A Socratic Perspective on The Nature of Human Evil

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Morality is a term that refers to the creation of and adherence to rules that govern human behavior on the basis of some idea of right and wrong. Whatever your concept of morality, it must address the human capacity to identify and choose between right and wrong. Socrates believed that nobody willingly chooses to do wrong[1]. He maintained that doing wrong always harmed the wrongdoer and that nobody seeks to bring harm upon themselves. In this view all wrongdoing is the result of ignorance. This means that it is impossible for a human being to willingly do wrong because their instinct for self interest prevents them from doing so. This is an extraordinary statement that strikes disbelief in many people going all the way back to Aristotle[2]. It seems contrary to experience that nobody knowingly does wrong. Perhaps you have personally witnessed examples of people who did wrong and seemed to know full well that their behavior was wrong. Yet, I propose that this belief of Socrates is true in a clear and simple way.

It is true that people can choose to do things they know other people think are wrong. It is even true that people can choose to do things that they believe are wrong for others while trying to benefit themselves. However, people do not choose to do things that they perceive in the moment of decision to be wrong (harmful) for themselves. Humans have a powerful instinct for benefiting themselves. Even when there is an obvious inherent self harm in the action, people can do wrong and cause harm while their goal is to seek after the good they believe will benefit them. Our objective knowledge is often subordinated to the power of our intuitive personal self-understanding. It is our personal intuition into a sense of our own well being that causes us to choose to do, or have a compulsion to do, a particular wrong even when that wrongdoing will obviously harm us. An example is a psychologically distraught person obsessed with cutting themselves. We know that such persons are merely trying to relieve psychological stress. They discover that, for some reason, cutting their flesh provides this relief. Here, we must keep the distinction between ends and means clear in our minds. They do not cut in order to harm their flesh. That is just a means. They cut in order to relieve stress, which is the end that their action seeks to obtain. In their intuitive calculus of personal benefit, they conclude that their overall state, which results from cutting, is better than the state of unrelieved stress. Even though the rationality and efficacy of such actions can be questioned, these persons believe they are benefiting themselves. A basic principle in Socrates’ perspective is that choices, right or wrong, serve the ends that the chooser seeks to obtain and not the means through which the ends are realized.

Ask Yourself Two Questions:

1. Do you believe that all humans have an instinct to benefit themselves?
2. Do you believe that all humans, to the extent that they suffer, instinctually seek to relieve their suffering?

If you answered yes to the above questions, then you can accept the idea that nobody chooses to do wrong when they perceive that the wrongdoing in question will bring harm upon them. To the extent that we simply obey our instinct to benefit ourselves and relieve our suffering, we are not willing to harm ourselves. Socrates' believed that persons who seek what they understand to benefit them are not trying to do wrong. They do not act for the sake of the wrong, but for the sake of obtaining the perceived good with which they are trying to improve their lives.

If you answered no to one or both of the questions above, then you are responsible for giving one clear example relevant to our subject that shows the truth of your belief. In this example you must describe a human committing an action, right or wrong, with no ulterior desire to either benefit herself or relieve her suffering. This is more difficult than you may think. I have yet to have anyone provide me with such an example that passes further examination.

The difference between objective knowledge and our personal intuitive insight into our own well being is important. People can know that stealing is wrong, but they experience a benefit through theft that makes them feel the wrongful action results in their obtaining some good, which improves their lives. Remember the important psychological principle, there is no motive for committing actions that are right or wrong, which bring no perceived benefit. If we keep the distinction between the ends and means clear, we see that nobody commits an act for the sake of the wrong involved but with a view to obtaining the perceived benefit or good, which results from the action. Even when the benefit of horrendous actions defies our understanding, the actor usually still has a conscious motive to benefit herself. So it is that some people can commit horrible actions with no sensible benefit. In such circumstances, either the benefit of the action is only perceptible to such persons' own distorted inner sense of well being or such persons are aware of acting out of uncontrollable compulsion. In the latter case they are rendered unable to make real choices and are thus removed from the realm of morality altogether. To the extent that we are unable to choose, we are unable to be moral.

