

Small Pleasures Still Feel Good

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I know the feeling just too well, a deadline needs to be met, but the distracting pleasures just seem to become more and more. Surprisingly, Socrates argues in the *Meno* that there is no weakness of will. But right now, the temptation to give in and watch “The Simpsons” instead of working on this paper is very big. So, how could Socrates possibly believe that there is no weakness of will? We have already touched briefly on his argument in the *Meno* in class, so I will now set out and criticize his argument in the *Protagoras*.

In the beginning of his argument, Socrates sets out that he is “disposed to say that things are good in as far as they are pleasant, if they have no consequences of another sort, and in as far as they are painful they are bad.” (1)<sup>1</sup> So what distinguishes a good thing from a bad thing is its’ consequence. Drinking is bad, because it leads to impaired coordination and to a hangover. Learning is good, because it increases your understanding of the world without any obvious negative effects. I consider this to be the first step into his argument: (I) actions can be good or bad, depending on their consequences. It needs to be pointed out that Socrates argues that an action can be both good and bad. He does this when he substitutes “good = pleasurable” and “evil = painful” (p4). So, drinking can be immediately good but is followed by a great bad. In other words, the short-term consequence of drinking brings pleasure, but the long-term consequences bring a lot of pain.

Socrates goes on to show that some men even choose pain to achieve a greater good. “...you call them good because .. afterwards, they bring health and improvement of the bodily condition.. .” (3) For example, a visit to the dentist might not be pleasurable,

but it avoids a bigger pain. I will consider this to be the second step of his argument:

(II) men use judgement to choose their actions.

The question arises next, why do some men act impulsively and follow their desires, knowing that their behavior can lead to bad things? Why does someone smoke a cigarette even though they know it leads to cancer? Or why does someone go on a drinking spree, knowing that they will suffer a hangover the next morning? For Socrates, the answer lies in the judgement that they use. In (II) of his argument, we have already determined that humans use their judgement when choosing their actions. Now, Socrates leads us to a problem with our judgement. He argues that our judgement can be fooled by appearance. “Do not the same magnitudes appear larger to your sight when near, and smaller at a distance?” (4) he asks. “And the same holds of thickness and number; also sounds.. are greater when near, and lesser when at a distance.” (5) He concludes, that the immediate pleasure deceivingly appears greater than the long-term pain that follows. A smoker lighting a cigarette sees the instantaneous relief it brings, but the onset of cancer, which might not occur until decades later, seems almost completely harmless and out of reach at the time. For now, I will summarize his third step as (III) men use faulty judgement when choosing bad actions.

The solution for this problem has two ascends. First, humans need to realize their erroneous decision-making. Second, they need to elevate their judgement into a science by objectively outweighing the good and the bad consequences an action might bring. So before lighting a cigarette, our illustrative smoker ought to step back and consider his options. He needs to mentally gather his information on smoking before holding the scales on his action. The more knowledge he has about smoking, the better his decision

will be of course. Therefore, I will refine (III) men use faulty judgement when choosing bad actions to (III) out of ignorance men use faulty judgement when choosing bad actions. Since erroneous judgement is based on ignorance, Socrates infers that (IV) no man voluntarily pursues evil actions intentionally. The smoker doesn't smoke to get cancer and a barfly doesn't drink to become hung over. Both actually lack any intention of wanting something bad, instead they simply don't see the big picture of their actions clearly. His argument against the weakness of will can now be laid out as

- (I) actions can be good or bad, depending on their consequences
- (II) men use judgement to choose their actions
- (III) out of ignorance men use faulty judgement when choosing bad actions (bad actions = overwhelmed by passion)

His moral argument then follows that

- (IV) no man pursues evil actions intentionally

Upon critical evaluation, several problems seem to appear. If actions depend on their consequences (I), then our human progress determines what is good or bad, subsequently what is evil or good. If modern medicine can prevent or cure a disease, such as HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases, then sexual escapades will lose their negative consequence. It might be argued that sexual actions might lead to emotional wrongs, such as regression or hurt feelings, but such feelings change as society changes, e.g. the 'free love be happy' attitude of the Sixties. I also feel that any action can have a negative consequence. For example even some Epicurean "goods", such as friendship or love are accompanied by pain as well. A

trusted friend may die or your love might leave you, both events will probably bring sadness and sorrow into your life. Socrates' consequence for being a philosopher was death, which is something most of us would consider negative. Therefore it seems up to us to decide which consequences we choose to endure. If friendship and philosophy are so valuable in someone's life that they are courageous enough to suffer the pains that might come with them, then it's all good. But a third person might feel as strong about sex or drinking.

Second, the judgement that we use (II) also depends on our scientific understanding. If the occasional use of drugs such as alcohol or cigarettes has no scientific harm, then there seems to be nothing wrong with it. One can even find support that alcohol diminishes shyness, which might be very helpful for some people. I don't want prove (II) to be wrong, but I would like to point out that with increasing knowledge comes increased difficulty in judging.

I find myself agreeing to the ignorant choice of bad actions in (III). Watching "The Simpsons" will bring me instant gratification, but the pleasure seems small compared to risking a bad grade and lowering my GPA. I have never paid attention to this flaw in my reasoning until now and I am very interested to see if my distractions will become less over time.

Unfortunately I cannot agree with his reasoning in (IV) as generously. I think Socrates is right by saying that no one pursues pain intentionally, at least without having any benefit from it. But there is a difference between choosing pleasurable actions for ourselves and for others. Just because I want the best and most pleasurable life for myself doesn't mean I am not willing to commit

an evil action against others. Certainly members of medieval societies wanted the most pleasurable life for them, but with that came a fear of witches and their burning at the stake. We can see that personal pleasure and moral good do not necessarily support each other.

Reviewing my arguments I think we cannot derive an intrinsic human moral goodness from his argument. However, Socrates' reasoning against weakness of will is valid in as far humans do what's pleasurable to them, and that they become occasionally distracted by seemingly weaker pleasures<sup>ii</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> Unfortunately neither this online version nor a second document provided Plato's customary number system. I have therefore used page numbers of the printed online document. All mentioned references can be found in *Protagoras* 351b-358d.

<sup>ii</sup> see title again ☺