

Chapter 6

Socrates' Ethics

6.1 Readings and Homework

- Readings: Platon, *Apology*
- Study questions:
 1. What are the charges against Socrates?
 2. What are the rules of discourse that Socrates wants to follow? How does it differ from the usual speeches in a court room?
 3. What is his strategy of defense? Do you think his way of defending himself are likely to be successful? Why? Why not?
 4. What are the main ideals that Socrates defends in his speech?

6.2 Reading the *Apology*

6.2.1 First Speech: Socrates's Defense

- Socrates requests that rational minds and not emotional being be his judges
 - Ways of speaking in philosophy contrasted with “clever speech”
 - Demands that the jury “overlook [his] manner of speaking (...), but consider and apply your mind to this alone, whether I say what's just or not”

- *Question: to what extent can we do without rhetorics?*
Contrast Conviction and Persuasion : is it sufficient to tell the truth for people to believe you?

Early accusations

- Charge: “They say there is a man called Socrates, a “wise” man, a thinker in the heavens, an investigator of all things below the earth, and someone who makes the weaker argument the stronger” 18c + added in 19c : “teaches these things to others”
- SO: Two main points lead to the charge of impiety and corruption of the youth:
 1. Socrates would pretend to know something about the divine
 2. Socrates would teaches this things to young people
- Logically, Socrates’ defense consists in undermining the two points above: he does not pretend to be wise in the divine, and does not teach either (irony on the well respected Sophists 19e)
- Human wisdom = awareness of lack of wisdom
 - Story of the Delphic Oracle: Socrates is the wisest of all men
 - Socrates’ looking for wiser people than himself
 1. Politicians – don’t know anything but think they do
 2. Poets – have a kind of natural inspiration, but know nothing they speak about
 3. craftsmen – have some true knowledge in their craft, but pretend that their wisdom extends beyond the restricted domain of their craft
 - as a result of such a search: hostility (+ Socrates does not care about the city’s affairs 23b-c)
- Young people follow and imitate him: Socrates says this is not teaching
Questions:

- What do we mean by teaching? teaching = transfer of some knowledge or of some method?
- To what extent is a teacher responsible for the mis-use of his teaching?

New accusations – Meletus

Socrates announces that he will prove that Meletus does not know what he is talking about when he accuses Socrates of corrupting the youth and not recognizing the official gods.

Education :

- Who can educate and improve the youth? All Athenians except Socrates
- Comparison with horses:
 - only horse trainers can improve horses, all other people make them worse
 - Socrates: it can't be otherwise for the youth: only a few people should be able to train them
 - Conclusion: Meletus does not know anything about education
- *Two comments:*
 - Is the comparison a good one? Is the education of horses adequately compared to the education of the youth? Why? Why not?
 - Importance of the notion of expert in Socrates' philosophy: there are experts in all domains. Experts are those who have knowledge of their domains. Virtue is no exception. Only experts in virtue could be good educators

SOCRATES' ETHICS 1: Virtue is a matter of knowledge, or: *Knowledge is necessary for virtue*

Intensional Corruption :

Socrates reduces Meletus to a dilemma:

On the basis that

1. someone bad harms close people

2. if one harms close people, he or she is likely to get harmed in return
3. someone would not intentionally do something for which he is likely to be harmed in return:

Socrates derives that:

1. Either Socrates corrupts the youth, but not intentionally
2. Or Socrates does not corrupt the youth

- In both cases, no need for trial

Comment: behind this is the thesis that no one does harm intentionally, which in turn involves that everybody does what he thinks is best and, conversely, that it is sufficient to know what is right to do to do it. All these are fundamental and controversial theses that Socrates hold.

SOCRATES' ETHICS 2: Virtue is only a matter of knowledge, or: *Knowledge is sufficient for virtue*

Gods :

Socrates reduces Meletus's claims to contradiction:

1. Claim 1: Socrates does not acknowledge any god
2. Claim 2: Socrates does acknowledge daimonic activities

Now: in order to acknowledge daimonic activities, one has to acknowledge the existence of daimons, which in turns involves to acknowledge the existence of gods, of whom daimons are the childrens.