We all have a powerful instinct to benefit ourselves. This instinct is our natural morality. It is our nature to see what we perceive to benefit us as being good and right. It is also our nature to see that which harms us as being bad and wrong. We may objectively see that some particular circumstance may harm us. However, deciding that such harm is morally wrong is a value that can only be imposed by a self-interested being. A non self-interested being is incapable of conceiving of right and wrong in a moral sense. There is no such thing as moral or ethical right or wrong until there first exists self-aware self-interest. Right and wrong, in the perception of the actor, are defined by the ends that the actor's natural instinct of self-interest guides her to embrace. The ends that we seek are always defined in the context of our self-interest and moral choices are always expressed in light of the ends we seek. I am not saying that morality IS self interest; nor am I saying that structures of moral or ethical reasoning are synonymous with self-interested reasoning or motivation. Mathematics provides a clarifying example. Nobody would say that mathematical reasoning and self-interest are the same thing. The structures of mathematical reasoning are independent of the phenomenon of human self-interest. However, all mathematicians always use the structures of mathematical reasoning in a self interested manner. Also, the only reason that mathematicians ever discover new
mathematical structures is because they are responding to self-interested motivations. In the same way the structures of moral or ethical reasoning are independent of the phenomenon of self interest. However, it is only by responding to self-interest that people embrace morality or ethics and only by virtue of self-interest has any thought on morality or ethics ever been developed. So it is that our thoughtfulness about moral right and wrong is born of and embraced through self-interest. Our self-interest is the foundation of our capacity to be moral. Our instinct to benefit ourselves makes our participation in moral choices possible.

That this instinct for self-interest may assert itself in minds that are ignorant, confused, twisted, broken and utterly unable to know what is truly good is a separate issue that does not negate the fundamental truth of Socrates’ insight that people never willingly harm themselves. Action based on ignorance still has the motive of benefiting the actor but lacks the knowledge to make good of that motive.

Question:

1. Have you ever committed a wrong action in which you did not seek to benefit yourself in some way? Even motives of entertainment, stress relief or avoidance of anxiety count as seeking to benefit you.

If you answer no, then your own life is a testimony to the truth of Socrates’ belief. If you answered yes, you must try to assess your answer. Did you really commit a wrong without trying to gain something...anything from that action? If you commit any action, wrong or right, without a view to any end then you have done something extraordinarily rare. Completely motiveless actions are virtually unknown except perhaps in the case of disease or brain trauma. Even in cases of disease or brain trauma there is usually some kind of motivational context although it may be incoherent. I suspect you have never committed a wrong action in which you did not seek to benefit yourselves.

It is at this point that we come to an important clarification. Socrates did not state that doing wrong to others is ever right, but that the motivation for such actions determines the character of the will involved. Socrates maintained that people are never motivated to bring harm to themselves. Since Socrates believed that wrongdoing always harmed the wrongdoer, he saw all wrongdoing as a mistake in judgment or an expression of ignorance. This is especially true in cases where a life full of wrongdoing never physically harms the wrongdoer. Socrates believed that the most pitiable of humans were those who lived under the delusion that their wrongdoing benefited them. According to Socrates, the successful tyrant[3] who is able to do great wrong for many years without ever being held accountable, was the most terribly harmed of all human beings. Socrates believed that doing injustice made us less just and diminished our character. For Socrates, harm to character, or the soul, is the greatest harm of all. Since Socrates believed that all wrongdoing harmed the wrongdoer, he believed that all people never choose to harm themselves and thus never choose to do wrong. When we see people knowingly doing wrong to others, they are not cognizant of the harm that their wrongdoing brings upon themselves. So it is that even the most flagrant examples of willful human wrongdoing, which may seem to contradict Socrates’ belief, actually confirm Socrates belief by being examples of our instinct to benefit ourselves misguided by ignorance. If all wrongdoing harms the wrongdoer and all people make decisions only to benefit themselves, then all people commit wrongdoing through ignorance and not through a will to do wrong.
Questions:

1. Do you believe all wrongdoing harms the wrongdoer?

2. Do you count harm to a person’s character, or soul if you like, to be a real type of harm?

If you answered yes to the two questions above and have answered yes to previous questions about the instinct in humans to benefit themselves, then you have no logical problems with the idea that humans never willingly choose to do wrong because they never seek to harm themselves. If you answered no to question one above, then question two is important for you. The only ambiguities with question one are in the extent that wrongdoing does not physically harm the wrongdoer. When wrongdoing only harms character, some may question if it harms at all. If you answered no to both questions above, then you have a fundamental disagreement with Socrates’ view of wrongdoing. If you answered no to both questions, I recommend that you read Plato’s dialogue Gorgias and book one of Plato’s Republic to get a more intimate understanding of the Socrates’ perspective on wrongdoing.

