height of their achievement, died young. The happy life is not the life devoted to achieving security, but may involve risk and aspiration. The point is that whether you are happy depends on what you make of your life. If you have made your life a noble one, then it is happy even if cut short. But Croesus' loss of riches and power will make his life unhappy because he sees his happiness as depending on them. Solon's point is not just that riches can always be lost, but that Croesus' priorities are wrong.

B. The First Theories: Virtue and Happiness

It is remarkable that the first ethical theories that we have—those of Democritus and Plato—are both very bold in the way that they try to reform ordinary people's thoughts about happiness. Both of them think that we should think about our lives more rationally and reflectively than we do and that the results of doing so would make us happy. Plato, in particular, stresses the importance of being a virtuous, moral person, implying (though he does not work it out rigorously) that this is all that is needed to be happy. Neither philosopher, however, makes his assumptions and framework explicit. Both simply take over the assumption that everyone seeks to be happy and give us a surprising account of how to achieve happiness.

DEMOCRITUS

Democritus of Abdera (c. 460–350s B.C.) wrote extensively on a wide number of topics, but apart from some fragments and later reports, his works are lost. His ideas were influential on later philosophers, however. Both his theory of atomism and his ethical view that our final end is a pleasant and tranquil state were taken up and developed later by Epicurus.

The actual inventor of atomism seems to have been an obscure figure called Leucippus, but it was Democritus who developed the theory and was associated with it. Atomism is the most influential of the pre-Socratic theories that attempted to account for the nature of the observable world by positing a small number of unobservable theoretical entities and a small number of mechanisms to get from them to the world we experience. Democritus posits only atoms, with differences of shape, and void and is notable among ancient theorists for having no use for teleology. The comments we have from him about knowledge are puzzling and have been thought both to support and to undermine skepticism about knowledge. We have a large number of fragments on ethical matters, enough to see how they might have fitted into the framework that later writers tell us he employed—that of criticizing our conception of the happiness that we all seek and of trying to replace it with a better one.
The Greeks were fascinated by the rich Eastern kingdom of Lydia. This is the sixth-century B.C. monument to a young man named after its king, Croesus. The inscription reads: "Stop and grieve at the tomb of dead Croesus, killed by wild Ares [the god of war] in the front rank of battle." The naked youth is not a portrait of Croesus; ideal types of young men and women were a common dedication, and the aim was to produce a beautiful statue, not a portrait of an individual. (Marble kouros [statue of a young man] from Anavyssos, Attica, c. 540 B.C. National Museum, Athens. Foto Marburg/Art Resource, New York.)
Fragments on Ethics

Democritus

Democritus and Plato unite in placing happiness in the soul. Democritus writes like this: "Happiness and unhappiness belong to the soul" [B 170] and, "Happiness does not dwell in flocks or in gold; it is the soul that is the home of a person's daimon (guardian spirit)" [B 171]. He also calls it cheerfulness, well-being, concord, symmetry, and tranquillity. He says that it consists in distinguishing and discriminating pleasures and that this is the finest and most advantageous thing for humans [A 166].

Democritus says that the end is cheerfulness, which is not the same as pleasure, as some people mistakenly interpret it, but a state in which the soul lives calmly and stably, disturbed by no fear or superstition or any other passion [A 1, 45].

People are happy not because of their bodies or possessions, but because of rightness and breadth of understanding [B 40].

The cause of going wrong is ignorance of the better [B 45].

Things turn from good to bad for people, if one does not know how to guide and keep them resourcefully. It is not right to judge these things to be bad; they are good. But it is possible to make use of good things, if one wishes, to ward off bad [B 173].

People fashioned an image of chance as an excuse for their own lack of counsel. For chance seldom fights with practical wisdom, and intelligent sharp-sightedness sets straight most things in life [B 119].

A cheerful person who is led to deeds that are just and lawful rejoices day and night and is strengthened and without care. But whoever disregards justice and does not do what he ought finds all such things unenjoyable when he remembers any of them and is afraid and reproaches himself [B 174].

The person who chooses the goods of the soul chooses what is more divine; one who chooses those of the body chooses what is human [B 37].

The wrongdoer is unhappier than the person wronged [B 45].

COMMENTS

Democritus is the first Greek philosopher to write systematically on ethics, but unfortunately his continuous works are lost, and we have to rely on accounts of his ideas by other people (the A passages) and "fragments" or isolated sayings or opinions that were found memorable and handed down (the B passages). (The A and B numbers come from the standard edition of "Presocratic" philosophers, Diels-Kranz.)

