

Episode 2: Why do what's right? Vice harms the doer—Socrates

Welcome to Philosophy for the Real World. I'm Professor Thomas White.

Think of a scandal you're familiar with in which some sports figure, executive, politician, or celebrity not simply *got caught* doing something they shouldn't have been doing, they got caught *because they did something really stupid*. I bet you said to yourself, "What an idiot. I could have gotten away with that." And I'll confess, that's normally my reaction as well. But these are typically smart, successful people with plenty of resources. How do they end up shooting themselves in the foot?

In this podcast, we're going to get an answer to that question from the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates. It's Socrates' answer to the general question, "Why should any of us ever worry about whether our actions are right or wrong?" And his answer is as bizarre as it is interesting.

Now I'm going to be candid in saying that I've never liked the traditional answers to this question. We shouldn't do what's *wrong* because it will hurt other people, or isn't *nice*, or people won't like us, or we'll get a bad reputation. If you believe in an afterlife, it's about avoiding punishment. If you believe in reincarnation, doing wrong can carry some pretty serious karma.

The problem with these answers for me is—to be blunt—they aren't *selfish* enough. Look, we live in a world that makes selfishness a virtue. And there's no question about what you can get for lying, cheating, stealing, and treating other people badly. Money; power; a sex, drugs, rock and roll lifestyle. Our culture tells us daily that we need to *look out for number one*. And if we don't, we're losers. So my attitude is that if we want ethics to be taken seriously, our strongest argument needs

to be similarly *selfish*.

Fortunately, one such argument has been advanced for a couple thousand years—although it’s admittedly one of the strangest claims in the history of philosophy. No matter what tangible benefits we can get from lying, cheating, and treating others badly, we *ourselves get seriously harmed*—in the *here and now*—by doing so. The most *selfish* way to advance our interests, then, is to act ethically.

Even if you know nothing about philosophy, I’m sure you’ve heard about the philosopher who made this claim—the ancient Greek thinker Socrates. And, yes, Socrates really meant that. Being unethical harms the *doer*.

Before getting into the specifics of Socrates’ claim, however, I need to explain something about his personal situation—because this shows that Socrates wasn’t just spinning out some nice theory. He was so convinced that *vice harms the doer*, he himself refused to do what he was certain was wrong—even though it cost him his life.

Socrates is an interesting figure for several reasons. For one thing, he represents the rare case of a major philosopher who never wrote down a word. We know about his ideas primarily through the writings of his pupil Plato, who makes Socrates the main figure in most of his dialogues. For another, Socrates was an eccentric character in ancient Athens, having come to believe he had a mission to encourage people to live a moral life.

Socrates did this by approaching fellow Athenians, and engaging them in conversations that challenged their deepest beliefs. For example, he’d ask someone what the most important thing in their life was. If they answered “money,” for example, Socrates would ask for an explanation. When they responded, Socrates would ask for more, pursuing every point of the answer, trying to show the problems

with the other person's thinking. Back and forth it went until Socrates had convinced this individual about the importance of moral virtue. This "Socratic method" of question/answer, question/answer is still used by many teachers, especially those in law schools.

It's also true that there were probably lots of times when the person Socrates was questioning simply walked away exasperated by his strange fellow Athenian. Socrates was *relentless*. No doubt, his insistent back and forth could be really annoying. In fact, I think that being annoying is one of the main reasons Socrates got executed. Since this relates directly to his idea that wrongdoing harms the doer, it's worth taking a couple of minutes to recall what happened to him and why.

Socrates lived in Athens at a time when a couple of important things were going on that had a hand in his death. First, Athens was a democracy (although only for native, male Athenians) and one of the ways you made a name for yourself was in the Public Assembly. If you had the money, you could learn how to do this by studying with one of the teachers called the Sophists, who taught rhetoric—the art of public speaking. The less reputable Sophists, however, taught how to fool people with deceptive reasoning and logical tricks. That's why being called a "sophist" is no compliment. Some Athenians saw no difference between what Socrates and the Sophists were doing.

Second, for most of Socrates' adult life, Athen and Sparta were at war. At one point, the controversial Athenian military and political leader Alcibiades, who had a close relationship with Socrates, betrayed Athens and went over to Sparta. When Sparta ultimately won, Socrates' connection with Alcibiades wouldn't have been any help. Between that, confusing Socrates with the Sophists, and what was seen as Socrates constantly challenging Athens' traditions, some Athenians no doubt saw him as partly responsible for the city's defeat. He was charged with impiety and

corrupting the young—capital offenses.

The trial is described in Plato's *Apology*. The Greek word "apologia," by the way, means "defense speech," not "apology." Apologizing was the last thing Socrates did. His typical questioning of his accusers and his analysis of the charges quickly revealed they were specious. He argued that he was really the victim of the longstanding prejudice I just described. At this point, everyone would have expected Socrates to bring in his wife and children and plead for his life. He refused. It was a close vote (280 to 221), but the jury found him guilty. The next step in trials like this was for both the accusers and the accused to propose punishments. The jury would then vote which to accept. Socrates' accusers asked for death. Likely as a way of underscoring his idea of how ridiculous the charges were, Socrates proposed what he thought was the only appropriate thing he deserved for having spent his life trying to encourage Athenians to virtue—free meals for life. When the jury reacted as you'd expect, he considered the idea of imprisonment or exile, but rejected both. Socrates' rich friends told him they'd pay for a steep fine, which is what Socrates ultimately proposed. The vote was even less close this time—360 to 141. In other words, 80 people who had voted "not guilty" now voted "death"—likely because they felt insulted. As I said, I think Socrates was executed partly for being annoying.