Socrates’ belief that nobody ever willingly does wrong and Aristotle’s idea that there is such a thing as moral weakness, in which people know what is wrong but lack the strength to do right, are not mutually exclusive. Even in cases of moral weakness, the lack of strength to benefit oneself without wrongdoing is a form of ignorance. It is an ignorance of method and an ignorance of what is most important and beneficial. It does not matter if your ignorance is constructed out of an actual lack of knowledge or just the blinding haze of your own intemperance, your resulting beliefs and priorities will either cohere with knowledge or ignorance. When moral weakness reinforces a set of priorities that contradicts better knowledge, ignorance is propagated not through a lack of knowledge but through the existential gravity of weaknesses that forces the moral actor to embrace inferior priorities. The end result is that the morally weak person really believes that some things are more important for them than others and lives accordingly. Either the priorities are true and cohere with knowledge to bring benefit to the moral actor or they are false and cohere with ignorance, showing themselves to be delusions of weakness. It does not matter if the wrongdoing is the result of pure ignorance or was a product of moral weakness, the failure to live better in accordance with knowledge is ultimately a form of ignorance. Socrates saw ignorance as the basis of all wrongdoing.

Starving people often do not have the luxury of maintaining their highest ideals. Even though a starving person may know that forcibly taking food from another hungry person is wrong, she still does not will wrongdoing as an end. Such a person only wills to benefit herself but lacks the strength or know-how to do so while leaving higher ideals intact. This type of example gets as close as possible to an example of moral weakness that stands apart from ignorance. The starving person really believes and values the idea that forcibly taking food from a hungry person is wrong, but under compulsion of starvation does not have the strength to live up to her ideals. This is different from cases in which a person's moral weaknesses generate false values that are embraced as valid. According to Socrates, this is still ignorance insofar as the starving thief does not recognize the greater harm of doing wrong. People regularly fail to see that the harm to their character through wrongdoing is greater than physical harm[4]. Socrates’ believed that giving up our lives in order to maintain our good character is more important than survival at the cost of being less just or less
noble. The wrongdoing produced by moral weakness results from a lack of insight that prevents the wrongdoers from seeing the greater good and they are unable to benefit themselves without embracing the conflicting harm that wrongdoing brings to their character. For Socrates, ignorance is the origin of all human wrongdoing.

I will now connect the idea of wrongdoing to the term evil. In the west, the term evil is so overloaded with Christian theological content that it will be necessary to allow a Socratic perspective to limit the semantic range of the term. The vestige of influence that needs to be identified and eliminated is the cosmological and ontological aspects of the Christian concept of evil. In Christian thought, evil is a term with cosmological implications that are used to explain the existence (ontology) of human wrongdoing. This is pushing the term for more than it is worth in a Socratic perspective. Evil behavior is just the same thing as wrongdoing. When I speak of human evil, I will use it solely in association with harmful human behavior (including the harmful withholding of action). This is because it is only through behavior that any measure of human evil (no matter what your concept of evil) is recognizable. Harmfulness is the only evaluative criterion used for assessing the evil, or the wrong, of behaviors. In the traditional view, if some behavior is not harmful at all then there is no basis of defining the evil of that behavior. Any other theological baggage we carry for the term evil is irrelevant.

Question:
Can you name an example of an evil behavior that is not harmful in any way?

When I speak of evil I choose to add the element of fear as a cause of evil (harmful behaviors). Socrates believed that fear is a manifestation of ignorance. Even if this is correct, fear grows to have a powerful life and influence of its own. This is particularly true when we must choose to be moral in the most horrifying circumstances. The recognition of human evil is usually mishandled in the minds of most people. Human evil is usually measured in terms of the intensity of its destructive result without regard to understanding its nature. This is a categorical error. If you went to a doctor with a headache and the doctor just gave you aspirin for your pain, but failed to discover that the cause of the pain was a brain tumor, we would say that doctor was incompetent. The identity of the problem is not the pain, which is just a symptom; it is the tumor that causes the pain. In the same way the identity of human evil is in the cause of behaviors that hurt not in the hurt itself. In this Socratic perspective, the origin of behaviors we consider to be evil or wrong is found in fear and ignorance.