In the case of many early philosophers, we are in the position of relying only on secondhand accounts and fragments. Democritus has been particularly unfortunate, since his contemporary, Socrates, is generally regarded as the first Greek ethical philosopher, and this may be doing an injustice to Democritus.
As with all philosophy that we can read only in the form of isolated sayings, Democritus' ethics poses a problem of seeing it in a general framework. Clearly, he thinks that we all seek happiness and is offering a philosophical account of what happiness is. It is, he thinks, a positive and cheerful life, which requires a reflective and rational attitude toward getting pleasure. It also requires the person to have the virtues—that is to be wise, just, courageous, and self-controlled. In fact, Democritus clearly regards the virtues as far more important than everyday possessions, as far as being happy is concerned.

Is it surprising that someone who thinks that happiness consists of being cheerful and tranquil puts so much emphasis on being virtuous? Why might we think that happiness is mostly up to us and not much threatened by chance?

**Gorgias 468e-479e**

**PLATO**

**SOCRATES** I was right, then, when I said that someone might do what he thinks it's best for him to do in his community, but still fail to have a great deal of power and fail to do what he wants.

**POLUS** As if you wouldn't prefer to be able to do whatever you felt like doing in your community rather than the opposite, Socrates! You make it sound as though the sight of someone executing people when he thinks it's best, or confiscating their property, or throwing them into prison, doesn't make you envious.

**SOCRATES** Do you mean when these actions of his are justified or when they're unjustified?

**POLUS** It doesn't make any difference. Isn't it enviable anyway?

**SOCRATES** That's a terrible thing to say, Polus.

**POLUS** Why?

**SOCRATES** Because pity, not envy, is the appropriate response to people who are either unenviable or unhappy.

**POLUS** Do you really think these descriptions fit the people I've been talking about?

**SOCRATES** Of course they do.

**POLUS** Well, if a person decides to execute someone, and does so, and is right to have done so, is he unhappy or in a pitiful state, do you think?

**SOCRATES** No, I don't, but he's certainly not in an enviable position.

**POLUS** But didn't you just claim that he was unhappy?

**SOCRATES** No, Polus, I meant that anyone who executes a person unjustly is in an unhappy state, and deserves our pity as well; to do so justly is merely unenviable.

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POLUS Well, at least it's certain that the person who's being wrongly executed is in a pitiful and unhappy state!
SOCRATES But less so than his executioner, Polus, and less so than a person whose execution is just.
POLUS What do you mean, Socrates?
SOCRATES I mean that in actual fact there's nothing worse than doing wrong.
POLUS Really? Nothing worse? Isn't it worse to suffer wrong?
SOCRATES No, not at all.
POLUS So you'd rather have wrong done to you than do wrong?
SOCRATES I'd rather avoid them both, but if I had to choose between doing wrong and having wrong done to me, I'd prefer the latter to the former.
POLUS So you wouldn't opt for being a dictator?
SOCRATES No, if dictatorship means the same to you as it does to me.
POLUS What I mean by it is what I said a moment ago, the licence to do whatever you think it's best for you to do in your community—the licence to execute people and banish them, and to go to any lengths to see your personal predilections fulfilled.

SOCRATES Well, Polus, here are some thoughts of mine for you to criticize.
Imagine I'm in the agora when it's chock-full, and I've got a dagger tucked in my armpit. I tell you, "Polus, I've recently gained an incredible amount of power, as much as any dictator. Look at all these people. If I decide one of them has to die, he's dead, just like that; if I decide one of them should have his head split open, it'll be split open on the spot; if I decide someone's cloak needs shredding, shredded it is. So you can see that I have a great deal of power in this community." And suppose you don't believe me, so I show you my dagger. I bet you'd say, "Socrates, in that case everyone has a great deal of power, since by the same token you could also burn down any houses you decide to burn down—and then there are Athens' dockyards and warships and the whole merchant fleet in public and private ownership." So the ability to do what you feel like doing isn't a sign of a great deal of power. What do you think?

POLUS I agree, it isn't. Not that kind of power, anyway.

SOCRATES Can you tell us what's wrong with that sort of power, to your mind?

POLUS Yes.

SOCRATES What is it? Do please tell us.

POLUS It's that anyone who does the kinds of things you were describing is bound to be punished.

SOCRATES By which you mean that punishment is bad?

POLUS Yes.

SOCRATES So you've again come round to the view, my friend, that doing what it seems best to do is a good thing if it turns out to be in one's interest to do it. That, I suppose, is what it is to have a great deal of power. If it isn't in one's interest, however, it's a bad thing, and signifies little power. And here's another point for us to consider. Are we agreed that the actions we were talking about a while back (the execution and banishment of people
and the confiscation of property) may be better or worse, depending on the circumstances?

