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Choosing to Suffer: Is It Even A Choice?

"Man can do as he wills, but he cannot will as he wills" - Arthur Schopenhauer

Introduction

Socrates was Plato's teacher, and he used him in his dialogues as the voice of reason, representing, we believe, Plato's own views. Therefore, his answer to Polus' question seems reasonable and altruistic, something with which most of us would agree; even if that meant suffering, he would not do "what's unjust". This position has subsequently been argued by several thinkers throughout History, but it also has been challenged by many others, despite how naturally right it may seem.

As it is common, to understand those who support and those who oppose Plato's view, we must discuss what is justice, and what differs in just and unjust action. This is fundamental before we get on to decide whether Polus' question was rightly answered by Socrates, since some theories of justice and ethics associate suffering with injustice; thus, suffering would be unjust.

However, before we argue about whether or not doing the just thing (whatever it is) is worth suffering, I would like to point out that this entire discussion assumes one small, yet gigantic, premise, without justifying it: that Socrates could, in fact, *choose*. That it was up to him to decide between suffering and behaving justly, and that, whatever the results might be, him and only him was responsible.

In this essay I will argue for the position that the passage given is fundamentally flawed, for two reasons: it fails to justify why doing the unjust thing is different from suffering (I will give two examples of contradictory positions that disagree on this topic as examples of how Plato is "begging the question", so to speak, on this premise, and how later philosophers would agree or disagree with him); and it assumes that Socrates has a choice, and that, in such a situation, he would be able to choose, when he, in fact, does not (I will support my thesis with several arguments and examples). I will also elaborate on how free choices are not necessary in moral situations, supporting my thesis that we do not have moral responsibility and that it is coherent with morality, directing those conclusions to the topic at hand.

What is a just action?

Firstly, it is clear that, for Plato, justice was not separate from suffering, and Polus specifically mentions "suffer what's unjust". This would mean that Plato considers that injustice results in suffering. But is causing suffering the reason why an action is unjust, or is it simply an unrelated consequence?

Immanuel Kant, an 18th century German philosopher, argued for the latter. For Kant, an action should be guided by reason and good-will alone, with no regard for the consequences. Doing something was only correct, from a moral standpoint, if it was done because it was the correct thing to do. Kant envisioned a difference between doing something for the consequences (what he called behaving according to the hypothetical imperative: if one wants X, one should do Y) and doing something for itself (what he called behaving according to the categorical imperative: doing X

because of X, because it should be done for itself).

In his view, doing something for the consequences, that is, behaving according to the hypothetical imperative, had no moral value; only acting according to the categorical imperative, and doing something because it should be done, is a morally correct action. From then on, Kant built his moral framework by using reason not just as a tool, but as a fundamental part of the ethical process, by insisting that reason should guide good-will, which he deemed the only thing in the world that was good in itself. He arrived at several formulations of his categorical imperative, designed to decide whether or not actions were morally right by the use of logic. Some of his most well-known formulations are that the principle behind an action must be logically turned into a universal law and that one should always treat mankind as an end in itself, rather than as the means to an end.

However, another moral theory sought to disprove kantian ethics: utilitarianism. While Jeremy Bentham was one of the earlier adopters and advocates of this hypothesis, it was the British philosopher John Stuart Mill that cemented it as an alternative view of human actions.

Utilitarians argue that the only good and desirable thing in itself is happiness, which is defined as the greatest possible amount of pleasure and the smallest possible amount of suffering for everyone involved. According to this view, the right thing to do is that which maximises pleasure and minimises pain, or suffering. Killing a man might be entirely correct if the man was preparing to bomb a train station, but outright wrong if he was an innocent commuter on his way to work. There are no universal principles, or unchanging imperatives: the goal of any action should be the maximization of pleasure.

