicked an artery" is Exhibit A.

Socrates. Why did your province need a law at all, Priya, for a word that Garrett says is a noise?

Priya. Because lawyers like Garrett told doctors and insurers never to say it. Lawyers like me too. Then nobody said it. It turned out a city can't run that way.

Socrates. Here is a strange thing. In Buffalo the word is worth so much that a man can lose his house by it. In Toronto the law has made it worth nothing. And here it is spent forty times an hour.

Priya. Worth nothing in court. That isn't the same as worth nothing.

Socrates. Then it is like a coin. A coin buys what everyone agrees it is worth, and it passes from hand to hand all day where everyone knows its weight. Where no one knows its weight —

Garrett. You get a lousy exchange rate at the Peace Bridge.

Priya. Other way round. You'd be overpaying, Garrett. That's why you never spend it.

Socrates. So in Buffalo a sorry is a gold coin and no one spends it, and in Toronto it is a penny and everyone does.

Priya. We got rid of the penny in 2013.

Socrates. But you kept the sorry.

Priya. Somebody actually polled this. If someone else bumps into you, do you apologize? Thirty-six per cent of the British said yes. Twenty-four per cent of Americans.

Garrett. Twenty-four per cent of Americans? Who are these people?

Socrates. Perhaps they are Canadians in exile.

Priya. They published it on Canada Day, and they didn't ask us.

Socrates. Perhaps they did not want to bother you.

Priya. That's very Canadian of them.

At the corner of a food court, Garrett walks straight into Joy, who is carrying a tray of coffees.

Garrett. Whoa. Excuse me.

Joy. Oh! Sorry!

Socrates. Stop, both of you. Do not move. Garrett, what did you just ask of her?

Garrett. I said excuse me.

Socrates. And what is it, to excuse?

Priya. *(thumbing her phone)* Latin, *excusare*. *Ex*, out of; *causa*, a charge, a lawsuit. To let someone out of the case.

Socrates. You consult that little oracle very readily.

Priya. It's faster than Delphi.

Socrates. Then hear what the oracle says. Garrett walked into this woman and asked to be dismissed from the case. She walked into no one, and entered a plea of — what is *sorry* made of?

Priya. Old English, *sārig*, from *sār*. Sore. It isn't from *sorrow*. Different word.

Socrates. She entered a plea of *sore*. Which of these two is talking like a lawyer?

Garrett. Okay. That one's good.

Joy. Is anybody going to help me with these?

Garrett takes a tray. Socrates holds a cup as if it might be hemlock.

Socrates. And *apology*, the word your law is named for: that is my word. In Athens an *apologia* was a speech of defence. I made one once, before five hundred of my fellow citizens.

Garrett. How'd it go?

Socrates. I said sorry to no one. I would not bring my sons in to weep for me. They gave me hemlock.

Garrett. Maybe you should've said sorry.

Socrates. Perhaps. But not, I think, for philosophy. Is there anything a person should not say sorry for?

Joy. For being sick. I'm a nurse at St. Mike's. Patients say sorry all day. Sorry I pressed the bell. Sorry I threw up. Sorry for being a bother. I tell them, stop it, this is what I'm for.

Socrates. And do you say it to them?

Joy. All the time. When the needle doesn't go in the first time. When the news is bad and it isn't anybody's fault.

Socrates. If it is nobody's fault, what are you sorry for?

Joy. That it hurts. Sorry means I see it hurts.

Priya. Commiseration.

Joy. We used to be told not to say it. Legal said. Families told us afterwards that was the worst part, that nobody would say it.

Socrates. And the woman with the coffee this morning, who said it to the man who stood on her foot?

Joy. Same thing. We're both here, and something hurts. Doesn't matter whose foot.

Socrates. Then the word does not point at the one who did it. It points at the sore place. Garrett, a third definition, and this one is not yours, so I have more hope for it: *sorry* means "I see that something hurts, and I am here."

Garrett. You can't put that in front of a jury.

Priya. That's the point.

Joy. I'm getting the King car. Walk me up?

III. The 504 King

A crowded westbound streetcar. Mrs. Pereira has a seat, her missal in her lap. Tiago stands holding a pole. The car lurches, and he knocks his forehead against it.

Tiago. Sorry.

Socrates. *(crouching to his height)* Young man, to whom did you speak?

Tiago. The pole.

Socrates. Did it feel it?

Tiago. No. It's a pole.

Socrates. Then why did you say sorry?

Tiago. So it's not weird.

Socrates. What is weird?

Tiago. When you bump something and nobody says anything.

Socrates. Garrett, do you hear? This boy knows what we have been looking for all morning, and nobody taught him.

Mrs. Pereira. I taught him. Leave him alone.

Socrates. One more question, madam, and then I will leave him alone, as I was asked to in Athens. Tiago: is the pole sorry-worthy because you said sorry to it, or did you say sorry to it because it was sorry-worthy?