**POLUS** Yes.

**SOCRATES** Here's something we apparently both agree on, then!

**POLUS** Yes.

**SOCRATES** Well, what are the circumstances under which they become better, do you think? Can you tell me what makes the difference, in your opinion?

**POLUS** I'd like to hear your response to that question, Socrates.

**SOCRATES** You'd rather hear what I have to say? All right, Polus. My view is that if they're morally right, they're better, but if they're wrong, they're worse.

**POLUS** Do you want to know how unassailable a position you're in, Socrates? Even a child could prove this idea of yours wrong.

**SOCRATES** Then I'd be very grateful to the child. But I'll be no less grateful to you if you prove me wrong and free me from the snares of absurdity. You should never tire of doing friends favours, so go on: prove me wrong.

**POLUS** Well, I don't need ancient history to help me prove you wrong, Socrates: there's enough counter-evidence from the very recent past for me to show that happiness and wrongdoing do commonly go together.

**SOCRATES** What is this evidence?

**POLUS** You know that man Archelaus, Perdicas' son, the one who rules Macedonia?

**SOCRATES** Not exactly, but I've heard of him.

**POLUS** Does he strike you as being happy or unhappy?

**SOCRATES** I don't know, Polus. I've never met the man.

**POLUS** Would you really have to meet him before appreciating how happy he is? Can't you tell already?

**SOCRATES** No, I certainly can't.

**POLUS** It goes without saying that you won't admit that the king of Persia is happy either, Socrates.

**SOCRATES** No, and I'm right not to, since I don't know whether or not he's an educated, moral person.

**POLUS** Does happiness really depend entirely on that?

**SOCRATES** Yes, I think so, Polus. In my opinion, it takes true goodness to make a man or a woman happy, and an immoral, wicked person is unhappy.

**POLUS** My man Archelaus is unhappy, then, according to you.

**SOCRATES** Yes, if he does wrong, Polus.

**POLUS** But of course he does. He didn't have the slightest claim to the throne he currently occupies. His mother was a slave of Perdicas' brother Alcetas, so by rights he should have been Alcetas' slave too. If he'd wanted to behave morally, he'd have been Alcetas' slave and that would have made him happy, according to you. As it is, though, he's become incredibly unhappy as a result of the awful crimes he's committed! In the first place, he sent a message to Alcetas, who was his uncle as well as his master, in which he invited him to stay on the grounds that he would restore the kingdom
which Perdicas had stolen from him. So he welcomed Alcetas and his son Alexander, his own cousin (who was more or less the same age as him), into his house; then he got them drunk, bundled them into a cart, took them away under cover of darkness, murdered them both, and disposed of the bodies. He didn’t realize how terribly unhappy these crimes had made him and he showed no sign of regret either, but a little later made his next victim his brother, a lad aged about seven, who was Perdicas’ legitimate son and the rightful heir to the throne. Instead of choosing happiness by following the moral course of looking after the lad until he had grown up and then handing the kingdom over to him, he threw him into a well and drowned him—and then told the boy’s mother Cleopatra that he’d fallen in and died while chasing a goose. There’s no one in Macedonia, then, who has committed worse crimes than him, and that’s why he’s the most miserable Macedonian alive today, not the happiest. And that also explains why everyone in Athens would presumably follow your lead: Archelaus would be the last Macedonian they’d swap places with!

**Socrates.** I want to repeat a point I made early in our conversation, Polus, when I complimented you on what I’m sure is an excellent training in rhetoric—but was disappointed to find that you’ve taken no interest in how to carry on a rational argument. Is the argument you’ve just come up with the one by means of which “even a child” would expose my errors? Do you really think that with this argument you’ve disproved my claim that a criminal isn’t happy? How on earth could you think that, my friend? I have to tell you that I disagree with absolutely everything you’re saying.

**Polus.** You mean you’re not prepared to admit it; you do actually agree with me.

**Socrates.** The trouble is, Polus, that you’re trying to use on me the kind of rhetorical refutation which people in lawcourts think is successful. There too, you see, people think they’re proving the other side wrong if they produce a large number of eminent witnesses in support of the points they’re making, but their opponent comes up with only a single witness or none at all. This kind of refutation, however, is completely worthless in the context of the truth, since it’s perfectly possible for someone to be defeated in court by a horde of witnesses with no more than apparent respectability who all testify falsely against him. In the present dispute, if you feel like calling witnesses to claim that what I’m saying is wrong, you can count on your position being supported by almost everyone in Athens, whether they were born and bred here or elsewhere . . .