Evidently, both theories might be objected to. Kantian ethics are commonly accused of being out of touch with reality (Kant would consider that the correct thing to do would be to let the terrorist bomb the train, if the only alternative was killing him, since killing someone could not be a universal law, and it would treat the bomber as the means to an end, rather than an end on itself) and of being near impossible to fulfill (no one manages to live every instant according to the categorical imperative, ignoring every single consequence of every single action), while Utilitarianism is often considered to be difficult to implement (it implies that we should calculate the resulting happiness of everyone involved, which is also nearly impossible, since we are unaware of most of the reactions to our actions) and may lead to uncomfortable results: if 60% of the population find that torturing the other 40% gives them immense and extreme pleasure, capable of outweighing the suffering of the tortured 40%, then it should be correct, according to Utilitarianism. Perhaps the most difficult objection to Utilitarianism, and one which I must confess I cannot provide an answer for, and still represents for me its biggest obstacle, is that equating pleasure with morality means that pleasure is objectively and undeniably good, which has no rational justification. There is no reason why pleasure would be objectively good, other than our feelings indicating it.

Both theories have responded to these criticisms, and several other theories are also good answers to this problem (one example is Aristotle's virtue theory) but that is beyond the scope of this essay. This short exposition was merely to provide context to the following paragraphs.

For Kant, Socrates' response was correct: one should do what's right, regardless of the consequences, even if that would bring one suffering. What one could not do was break the categorical imperative and do something other than for its own sake. It is better to suffer than to behave unjustly.

For Stuart Mill, Socrates' response was not necessarily correct, because he did not elaborate on what was a just action. Should one throw himself on top of the bomber to save the remaining passengers? Yes, because that would maximise pleasure. But one should not sacrifice himself if that

does not lead to a happier world, or reduce the overall suffering. In Utilitarianism, there is no general just action, but a case-to-case analysis of whether or not doing something will lead to the maximum pleasure possible, and our own suffering is included in the calculations, equally to everyone else, surely, but still there - sacrifices are only worth anything if there is something to be gained, not because of blind obedience to some principles.

Of course, perhaps suffering would, in some circumstances, be unjust - an example would be self-defence, where we would consider the use of force against someone just, as it seeks to protect our own physical integrity. In this case, then, what would Socrates do? Suffer would be doing the unjust thing. In this passage, Socrates does not elaborate. But a more important point in this discussion is whether the answer to Polus' question has any meaning at all. In other words, a more important question is whether Socrates would have the possibility of choosing one over the other, or whether it is well beyond his abilities to freely choose one or the other.

Can we choose what we do?

The idea that we are responsible for our actions and that we, generally speaking, choose them freely is a widely believed and, indeed, engrained idea. Most people have a natural reluctance or outright indignation when told that they have no free-will, that their choices are not free and that their actions are, therefore, determined by something other than themselves.

But no convincing evidence has been presented for the contrary, while countless arguments, empirical data and theoretical reasonings have disproved the idea that mankind has any sort of role to play in deciding its actions.

The most commonly presented one is quite simple:

- Everything in the universe is subject to its natural laws, and its behaviour evolves according to them and to an initial position;
- Human beings live and act in the universe;
- Therefore, human beings are subject to natural laws, and their behaviour evolves according to them and to an initial position.

The source of every single one of our decisions is our brain, there is no disputing that. We cannot admit Descartes' mind-body duality, since it simply does not exist. Our mind exists purely insofar as our body exists, as a result of the mental processes taking place in our brain. While writing these lines, it is not my mind, housed in some parallel dimension outside of this earthly realm, that conjures verbs and adjectives, but my brain that, inside my skull, bathed by my blood, commands my fingers to move, through neural activity. And even if we ignore the miraculous contributions of modern neuroscience, and resort to purely logical reasonings, we still find ourselves before a conundrum: how can the mind, which resides outside of the physical plane, act upon it, without being subject to its laws? If it did exist, then, by virtue of living separately from the body, how could it command it, if there is no connection between them?

Indeed, our physical body is all we have, and it is not made of divine clay, but of carbon and oxygen, hydrogen and nitrogen, the very same elements that surround us at every moment. We are, as Carl Sagan famously said, "stardust", ultimately made of the very same thing as our homes and our pets, our tables, chairs, doors, windows and the great Nature beyond them.