Tiago. What?

Mrs. Pereira. Are you corrupting him?

Socrates. It has been alleged. But hear what he said. The pole felt nothing, and the word was not for the pole. It was for everyone else on the car, so that they would know nothing was wrong with the world.

Tiago. Yeah.

Socrates. When a thing is bumped and no one owns the bump, it is weird. When someone says the word, the bump is owned, and the car is in order again.

Tiago. That's what I said.

Socrates. It is. I only took longer.

The speaker crackles.

The Operator. Sorry, folks, this car is short-turning at Spadina. Everybody off at Spadina. Sorry for the inconvenience.

A groan goes down the car.

Socrates. He is sorry, and nevertheless he does it.

Mrs. Pereira. That's not a sorry. That's Herod. "And the king was sorry: nevertheless for the oath's sake…" Matthew fourteen.

Garrett. And we're on the King car.

Joy. Can she say that about the streetcar?

Priya. Truth is a defence.

Socrates. So there is a sorry that means "I see that it hurts," and another that means "I see that it hurts, and I will do it anyway."

Mrs. Pereira. The second one belongs to kings.

Joy. And airlines.

IV. Spadina Avenue

Everyone off at Spadina. Tiago wants the beach, so they all walk south toward the lake.

Socrates. Madam, you knew your Herod. You have been to the temple this morning.

Mrs. Pereira. Noon Mass at the cathedral. Every Friday.

Socrates. And do they say sorry there too?

Mrs. Pereira. At the start. Everybody together. *Mea culpa, mea culpa. (she strikes her breast)* And then we go on to the good part.

Socrates. Quickly?

Mrs. Pereira. Quickly. Father doesn't make a fuss. That's for the little ones. The little ones don't break anything. They're wear and tear.

Socrates. And the big ones?

Mrs. Pereira. For the big ones there's the box. You kneel down and you say, "O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee."

Socrates. The same word.

Mrs. Pereira. Same word. Different weight.

Socrates. Is there anyone who gets through a day without the little one?

Mrs. Pereira. Nobody. Seven times a day the just man falls. It's in the Bible.

Priya. *(the oracle again)* Proverbs twenty-four. It doesn't say "a day."

Mrs. Pereira. It means a day.

Socrates. Then everyone in this city needs the little word every day, and this city says it every day. Perhaps it is the only city that does what is required of it.

Garrett. Compliance. Now you're speaking my language.

Socrates. And is there anyone who never needed the little one?

Mrs. Pereira. Only Our Lady.

Socrates. Then she alone never said it.

Mrs. Pereira. She never needed the first kind. But she stood at the cross. That's the other kind.

Joy. Commiseration.

Priya. Section one.

Socrates. So there are three. The great sorry of the one who did a great wrong. The little sorry of the one who did a little wrong. And the sorry of the one who did no wrong at all, and stands beside the one who hurts. The first is said in the box, the second at the start of the Mass, and the third at the foot of the cross and in the tunnels under King Street. Garrett, which of the three did you think the woman at the station was saying?

Garrett. The first.

Socrates. And she was saying?

Garrett. The third. Maybe the second.

Socrates. Then you heard a gold coin where she spent a penny, and you went home thinking all of Canada was in the box.

They cross at Queens Quay. Socrates stops at the curb.

Socrates. One more question, and it is not a joke. A city that says the little word so easily: has it ever had to say a great one?

A pause.

Priya. Yes. June 2008. The Prime Minister stood up in the House of Commons and apologized to the survivors of the residential schools. He said, "We are sorry."

Mrs. Pereira. And the Holy Father came in 2022, out to Maskwacis, and asked forgiveness. Catholics ran a lot of those schools.

Socrates. Was it the same word?

Priya. Same word. It couldn't be said the same way.

Mrs. Pereira. With the big ones you have to do something after. Saying it is only the beginning.

Socrates. So the little sorry closes a matter, and the great one opens one. Then whose sorry was it? The Prime Minister never ran a school.

Priya. He still said "we."

Mrs. Pereira. So did Daniel. He never burned the Temple, and he still prayed, "for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers."

Socrates. And this "we" of the Prime Minister's. Is it a person?

Priya. It's the Crown. In law the Crown never dies. The Supreme Court says its honour is "always at stake in its dealings with Aboriginal peoples."

Mrs. Pereira. The Church never dies either. But only one of them is going to the wedding.

Socrates. What wedding?

Mrs. Pereira. The Lamb's. It's at the end of the Book.

Socrates. Then the great sorry is not one man's, and it is not many men's sorries added up. Is it the sorry of a machine, then? Of laws and offices and buildings?

Mrs. Pereira. A machine can't say sorry. You saw the boy with the pole. The guilt belongs to the ones who did it, and nobody inherits it. What's left is ours to carry. The Church is one body, and the dead are still in it.

Socrates. And who closes a matter that a whole people opened?