Nevertheless, there’s still a dissenting voice, albeit a single one—mine. You’re producing no compelling reason why I should agree with you; all you’re doing is calling up a horde of false witnesses against me to support your attempt to dislodge me from my inheritance, the truth. To my mind, however, I won’t have accomplished anything important with regard to the issues we’ve been discussing, unless I get you yourself to act as my witness—albeit a single one!—to testify to the truth of my position; and I’m
sure you won’t think you’ve accomplished anything important either unless I testify for your position. It doesn’t matter that there’s only one of me; you’d let all the others go if you could get me as your witness.

So although there’s the kind of refutation whose validity you take for granted (and you’re far from being alone), there’s also another kind, the kind I have in mind. Let’s compare them and see how they differ. You see, the issues we’re disagreeing about are in fact hardly trivial: I’d almost go so far as to say that in their case there’s nothing more admirable than knowledge and nothing more contemptible than ignorance, since that would amount to knowledge or ignorance about what it is to be happy and what it is to be unhappy.

SOCRATES Let’s start with the question facing us, which is the crux of our present discussion. You think it’s possible for someone to be happy in spite of the fact that he does wrong and is an immoral person, and you cite the case of Archelaus who is, in your opinion, an immoral, but happy, person. Is that a fair representation of your view?

POLUS Yes.

SOCRATES On the other hand, I claim that this is impossible. So here’s one point on which we disagree. Now then, this happy criminal . . . will he be happy if he pays the penalty for his actions and is punished?

POLUS Definitely not. That would make his condition very unhappy.

SOCRATES So is it your view that a criminal is happy as long as he doesn’t get punished?

POLUS Yes.

SOCRATES My view, however, Polus, is that although an unjust person, a criminal, is in a thoroughly wretched state, he’s worse off if he doesn’t pay the penalty and continues to do wrong without getting punished than if he does pay the penalty and has punishment meted out to him by gods and men.

POLUS That’s an extraordinary position to take, Socrates.

SOCRATES And it’s exactly the one I’m going to try to convert you to as well, my friend—I do count you as a friend, you see. Now, as things stand at the moment, the difference between us is this. Please see whether I’ve got this right. I maintained earlier that doing wrong was worse than suffering wrong.

POLUS Yes.

SOCRATES While you claimed that suffering wrong was worse.

POLUS Yes.

SOCRATES And then my claim about the unhappiness of criminals was refuted by you . . .

POLUS It certainly was.

SOCRATES Or so you think, Polus.

POLUS And I’m right.

SOCRATES Maybe, maybe not. Anyway, you then said that criminals were happy as long as they avoided punishment.
POLUS That’s right.
SOCRATES Whereas my position is that this makes their condition completely
wretched, and that punishment alleviates their condition somewhat. Do
you want to refute this as well?
POLUS It’s going to be really hard to disprove this claim, Socrates—even
harder than it was to refute the earlier one.
SOCRATES It’s not just hard, Polus—it’s impossible. The truth can never be
proved wrong.
POLUS What do you mean? Imagine someone who’s been caught in a criminal
conspiracy against a dictatorship. After having been captured, he’s
stretched on the rack, bits of his body are cut off, his eyes are burned out,
and he’s terribly mutilated in a great many and a wide variety of other
ways; in addition to being mutilated himself, he watches his wife and chil-
dren being tortured as well; finally he’s crucified or covered with boiling
pitch. Is this a happier state for him to be in than if he’d avoided being
cought, had become dictator, and had spent the rest of his life ruling over his
community and doing whatever he wanted, with everyone from home and
abroad regarding him with envy and congratulating him for his happiness?
Is this your “irrefutable” position?
SOCRATES My dear Polus, first it was witnesses, now it’s scare tactics. You’re
not doing anything to prove me wrong. Still, please refresh my memory a
bit. The man in your scenario was involved in a criminal conspiracy against
a dictatorship?
POLUS Yes.
SOCRATES Well then, neither situation will make him happier—whether he suc-
ceds in making himself dictator by criminal means or pays the penalty—
because you can’t compare any two miserable people and say that one is hap-
pier than the other. Nevertheless, if he avoids being caught and becomes
dictator, his stock of misery will increase. What’s this, Polus? You’re laugh-
ing? Is this yet another kind of refutation, which has you laughing at ideas
rather than proving them wrong?
POLUS Don’t you think the sheer eccentricity of what you’re saying is enough
of a refutation, Socrates? Why don’t you ask anyone here whether they
agree with you?
SOCRATES I’m no politician, Polus. In fact, last year I was on the Council,
thanks to the lottery, and when it was the turn of my tribe to form the exec-
tive committee and I had to put an issue to the vote, I made a fool of myself
by not knowing the procedure for this. So please don’t tell me to ask the
present company to vote now either. No, if this is your best shot at a refuta-
tion, why don’t you do what I suggested a short while ago and let me have
a go at one? Then you’ll see what I think a refutation should be like. My
expertise is restricted to producing just a single witness in support of my
ideas—the person with whom I’m carrying on the discussion—and I pay no
attention to large numbers of people; I only know how to ask for a single
person's vote, and I can't even begin to address people in large groups. What I'm wondering, then, is whether you'll be prepared to submit to an attempt at refutation by answering questions. You see, I think that both of us—and everyone else as well, in fact—believe that doing wrong is worse than suffering wrong, and that for a wrongdoer not paying the penalty is worse than doing so.