Yet, we expect every single thing around us to behave as science describes and Nature dictates. This

computer is converting my thoughts into words because electrons are flowing, right as predicted by engineering and as commanded by physics. Then how come every object obeys Nature but us? Why do we expect medication to act as the doctor prescribed it, and, again, as Nature commanded, but regard the brain as separate in every aspect from every other object in the Universe?

The Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza argued for this position, determinism, with the following argument: just as a rock falling from a cliff would believe that it acted like so willingly, so do we, humans, believe that all we do results from our own will and is entirely free. However, exactly like the rock, we have no choice but to act as we do, even though we might believe otherwise. The reason why we fail to understand it is our own ignorance: we have little knowledge, blinding us away from the truth.

Our actions are just a result of the laws of physics as the orbit of the generous planet we inhabit; however we think of the orbit as predictable and our own behaviour as spontaneous. While an orbit is a relatively simple thing to calculate, human behaviour is immensely more complex, and that means that, even though it seems free, it is simply too hard to be predicted.

If this argument does not satisfy those that feel their freedoms at any instant, than countless scientific experiments have contributed to this discussion. One of the most important is the experiment conducted by Dr. Benjamin Libet, at the University of California. Dr. Libet measured brain activity while his subjects decided to flex their wrist. In front of them was a faster type of clock, and the subjects should note the time when they decided to flex their wrists. Libet concluded that, several milliseconds before subjects claimed they decided to flex their wrists, the brain was already active in the regions related to movement in that area. Before the subjects had consciously decided to move, their brain had already chosen for them.

This study, and several similar ones, have their own objections, even from within the scientific community. But the scope and the amount of works sharing Dr. Libet's conclusions should not be ignored.

If, even now, some are still skeptical, I would like to present my last argument.

In every thing we do, we act according to our desires. Even if we do something contrary to our desires (wake up at 6:15 am), there is a stronger, implicit desire behind it (have breakfast in time and take part in the IPO). I challenge the reader to think about something that was contrary to his desires, and reflect on why, after all, he did it. There must have been some implicit desire, one that perhaps the reader hadn't thought about to this moment, that led him to that action.

Nonetheless, we don't choose our desires. No one chooses to desire knowledge, their genetical heritage and the environment in which we live simply led some of us to desire it, and that, conjugated with some other desires (and a few other factors, none of them up to us), led each one of us to this year's IPO. But if we don't choose our desires, yet we act according to them, then how are our actions free, or truly ours? I quoted Schopenhauer in the beginning of this essay; this is his precise point. Surely, we do what we want; but we cannot want what we want; not in a free, conscient decision.

Can we choose the moral path?

Going back to Plato's excerpt, Socrates chose to suffer over do what's unjust. But it was not his decision. Given his set of desires, and his desire to act according to his moral considerations, he

would always make that choice. He'd never have the slightest possibility of choosing to do what's unjust; his choice is not his own.

Discussing what the correct choice is important, but we must not forget that we are not "the masters of our fate", as Churchill put it, but machines, feeling and thinking machines, yet machines all the same, created and programmed by Nature.

As such, Kant's position loses much of its attractiveness. Logical and universal, a simple guidebook to humanity, it fails when confronted with the mere fact that humanity doesn't have much choice in the matter (or any, at all). Good-will is useless if there is no free-will. Our intentions are not worth much if they are not our own.

This is not necessarily related to the topic of this essay; I have only sought to prove that the passage provided assumed more than it justified, and that it was virtually empty of any viable content, not to provide another objection to Kantian ethics. But I believe it is still an important point to be made: Socrates would choose suffering over doing what's unjust. But there is no moral superiority in doing that instead of the opposite; in fact, there is no moral responsibility, so every action is equally moral, which is to say that it is right and wrong and everything else in between, all at the same time. The fall of moral responsibility must precipitate mankind into the nihilistic, relativistic void of "everything's permissible", or "everything's right".

But does it really?

Can we live without free choices?

I would say that we are actually forgetting something: happiness. Not being free does not mean that we cannot be happy; it is entirely unrelated. In fact, making peace with our lack of free-will will actually allow us to be happier, to understand that some things (all things, even, I would say) are beyond our control and that it is not our fault.