Conclusion :

- has proved that the accusations are non sense
- claims that it proves he is innocent
- *Question:* Is that true? Do you need to know who is the expert for virtue education in order to accuse someone of mis-educating the youth?

The threat of Death and the ethical principle**The ethical principle :**

- A man should care about one single thing: “whether his actions are just or unjust, the deeds of a good or a bad man”
- Apply to situations: Achylles, battle field, and philosophy “examine myself and others”

Consequence 1 : death is not to be feared

Socrates’ argument goes like this:

1. Death is not something that he knows is bad;
2. By contrast, he knows that acting against the god is bad;
3. Further, he is convinced that the god wants him to philosophize;
4. THUS: Socrates knows that to live without philosophizing is bad while he does not know whether dying is good or bad
5. Therefore: S. chooses to avoid what he knows for sure is bad.

“I’ll never fear or avoid things that may for all I know be good more than things I know are bad” 29c

Consequence 2 : never give up philosophy

- never give up something he knows is right to do
- never give up prove to Athenians that they are ignorant of the most important things, i.e. things which concern ethics
- strong statement 30b: from virtue comes all the things that are good for human beings
- *Question:* Is that true? Is virtue sufficient to get all the good things?

SOCRATES’ ETHICS 3: Happiness is a matter of virtue, or: *virtue is sufficient for virtue*

Consequence 3 : Kill him or bless him

Socrates presents himself as

- a gift to the city from the gods
- a gadfly whose role is to awaken a big sleepy horse

Consequence 4 : No politics for Socrates

- Strong statement: no one who is looking for justice can survive in politics. Socrates seems to claim that virtue can be only exercised in private life !
- He would have died long ago if he had entered political life
- *Problem*: So what? Why has dying become a problem for Socrates? He seems now to think that it matters. The reason he gives: he would not have done anything beneficial for the city.

Consequence 5 : Students not corrupted

Meletus has no one to testify his sayings. Neither Socrates' "students" nor their families complain about Socrates' "teaching".

Conclusion

Back to the appropriate modes of defense : reason vs. emotion. Socrates refuses to arise pity, to confuse justice with spectacle.

"a juror does not sit in order to grant justice as a favor, but to decide where justice lies" 35c;

6.2.2 The Sentence**Socrates found guilty :**

- Accusators' proposal: death
- Socrates' answer: permanent seat for meals in the *Prytaneum*¹
- *Question*: What to think about Socrates' ways of negotiating the sentence?
- Rejects any smaller punishment:
 - "the greatest good of man is daily to converse about virtue"
 - "the life which is unexamined is not worth living"
 - *Question*: Why is that? This is a direct consequence of the ethical principle. If the best life is a life of virtue, and if the possibility of virtue depends on knowledge of virtue, then our first

¹The *Prytaneum* was a public dining hall.

duty is to try to get some knowledge about virtue, which is just what philosophy consists in according to Socrates.

SOCRATES' ETHICS 4: Knowledge is a matter of philosophy, or *Philosophy is necessary for knowledge* – NOTICE that he never says it is sufficient !! There is no guarantee to gain true knowledge in philosophizing, but this is the best we can do to be good persons.

Socrates sentenced to death :

- not surprised
- would not change anything if he was to do it again
- prophecy: accusers will be accused
- TO his friends: that the daimon did not stop him is a proof that death is not evil

“I regard this as a proof that what has happened to me is a good, and that those of us who think that death is an evil are in error. This is a great proof to me of what I am saying, for the customary sign would surely have opposed me had I been going to evil and not to good.”

- Considers two hypotheses: 1. death is but a deep sleep, 2. death is living as an eternal soul among other eternal souls

In case 1: sleep is nice

In case 2: it is the best life imaginable to be able to converse with some many minds.