**Polus** And I say that no one—not me, and not anyone else either—believes that. Would you prefer to have wrong done to you than to do wrong?

**Socrates** Yes, and so would you and everyone else.

**Polus** You're quite wrong. I wouldn't, you wouldn't, and nobody else would either.

**Socrates** Why don't you answer my questions, then?

**Polus** All right. I'm certainly longing to hear what you're going to say.

**Socrates** You'll find out; you only have to answer my questions. I'll pretend that we're starting afresh. Which do you think is worse, Polus, doing wrong or having wrong done to you?

**Polus** Having wrong done to you, I'd say.

**Socrates** And which is more contemptible, doing wrong or having wrong done to you? Can you tell me what you think?

**Polus** Doing wrong.

**Socrates** Well, isn't it also worse, given that it's more contemptible?

**Polus** Certainly not.

**Socrates** I see. You don't identify "admirable" with "good," and "contemptible" with "bad," apparently.

**Polus** No, I don't.

**Socrates** But what about this? Isn't there always a standard to which you refer before calling things admirable? It doesn't matter what the object is; it could be a body, a colour, a figure, a sound or an activity. Take an admirable physique, for instance. Don't you call it admirable either on account of its utility (by considering the particular purpose it is useful for), or on account of a certain kind of pleasure (if it gives people pleasure to look at it)? Can you think of anything else which might make one admire a person's physique?

**Polus** No, I can't.

**Socrates** And doesn't the same go for everything else as well? Don't you call figures and colours admirable either because they give a certain kind of pleasure, or because they're beneficial, or for both reasons at once?

**Polus** Yes.

**Socrates** And isn't that also the case with sounds and all musical phenomena?

**Polus** Yes.

**Socrates** And these criteria are surely relevant to the whole sphere of people's customs and activities as well. I mean, provided they're admirable, they're either beneficial or pleasant or both.

**Polus** I agree.
Socrates: And does the same go for admirable fields of study too?

Polus: Yes. In fact, Socrates, in defining what is admirable in terms of pleasure and goodness, as you are at the moment, you've come up with an admirable definition!

Socrates: And also if I define what is contemptible in the opposite way, in terms of unpleasantness and harmfulness?

Polus: Yes, of course.

Socrates: So when one of a pair of admirable things is more admirable than the other, this is because it exceeds the other in one of these two respects or in both—either in pleasantness or in benefit or in both at once.

Polus: Yes.

Socrates: And when one of a pair of contemptible things is more contemptible than the other, this is because it exceeds the other either in unpleasantness or in harmfulness. Isn't that bound to be so?

Polus: Yes.

Socrates: Now, what was the position we reached a moment ago as regards doing and suffering wrong? Didn't you maintain that although suffering wrong was worse, doing it was more contemptible?

Polus: Yes, I did.

Socrates: So if doing wrong is more contemptible than suffering wrong, then either it's more unpleasant and it's more contemptible because it exceeds the alternative in unpleasantness, or it's more contemptible because it exceeds the alternative in harmfulness or in both qualities at once. Isn't that bound to be the case?

Polus: Of course.

Socrates: So the first point for us to consider is whether doing wrong is more unpleasant than suffering wrong, and whether people who do wrong are more distressed than those who have it done to them.

Polus: No, of course that's not the case, Socrates.

Socrates: So it doesn't exceed the alternative in unpleasantness.

Polus: No.

Socrates: And if that's the case, it doesn't exceed the alternative in both respects either.

Polus: That seems right.

Socrates: The only remaining possibility, then, is that it exceeds the alternative in the other respect.

Polus: Yes.

Socrates: In harmfulness.

Polus: I suppose so.

Socrates: Well, if doing wrong exceeds suffering wrong in harmfulness, it must be worse than suffering wrong.

Polus: Obviously.

Socrates: Now, isn't it invariably accepted, and wasn't it admitted by you earlier, that doing wrong is more contemptible than suffering wrong?

