

# Plato's *Apology* and *Crito*

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## **Ethics and Political Philosophy**

- The second part of the course is a brief survey of important texts in the history of ethics and political philosophy.
- Ethics is a normative discipline, which primarily concerns the evaluation of human behavior.
- Historically, two broad questions are asked:
  - What makes a person a *good* or a *bad* person?
  - What makes a human action *right* or *wrong*?
- Closely connected with ethics is political philosophy, which deals with such questions as:
  - How ought society to be organized?
  - What makes the actions of a society or of individuals *just* or *unjust*?
- These questions were asked by the ancient philosophers and remain of vital interest today.

## **Ancient Ethics and Political Philosophy**

- The fundamental practical issue for the ancient philosophers was how to attain the good life.
- There were two main candidates as answers to that question:
  - Through virtue or excellence of character, thought, and action (*arete*),
  - Through a state of either happiness (*eudaemonia*) or pleasure (*hedone*).
- Generally, it was thought that virtue and happiness are closely related, while virtue and pleasure are not.
- If this is so, then happiness and pleasure are two distinct kinds of states.
- The larger question was how individual virtue, happiness, or pleasure are related to norms such as justice and injustice that apply to society.

### **Socrates: The Man of Virtue**

- The first ancient philosopher to undertake a comprehensive investigation of virtue was Socrates.
- Socrates described his behavior as a response to a divine voice (*daemon*) within him and to an utterance by the Delphic Oracle.
- His philosophical goal was to seek the truth through the interrogation of people alleged to be wise.
- His practical goal was to teach that each person should attain the best possible state of the soul, which would entail being as virtuous as possible.
- According to Aristotle, Socrates believed that our actions always aim at the best and fail to attain it only because we are ignorant of what the best is.
- Socrates's commitment to virtue was so strong that he accepted an unjust sentence of death rather than escaping into exile.

### **The Sophists**

- Although Socrates tried to expose the pretensions to knowledge of everyone he came across, he was especially hostile toward the Sophists.
- The Sophists were professional teachers of rhetoric, whose aim was to train young people to debate in the political arena.
- One boast of the Sophists was that they could make the worse argument appear better than the better argument.
- Socrates charged that the Sophists trained their students to advance their own interests, even by arguing for falsehoods.
- By promoting ignorance, the Sophists promoted actions which are not aimed at what is best.
- In this way, the influence of the Sophists was to turn people away from virtue.

### **The Priority of Virtue**

- In contrast to the Sophists, Socrates tried to turn people toward virtue.
- His message was that one should care most strongly for the best possible state of the soul, rather than for wealth or bodily pleasure.
- Wealth and other goods that a person pursues do not make the person virtuous when they are attained.
- "Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively" (*Apology* 30b).
- The virtuous person cannot be harmed, as the only real harm is the loss of virtue.

### **An Injustice**

- Socrates was accused of crimes against the city of Athens, convicted by a jury, and sentenced to death.
- He regarded his conviction as wrongful, as he thought he had proved that the charges against him were unfounded.
- He claimed that the only reason for his conviction was his own refusal to beg for the jury's mercy.
- Had he done so, he would have brought shame on himself.
- In fact, it was the jury that brought shame on itself by treating him unjustly.
- The jury would reap the consequences of its actions:
  - Socrates's followers would be emboldened to act against members of the jury,
  - The jury members would lose out on the opportunity to improve themselves with the help of Socrates.
- The second item is an example of the famous Socratic irony.

### **Death**

- Socrates faced death resolutely, due to his belief that the virtuous person cannot be harmed.
- He proposed a *dilemma* which shows the harmlessness of death.
- Death is either:
  - A dreamless sleep, or
  - A passage to another life.
- A dreamless sleep is desirable, not harmful.
- The virtuous person who passes on to another life would find justice there and would associate with other virtuous souls.

### **The Social Dimension of Virtue**

- Excellence of the soul seems to be an entirely personal matter.
- Socrates argues that the opinions of others are irrelevant to whether one is acting from virtue or not.
- The virtuous person cannot be harmed by the actions of others, no matter what their opinion of him.

- The only harm another can do is to lead one away from virtue.
- In looking to others for guidance in action, one should look to those who have knowledge of virtue.
  - By analogy, an athlete should look for guidance from a trainer or a physician.
- What should guide our actions is not how non-virtuous people think we should behave, but whether the actions themselves are right or wrong, just or unjust.

### **Unjust Actions**

- Suppose someone, or some group of people, has behaved unjustly toward a person.
  - A case in point is Socrates's conviction and death-sentence.
- The injustice of the act does not justify an unjust act in return.
  - Socrates should not avoid death by escape and exile if such behavior would be unjust.
- In general, no consequences of an unjust action, however favorable, make it acceptable to perform it.
- So the issue facing Socrates is whether avoiding the death penalty by escape is indeed unjust.

### **Bad Consequences**

- Socrates argues in the specific case of his escape that the consequences would not in fact be favorable.
  - His friends will be put into danger by helping him escape,
  - He will be received as an enemy of the law,
  - If he finds a lawless state that would accept him, his life would not be worth living there,
  - His conviction would be vindicated, as his escape would prove that he was not teaching virtue,
  - He would be disgraced by acting in a cowardly way.
- On the other hand, no real harm will be done if he does not escape.
  - As a virtuous person, he cannot be harmed,
  - No harm would come to his family members, as friends would look after them.

### **Justice and Agreement**

- But as stated above, the consequences of his escape should not be the basis of his decision.
- The question is whether to escape is to act unjustly.
- Socrates argues that to escape would be to violate a just agreement, which is always unjust.
- The agreement in his case is to follow the laws of the city.
- So even if the laws are executed in an unjust way, they must still be followed.

### **The Social Contract**

- Socrates did not make an explicit agreement with the city of Athens to obey its laws.
- His agreement was a tacit one, which is now called a “social contract.”
  - He stayed in the city,
  - Yet he could have left at any time with all his property.
- Moreover, he received benefits from his tacit agreement with the city, e.g., his education.
- It was also in his power to argue for better laws, so the laws of the city are not oppressive in any way.

### **Socrates and Modern Political Thought**

- Social contract theories have been used by many modern philosophers to justify the application of laws to members of society.
- In the mid-twentieth century, such thinkers as Ghandi and King have claimed that it is just to disobey unjust laws, or laws that are enforced unjustly.
- There may be a way to reconcile this attitude with Socrates’s argument that it is unjust to disobey the laws of the city.
- The indigenous people of India and the African-Americans were not related to the laws in the same way Socrates was:
  - The laws were oppressive, in that these people were in no position to influence the legislative process.
- The difference in the two situations can be made vivid by considering whether a slave in ancient Athens was party to any kind of social contract.