Mrs. Pereira. Not us. He does, when He comes back. Saint John saw them standing before the throne, "all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues." Every tongue. Even the ones the children were punished for speaking.

Joy. So it stays open till then.

They walk the rest of the way without talking.

V. The Beach with the Yellow Umbrellas

Sand, umbrellas, no swimming. Tiago runs to the edge of the water. Garrett, reading his phone, backs onto Mrs. Pereira's foot.

Garrett. Oh! Sorry. Sorry. *(catching himself)* I mean, that's not an admission.

Mrs. Pereira. You're good.

Socrates. What did she just do?

Priya. She absolved him.

Mrs. Pereira. Only Father can absolve. I just told him he's good.

Socrates. She told him he is good. Is that not what your God said at the beginning, of everything he had made?

Mrs. Pereira. "And, behold, it was very good."

Socrates. So the one who bumped says "I see that it hurts," and the one who was bumped says "you are good," and the matter is closed, and the world that was knocked is set back in order. In my city it took five hundred jurors to close a matter, and they closed it badly.

Garrett. You still haven't said it once today.

Socrates. That is true. I owe a palinode.

Garrett. A what?

Socrates. A recantation, in something like verse. Stesichorus slandered Helen and was struck blind. He sang a palinode, and his sight came back. This morning I said that eleven people confessed to me. That was false, and I must take it back.

Priya. An ode to Canada.

Socrates. Something like that.

He stands on the sand, facing the lake.

False was my word this morning, city by the lake.
Your people were not confessing. They were counting one another.
In the tunnels where the sun does not come,
at the doors where two arrive at once,
on the long car that turns back short,
you say the little word, and the city holds.
You say it to the stranger, to the pole,
to the board of trains that cannot hear,
and to the man who stood on your foot.
It is not sorrow. It is a sore place, touched,
and a voice that says: I see it, and I am here.
No one can say it to a shadow on a little wall.
You have to be in the same place.
Say it often, say it quickly, and go on to the good part.
And the great word, which you were slow to say,
keep saying with your hands.

Garrett. That was a sorry?

Socrates. A sorry with a meter. Stesichorus would have done it better. And now, Garrett, one thing more. The woman at Union Station, the first one. I stood on her foot, and she gave me the word, and I gave her nothing back, because I did not yet know what it was. I owe her a sorry. Will you remember to pay the debt?

Garrett. I don't know who she is.

Socrates. Then pay it to the next one. It is the same coin all over this city.

Garrett. I'm on the train back to Buffalo tonight.

Socrates. Then carry it over the bridge. Is it heavy, this word, to carry across a border?

Joy. Not heavy. *(She hands him the last coffee.)* "Neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Garrett. Is that admissible?

Priya. Everywhere.

Notes and sources

- **The law.** British Columbia's *Apology Act* (SBC 2006, c 19) came first (UBC Wiki). Ontario's *Apology Act, 2009* defines an apology to include commiseration, whether or not fault is admitted (Nelligan

Law), and bars it as evidence of fault in civil proceedings (Slaw). New York's bill, S4848 (2021), went to committee. On the American "partial" laws: CLM, ABA TortSource, Summer 2026.

- **The Crown.** "The honour of the Crown is always at stake in its dealings with Aboriginal peoples" (*Haida Nation v. British Columbia*, 2004 SCC 73, para. 16).
- **The poll.** YouGov, 1 July 2015.
- **The words.** Etymonline, "sorry"; Etymonline, "excuse".
- **The great sorries.** The House of Commons, 11 June 2008 (CBC); Pope Francis at Maskwacis, 25 July 2022 (EWTN News).
- **The three sorries.** Venial sin "does not break the covenant with God" (CCC 1863); no one avoids all venial sin through life without a special privilege, as the Church holds of the Blessed Virgin (Trent, sess. VI, can. 23; DH 1573).
- **The great sorry.** Subjective responsibility "ceases with the death of the one who performed the act"; what continues is an "objective common responsibility," because of "the bond which unites us to one another in the Mystical Body" (International Theological Commission, Memory and Reconciliation, 2000, quoting *Incarnationis mysterium* 11). The kingdom comes "not by a historic triumph of the Church through a progressive ascendancy" but by "God's victory over the final unleashing of evil" (CCC 677).
- **Scripture (KJV).** Genesis 1:31; Nehemiah 8:10; Proverbs 24:16; Daniel 9:16; Matthew 14:9; Revelation 7:9, 19:7.
- **Plato.** The opening, *Republic* 327a; the cave, 514a; barefoot on the ice at Potidaea, *Symposium* 220b; "by the dog," *Gorgias* 482b; the sons not brought to weep, *Apology* 34c–d; the dilemma, *Euthyphro* 10a; the boy, *Meno* 82b–85b; Stesichorus' palinode, *Phaedrus* 243a–b; the debt to Asclepius, *Phaedo* 118a.

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