Polus: Yes.
SOCRATES And now we’ve found that it’s worse as well.

POLUS So it seems.

SOCRATES Well, if you were faced with a choice between two things, and one of them was worse and more contemptible than the other, would you prefer it to the alternative? ... Don’t you feel like answering? You needn’t worry: you won’t come to any harm. Imagine that the argument is a doctor who demands sincerity from you, and tell us what you think. Do you say yes or no to my question?

POLUS No, I wouldn’t prefer it, Socrates.

SOCRATES Would anyone?

POLUS I don’t think so: the argument doesn’t make it seem possible.

SOCRATES I was right, then, when I suggested that doing wrong is held by everyone, including you and me, to be less preferable than suffering wrong, and the reason I was right is that doing wrong is in fact worse than having it done to you.

POLUS I suppose so.

SOCRATES Now that we’ve compared our techniques of refutation, Polus, you can see how completely different they are. You rely on the fact that everyone in the world agrees with you except for me, while I’m satisfied if I gain the assent of just one person—you. I’m content if you testify to the validity of my argument, and I canvass only for your vote, without caring about what everyone else thinks.

SOCRATES So much for that issue. Next we need to look into the second point of disagreement between us. You claim that nothing could be worse for a criminal than paying the penalty for his crimes, whereas I claim that he’s worse off if he doesn’t pay the penalty. Which of us is right? Here’s a way into the question: would you agree that there’s no difference between a criminal paying the penalty for his crimes and being justly punished for them?

POLUS Yes.

SOCRATES Now, wouldn’t you describe any instance of justice as admirable, in so far as it is just? Think about it. What’s your view?

POLUS I think it has to be admirable, Socrates.

SOCRATES What about this, then? If a person does something, doesn’t there also have to be something which undergoes what that person is doing?

POLUS I think so.

SOCRATES And isn’t the object which is undergoing the action also bound to be affected by the way the agent acts? For instance, if a person hits, there must be something which is hit.

POLUS Of course there must.

SOCRATES And if the hitter hits hard or fast, it also follows that the object which is hit is hit in that way.

POLUS Yes.

SOCRATES The effect on the object which is hit, then, is qualified by the way in which the hitter performs the action.
POLUS  Agreed.

SOCRATES Then again, if a person cauterizes, there must be something which is cauterized, mustn’t there?

POLUS  Of course.

SOCRATES And if the process of cauterity is intense or painful, the cauterized object is inevitably cauterized in the way in which the cauterity is performed. Yes?

POLUS  Yes.

SOCRATES And the same goes for when someone makes a cut, doesn’t it? That is, something is cut.

POLUS  Yes.

SOCRATES And if the incision is large or deep or painful, then isn’t the cut object cut in a way which reflects the kind of cut the cutter is making?

POLUS  Obviously.

SOCRATES To sum up, then, do you agree with what I said a moment ago—that in all cases the affected object is affected in a way which reflects the way in which the agent acts?

POLUS  Yes, I agree.

SOCRATES Please bear these conclusions in mind. I want to ask next whether to be punished is to do something or to have something done to you.

POLUS  It’s to have something done to you, of course, Socrates.

SOCRATES And this something is done by an agent, presumably.

POLUS  Naturally. By the person who implements the punishment.

SOCRATES And when a person is right to carry out a punishment, is he justified in doing so?

POLUS  Yes.

SOCRATES Is he acting justly, then, or not?

POLUS  He is.

SOCRATES So to be punished by paying a fair penalty for your crimes is to have justice done to you?

POLUS  Obviously.

SOCRATES But we’ve agreed that anything just is admirable, haven’t we?

POLUS  Yes.

SOCRATES So the agent is carrying out an admirable deed, while the one who’s being punished is having an admirable deed done to him.

POLUS  Yes.

SOCRATES Now, if he’s having an admirable deed done to him, he must be having a good deed done to him, in the sense that it’s either pleasant or beneficial.

POLUS  Yes, he must be.

SOCRATES Anyone who pays a fair penalty for his crimes, then, is having good done to him. Agreed?

POLUS  I suppose so.