Now I'm sure lots of us would question Socrates' decision to conduct his defense as he did. But let's not get into that.

Socrates' execution had to be delayed until the completion of an Athenian religious mission, and the dialogue entitled *The Crito*, also written by Socrates' pupil Plato, tells us that Socrates could have escaped. However, believing that escaping would be *wrong*, Socrates refused to leave. If he did, he was convinced he would be harming himself in some critical ways. At stake here is what Socrates calls "that part

of ourselves that is improved by just actions and destroyed by unjust actions.”¹

Today, we’d probably call that our *character*—that part of ourselves that essentially defines who we are.

Now, here’s the most important part of his thinking. Socrates identifies two specific ways we’re harmed.

First, we lose the ability to have our desires *satisfied*. Nothing is ever enough. We constantly want more. And whatever it is that we desire (power, fame, money, love, sex, success) becomes the driving force in our personality. At least part of the harm vice does, then, is to the *noncognitive* dimension of the human personality. That is, the first kind of harm that Socrates points out involves not the mind but our feelings of desire and satisfaction. The point at which we are satisfied by money, sex, power, or whatever else is to a large extent a psychological matter, not a physical or an intellectual one. And in Socrates’ mind, we lose the ability to be satisfied and are driven by our desires in a way that ends up being self-destructive.

Second, our *cognitive* capacities also take a hit. Our ability to *perceive reality accurately* is weakened. In particular, we get worse at *assessing risk*. We also get really good at rationalizing whatever we need to do to get what we want—despite any harm our actions might do to other people and even to ourselves.

Or, to put Socrates’ ideas in the most practical, matter of fact way, engaging in seriously unethical behavior makes us *greedy* and *stupid*.

Ultimately, this is a self-destructive combination. We can’t say ‘no’ to what we want, we go to the well one time too often, and we fail to assess the risks of being caught accurately. Maybe it’s cheating in a business deal or on our taxes. Perhaps it’s lying in a relationship thinking we know how to fool our partner because we’ve done

¹ *Crito*, 47d, p, 48.

it so many times. We're sure we can get away with it again and have whatever we want—EXCEPT it turns out we're so damaged we've misread the risks. Instead of being *more* careful, we get *less* careful, and get caught. *That's* what Socrates means by saying 'vice harms the doer.'

And that's why he doesn't escape from jail. He is sure that if he does—knowingly doing something seriously wrong—he'll be changed in a fundamental and negative way. Socrates takes it to be an absolutely certain, observable *fact* of human nature that when we do something wrong, we are hurt by it. He thinks that no one can be strong and fully healthy—no one can be in total control of our actions and have a clear perception of reality—without moral virtue. To his eye, unethical people lack critical capacities and strengths. Socrates sees them as genuinely unhealthy, and they are made that way by their wrongdoing.

And as far as I can tell, he's absolutely right. Think of all the smart, talented people who have been the authors of their own undoing. People who *on paper* were too smart to get caught—but made crucial mistakes and shot themselves in the foot. Once you start looking at things the way Socrates does, it's easy to find examples of what he's talking about.

Now if you're like most of the very bright students I've presented this idea to and discussed some examples with over the years, maybe you're politely nodding your head like you agree. But inside you're saying, "Yeah. I can see why those bozos got caught. But I'm smarter than that. I wouldn't make the same mistakes. I could get away with things." And I'll be completely honest. That was *my* reaction when I first started wondering if what Socrates said actually made sense. So let me tell you what happens next when I discuss this with students.

After we discuss Socrates' idea a bit, I ask my class to pick a high profile

scandal involving a very smart person who got caught. I then say, “For the next 15-minutes, we’re in a ‘morality-free’ zone. I want to hear your best ideas about how this person should have handled their situation so that they wouldn’t have been caught.” Very quickly, students come up with great ideas. They can see the risks and how to avoid them. They anticipate problems. They know when to cut their losses and not go too far. They have a plan in place for what to do at the first sign things go south. They very quickly cover all the bases. And then I say, “Person X was at least as bright as you. Why didn’t they see things the way you did? For you, it’s just a fun intellectual exercise. Nothing tangible was on the line. For *them*, something important in their life was at risk—their reputation, important relationships, money, success. They had far more motivation than you not to make mistakes. Yet they did. Why?”

Because Socrates is right—*vice harms the doer*. No matter how smart you are, once you get in the middle of things, you don’t see your mistakes, you don’t assess the risk of being caught accurately, you go to the well one time too often, you get careless.

Think about it.

Fortunately for us, Socrates isn’t the only person who floated such an idea. In another podcast, we’ll look at a similar idea from a very different kind of thinker—the fourth century Christian Saint Augustine. In a later podcast, we’ll find even more support on this in the research of the twentieth century psychologist Abraham Maslow.

Thanks for listening. I’m Professor Thomas White, and this has been philosophy for the real world.