No matter if the harmful result is slight or great, the presence of fear and ignorance as the origin of harmful behavior is what constitutes the identity of evil. The identity of evil is not increased or decreased by variations in the resulting intensity of harm. Only the behavior originating fear and ignorance can offer us the identity of evil. Just as a larger wooden building has no more the identity of being a work of carpentry than a smaller wooden chair, because the identity of a product of carpentry is due to its being made of wood and not its relative size, so evil behavior has no more or less the identity of evil because of the relative size of its harmful effect. This Socratic perspective maintains that evil behavior is evil because it is born of fear and ignorance, not because of the relative measure of its harm. This raises the question of behaviors that are grounded in fear and ignorance, yet happen to have a good effect that is not harmful. Measuring the identity of evil by its results is always a categorical error. This means behavior that is grounded in fear and ignorance
always have the character and identity of human evil regardless of its results. Socrates would ask
who is better off. Is it the person who, in a spastic fit of ignorance gets lucky and does good, or is it
the person who knows what is good and does good with full intention? According to Socrates, the
only real good is associated with knowledge. In a Socratic perspective, physical harm in itself is not
evil nor truly harmful. Only the wrongdoing caused by ignorance (and fear) is evil to the extent that it
brings the harm of wrongdoing upon the character of the fearful and the ignorant and always is
divorced from better knowledge. This is why Socrates claimed that "no evil can happen to a good
man, either in life or after death."[5] Socrates believed that the only harm was harm to character.
Even when fear and ignorance happens to lead us to a non-harmful result, our fear and ignorance
represent a character liability that must be overcome with knowledge and courage. Socrates did not
accept behaviors that have their origin in fear and ignorance as good just because they happen to
not cause harm.

The advantage of this Socratic perspective is that we do not have to wait for a tsunami of harm
before we recognize real evil. In rejecting the identification of evil based on measures of harm, we
can learn to see the seriousness of our gravest evil in the smallest things and significantly advance
the moral integrity of humanity. Consider that you cannot commit to the genocide of the many without
first being discourteous to a single human being. You cannot build gas chambers and ovens for the
millions before you have first resorted to being rude to at least one person. The most vicious
holocausts of human history, the most barbaric social atrocities and the most brutal oppressions all
begin in the relationships of our youth where the smallest discourtesy first takes root in the heart and
the acceptance of discourtesy is normalized. However, this beginning is not as a seed that grows into
a tree. The full identity of human evil is already manifest in the smallest of events, because the
smallest of discourtesies find their origin in the same grounding of fear and ignorance as the largest
of holocausts. The acceptance of the smallest discourtesy or the normalization of the slightest
disrespect is not just the first step on the road to human evil. It is the whole of the journey. For human
evil must not be measured according to the amplitude of its destructive force. It must be understood
according to the character of its nature. There is no difference in the character of discourtesy and
genocide. The fundamental nature of both is to be an expression of fear and/or ignorance. The
identity of discourtesy and genocide as being evil is the same, because the nature of their origin is
the same. Eliminate even the smallest discourtesy and the larger and more destructive results of
human evil are never brought into being.

The nature of human evil does not rest in the mythic explanations of our wrong doing. It cannot be
assessed in the measure of the destructiveness of our evil behaviors. The identity or nature of
human evil is found in the origin of hurtful behaviors. That origin is misguided instinct (ignorance) and
fear. Even when we lack courage or knowledge, we are still being guided by our simple instinct to
benefit ourselves. No matter how brutal and terrifying our capacity to destroy one another, we are all
just little children trying to find some goodness in our little lives. In all of our moral choosing there is
the constant expression of this natural instinct to benefit ourselves and a corresponding instinctual
simplicity of innocence that dwells in all humanity. In this Socratic perspective, human fear and
ignorance make up the nature of human evil. What is the face of this human evil? Is it the face of a
monster? Is it the face of the Devil? No, the face of human evil is the face of every lost and frightened
child. It is the face of innocence under stress.

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Read Plato’s Gorgias.

See Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.3.1146b-1147a32

In Gorgias, read the conversation between Socrates and Polus.

See Plato’s Apology: Socrates says this after being condemned to death on false charges.

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