SOCRATES He’s being benefited, then, isn’t he?
POLUS Yes.
SOCRATES I imagine that the kind of benefit he receives if his punishment is just is that his mind is made better. Do you think I’m right?
POLUS It sounds plausible.
SOCRATES If so, then a person who pays a fair penalty for his crimes is escaping a bad psychological state, isn’t he?
POLUS Yes.
SOCRATES In which case, he’s escaping the worst state there is, isn’t he? Look at it this way: can you think of anything other than poverty which constitutes a bad state for one’s financial condition?
POLUS No, that’s it.
SOCRATES What about a person’s physical condition? Wouldn’t you say that in this case it’s weakness, sickliness, ugliness, and so on which constitute badness?
POLUS Yes.
SOCRATES Well, do you think there’s also such a thing as psychological badness?
POLUS Of course.
SOCRATES Which consists, wouldn’t you say, in injustice, ignorance, cowardice and so on?
POLUS Yes.
SOCRATES So it’s your opinion that there’s a pernicious state for each of the three—for property, body, and mind—and that these are respectively poverty, sickliness, and immorality. Yes?
POLUS Yes.
SOCRATES Well, which of these three kinds of iniquity is the most contemptible? Isn’t it immorality and psychological iniquity in general?
POLUS Yes, that’s by far the most contemptible.
SOCRATES And if it’s the most contemptible, it’s the worst too, isn’t it?
POLUS Why should you think that, Socrates?
SOCRATES Because it follows from our earlier conclusions that in any situation it’s the thing which causes the maximum amount of unpleasantness or harm or both that is the most contemptible.
POLUS That’s very true.
SOCRATES And didn’t we just agree that immorality—that is, psychological iniquity in general—is particularly contemptible?
POLUS Yes, we did.
SOCRATES Either it’s exceptionally unpleasant, then, and it’s particularly contemptible because it exceeds the others in its unpleasantness, or it’s particularly contemptible because it exceeds the others in harmfulness or in both qualities at once. Yes?
POLUS Of course.
SOCRATES Well, are injustice, lack of self-discipline, cowardice, and ignorance more unpleasant than hunger and exhaustion?
POLUS  I don’t think we’ve found any reason to say that, Socrates.
SOCRATES  Why, then, is psychological iniquity more contemptible than anything else? If, as you say, it isn’t because it causes more distress than other kinds of badness, it must be because it exceeds the alternatives in harmfulness. In some sense, then, it causes an incredible amount of harm and is unbelievably bad.
POLUS  I suppose so.
SOCRATES  Well, if something causes more harm than anything else, isn’t it the worst thing in the world?
POLUS  Yes.
SOCRATES  Doesn’t it follow that psychological iniquity—inequity, self-indulgence, and so on—is the worst thing in the world?
POLUS  It does seem to.
SOCRATES  Now, which is the branch of expertise that rescues people from poverty? Isn’t it commercial business?
POLUS  Yes.
SOCRATES  And which one relieves us of illness? Isn’t it medicine?

POLUS  Of course.
SOCRATES  And which one saves us from iniquity and injustice? Is that too hard a question for you? Look at it this way. When people have a physical ailment, where do we take them? Whom do we take them to?
POLUS  Doctors, Socrates.
SOCRATES  And where do we take people who do wrong and lack self-discipline?
POLUS  To appear before judges. Is that what you’re getting at?
SOCRATES  And don’t we take them there so that they can pay a fair penalty for their crimes?
POLUS  Yes.
SOCRATES  Now, it takes justice to punish and discipline someone correctly, doesn’t it?
POLUS  Obviously.
SOCRATES  So commerce relieves us of poverty, medicine relieves us of illness, and the administration of justice relieves us of self-indulgence and injustice.
POLUS  That seems to make sense.
SOCRATES  Well, which of them is the most admirable?
POLUS  Which of what?
SOCRATES  Of commerce, medicine, and the administration of justice.
POLUS  The administration of justice, Socrates, by a long way.
SOCRATES  In that case, it must confer either more pleasure than the others, or more benefit, or both. Otherwise it wouldn’t be the most admirable of these three areas of expertise. Do you agree?
POLUS  Yes.
SOCRATES  Well, is medical treatment pleasant? Do patients enjoy themselves?
POLUS  I don’t think so.
SOCRATES  But it is beneficial, isn’t it?
POLUS Yes.
SOCRATES The point is that medical treatment saves us from a terrible state,
and so it is worth our while to put up with the pain and get well.

POLUS Of course.
SOCRATES Now, which is the happier state to be in, as far as one’s body is con-
cerned—to receive medical treatment, or actually to avoid being ill in the
first place?

POLUS To avoid being ill, obviously.

SOCRATES Yes, it does seem to be true that happiness consists not in losing any
badness you have, but in not having it in the first place.

POLUS Exactly.

SOCRATES Now, imagine two people both of whom are physically or psycho-
logically in a bad state. One of them is receiving treatment and is being freed
from his badness, while the other isn’t, and so still has it. Which of these two
people is worse off?

POLUS I should say it’s the one who isn’t being treated.

SOCRATES Well, we found that paying the penalty for one’s crimes saves one
from the worst kind of badness—iniquity.

POLUS We did.