Strong statement: “no evil can happen to a good man”

6.3 Synthesis: Socrates' philosophy

6.3.1 From knowledge to ethics

In chapter 1, we have tried to make sense of Socrates ways of philosophizing (elenchus and maieutics). Let us sum up what necessary assumptions have to be true in order for Socrates' method to be efficient. See also RAPG, p. 91 sq.

- Underlying assumption 1:

There are some truth to be discovered about the nature of these virtue that the sophists deemed as of conventional nature: justice, piety etc.

That is to say, Socrates' way of questioning supposes that there a unique answer to the question he asks (See *Euthyphro* 6d-e). See Plato's theory of forms later in the course.

- Underlying assumption 2:

All souls possess knowledge even if they have not recognized it yet. See Plato's doctrine of recollection later in the course. Hint: Diotima's claim that to ignore is to have forgotten and to know is to remember. But this is really Plato's philosophy.

- Underlying assumption 3:

All souls are able to recognize such truth, when facing it. In particular, rational dialog should lead all souls to agreement. The point is that not only every soul has knowledge of the unique essence of, say, virtues, but also they have a form of access to it. See Plato's doctrine of recollection on this point.

Now, we can complete the picture. Definitions and knowledge are essential for conducting a virtuous life.

- From knowledge to virtue:

Being aware of oneself and of true knowledge is *necessary and sufficient* to lead to goodness.

It is a major claim of Socrates that *no one is evil willingly*. Another famous way to put it: evil is but ignorance and virtue is knowledge. This means that weakness of will is impossible (See *Apology* (discussion with Meletus on whether Socrates does harm his close friends intensionally or not), and also *Protagoras* for an explicit discussion of this point): it is not possible to act in one way while thinking that another way to act is better.

- From virtue to happiness:

Living according to knowledge-wisdom-goodness is necessary and sufficient to live in happiness. This is a statement that will pervade all

philosophy later on: happiness is and is only a matter of leading one's life in the right (i.e. philosophical) way.

This is another strong thesis – no evil happens to a good man, which leads Socrates to say that his being sentenced to death is a good thing that happens to him.

Since knowledge of what is right is sufficient for goodness, we have to act to the best of our knowledge. This is the content of the ethical principle, which is Socrates' guide in life: Act according to what you judge is the best. The ethical principle is driven by the only moral value: the will to good.

This in turn leads to the idea that the best life is the philosophical life, that is to say, a life of self-examination, a life devoted to seeking knowledge about right and wrong.

With this in hand, we can make sense of usual Socrates' paradoxical claims:

- No one is evil willingly;
- Do not fear death;
- It is better to suffer injustice than to do it;
- No evil can happen to a good man.

6.3.2 Socrates' paradoxes

We have tried to make sense of Socrates' way of philosophizing (at least to the extent we have access to it). Some points remain still unclear though. If Socrates indeed holds the different theses above, then it is hard for him to consistently hold that “he knows nothing”.

In the *Apology* for example, he seems to “know” a lot of things indeed:

- that it is good to follow the gods (21e)
- that it is good to follow orders (29b-c);
- that the greatest way to live is to philosophize (38a-b);
- that to be good is only this: follow the ethical principle in all circumstances;

One could try to use the notion of Socratic irony to make sense of it. Under such hypothesis, whenever Socrates says he knows nothing, this would be ironical. This is a matter of academic controversy. Some deny that irony can make Socratic disclaimers of knowledge consistent with the rest of his philosophy.

In the *Apology*, Socrates tells us that it is his daimon who warns him whenever he is to act in the wrong way. What to think of this? What would you call such feeling or intuition? Further, such intuition is just a recipe to know what is wrong or bad: why would he obey the voice? How does he know this is the good way to live? What kind of answer and whether any answer, which would make Socrates' claims consistent, is a matter of academic controversy. Some also think that Plato intentionally makes Socrates inconsistent in his Dialogs so that we think about it, and, maybe, accept his philosophy as a solution.

Let us finally remember that all this is highly hypothetical. It is really difficult to figure out who was the historical Socrates and what was his philosophy...