The French, 20th century philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre once wrote that we are "condemned to be free". For me, that instills incredible fear. To think that everything we do is entirely dependent on us, that it's all up to us, that everything we've ever did, for good or for bad, is of our complete responsibility, is scary. If there is one thing mankind is proficient in, that's failing. Every single one of us has failed many, many times, and will fail many, many times again. We will have our successes, but we will also have our failures, and I would rather give up merit for my successes (to those who wouldn't, I would invite you to reflect on whether it was entirely merit: wasn't there some fragment of luck? How would you know that it wasn't that tiny, invisible piece of luck that ensured success? Or if there wasn't, and it was all due to your talents and hard work, aren't *those* entirely accidental? Weren't you lucky to be born intelligent, or strong, or brave, or hard-working? How much of the merit is truly yours?) than to assume the guilt and responsibilities I'd be owed for my failures.

Simply put, the main character of Netflix's cartoon series "BoJack Horseman" once said: "I'm responsible for my own happiness? I'm not even responsible for my own breakfast!". Realizing we're not, and that it's not our fault if we fail on the long and tiresome way to happiness, is relieving, and certainly makes me happier.

But then, cry the fiery moral relativists and nihilists, how can my actions be morally good, if I'm not responsible for them?

One moral theory particularly revered happiness, while entirely ignoring intention - utilitarianism. Actions can be good if they contribute to the maximization of pleasure, even if the intentions are bad (or, as is the case, non-existent).

One objection to this position is that, even if the actions are good, there is no moral responsibility; therefore, how can civil justice (the justice of courts and our judicial system; I do not mean in this paragraph the concept of Justice as discussing what is just or unjust, although they are undoubtedly intertwined) punish someone who is not responsible for his actions? The answer is simple: justice does not fulfill some near-divine duty to uphold morality or exact revenge on the scum of society; justice, as everything else, works for the common good, works for the maximization of pleasure, works for the greatest possible happiness for the greatest number of people. We are not responsible for our actions, since they result from our desires. But our desires can be shaped, and the example of others' contributes to the evolution of our behaviours. That, along with removing dangerous individuals from society for enough time to rehabilitate them as citizens, is (or should be) the purpose of justice - always aligned with the common good and the greatest possible pleasure.

I have ventured far from the topic of this essay because I find that philosophy, as much as it is about asking questions, should never forget its duty to try and answer them; as such, I could not leave these doubts hanging around, like ghosts of unfulfilled lives, without attempting to answer them. Indeed, they are also connected to this topic, albeit in a slightly over-extended way, and they may be helpful to extract conclusions for this topic.

Conclusion

The passage provided frames the moral question in a profoundly flawed way: by accepting that it is a choice and by ignoring that, consequently, suffering is connected with justice. Socrates cannot choose one over the other, since he could never do anything other than what he did; in other words, he could not, in every single decision he ever made in his life, act unlike the way in which he did, unless his own experiences or desires (the starting point) or the laws of Nature were different.

His response, however, and the hypothetical action it represents, are not devoid of moral value, since they will necessarily either contribute to increasing the overall happiness or increasing overall suffering, and thus be either morally good or morally bad. The reason why this must be left unanswered instead of swiftly declaring Socrates' hypothetical action as right or wrong is because of his annoyingly vague concept of "just". Polus does mention suffering as a result of injustice, yet Socrates could, by inflicting suffering upon others, provide pleasure for the most people possible (one example is the case of the bomber), but would that be "unjust" for him, leading him to prefer suffering alongside others?

Plato equated morality with a choice; that cannot be the case. We must have the bravery to face our obedience to the laws of nature, and understand that, ultimately, it is not about doing what is just, in some eternal, universal, *a priori* way, but acknowledging that doing so is meaningless if it does not come from a free choice.

Socrates cannot choose to suffer, and neither can any of us. But we can recognise that our choices, our successes and our failures don't define us, learn to free ourselves from free-will, and understand that there is nothing inherently good in good-will.