SOCRATES The reason being, I suppose, that the administration of justice makes
people self-controlled, increases their morality, and cures them of iniquity.

POLUS Yes.

SOCRATES Since psychological badness is the worst kind there is, it follows that
the height of happiness is not to have it at all .

POLUS Obviously.

SOCRATES . . . and the next best thing is to be saved from it, I suppose.

POLUS That makes sense.

SOCRATES Which we found to be a result of censure, criticism, and punishment.

POLUS Yes.

SOCRATES The worst state of all, then, is to have it and not to be saved from it.

POLUS I suppose so.

SOCRATES And isn’t this precisely the state of an arch-criminal, with his utter
immorality, who successfully avoids being criticized and disciplined and
punished—in other words, exactly what, according to you, Archelaus and
his fellow dictators, rhetoricians, and political leaders have managed to do?

POLUS I suppose so.

SOCRATES Their achievement, then, Polus, is not so very different from that of
someone in the grip of an extremely severe illness who successfully avoids
having the doctors exact the penalty for his body’s crimes—that is, who
avoids medical treatment—because he’s childishly frightened of the pain of
cautery and surgery. Don’t you agree?

POLUS Yes, I do.

SOCRATES And he’s afraid, I suppose, because he doesn’t understand health
and doesn’t know what a good physical state is like. I mean, the position
we’ve reached in our discussion makes it seem likely that this is what peo-
polus  Summarize them by all means, if you feel like it.
socrates  Well, one consequence is that there’s nothing worse than injustice and wrongdoing.

d  polus  So it seems.
socrates  Didn’t we also find that punishment saves one from this bad state?
polus  I suppose so.
socrates  Whereas to escape punishment is to perpetuate the bad state?
polus  Yes.
socrates  It follows that wrongdoing is the second worst thing that can happen; the worst thing in the world, the supreme curse, is to do wrong and not pay the penalty for it.
polus  I suppose so.
socrates  Well, wasn’t that the point at issue between us, Polus? You were calling Archelaus happy for getting away with terrible crimes without being punished for them, whereas I was upholding the contrary view. I was claiming that Archelaus or anyone else who does wrong without paying the penalty is likely to be far worse off than others; that doing wrong always makes people more miserable than suffering wrong does; and that evading punishment always makes people more miserable than paying the penalty does. Wasn’t that what I was saying?
polus  Yes.
socrates  And have I been proved right?
polus  Apparently.

COMMENTS

In the Gorgias, Socrates defends, against a wordly-wise public speaker, the view that the only thing relevant for happiness is being a good, moral person, someone with the virtues. Plato stresses how weird and unworldly this appears to people who have never stopped to consider whether money, success, and other conventional goods may not be what matters for happiness.

Why does Plato hold that the person who reflects in the right kind of way about conventional goods will be moral? Could she not be happy using her reason and intelligence to achieve selfish goals? Polus certainly claims to think so. Here, Socrates
subjects him to arguments to show that his views are internally incoherent. Note that Socrates thinks that when it comes to the happiness of each one of us, the views of others are not to the point—all that matters is what the person thinks when his or her views are subject to rational scrutiny.

In this passage Socrates’ arguments show that Polus’ opposition to Socrates’ apparently strange views is based on confusion. Are Socrates’ arguments, in fact, good ones? They have to be if he is entitled to claim that Polus really does believe conclusions that he began by claiming not to believe.

If virtue is really more important than conventional goods and vice far worse than conventional evils like poverty and punishment, then it follows, as Socrates brings home at the end, that the wrongdoer is unhappier than the person wronged (as Democritus also held; see p. 304). All one needs for happiness is to be a virtuous person, regardless of what conventional evils befall one.

Are Plato’s views on virtue and happiness too demanding and uncompromising? His greatest pupil Aristotle thought so.

C. The Major Theories

The most famous ancient ethical theories, which are well worked out and make their framework explicit, are those of Aristotle, the Stoics, and Epicurus. Aristotle argues that happiness requires virtue, but also some measure of “external goods” like health and wealth. The Stoics disagree with this view, starting what became the major ethical debate in the ancient world. Epicurus offers a different idea: Happiness is a life of pleasure. He takes care to avoid obvious objections to this idea and, like Aristotle and the Stoics, presents his theory as a theory of happiness, our ultimate end.

Nicomachean Ethics I, 1, 2, 4, 5, 7–10

ARISTOTLE

1. Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. But a certain difference is found among ends; some are activities, others are products apart from the activities that produce them. Where there are ends apart from the actions, it is the nature of the products to be better than the activities. Now, as there are many actions, arts, and sciences, their ends also are many; the end of the medical art is health.