

Group: 19

Id: 1086

Chosen Language: en

Track: T1

Language: ENGLISH

Introduction

Throughout the course of history, humans have continually engaged in conflict and committed injustices against one another. The hunter-gatherer nomads of the Paleolithic Era fought for primitive reasons closely tied to their sustenance and survival. When another group invaded their territory and posed a threat to their wellbeing, conflict ensued to protect the securities of the tribe. As civilizations evolved, however, so did the complexity of these conflicts. The sources of contention between two groups were no longer in relation to concrete and tangible concepts, like food or shelter, but more nuanced and abstract concepts such as rights and justice.

In Plato's *Gorgias*, we are presented with a conversation between Polus and Socrates. When the latter is inquired as to whether he would prefer to suffer an injustice or commit one, he asserts that he would rather choose the suffering.

Socrates' unique standpoint regarding the dichotomy presented by Polus fails to recognize the complexity of the concept of an unjust action, and its intricate connections to suffering when the two are in direct conflict.

As the philosophical nature of the concepts of suffering, and injustice are complex, I would like to engage in this philosophical investigation of the excerpt through three distinct avenues. After briefly considering the context of the claim raised by Socrates, I will first analyze the meaning of both concepts ("suffering" and "injustice") and the underlying connections between the two. Furthermore, I will then analyze the citation and present an argument refuting Socrates' notion on whether one ought to choose to suffer or commit an injustice. Finally, I will extend the scope of the philosophical argument to the realm of political philosophy.

The context of Socrates' assertion

Before engaging any further in this philosophical investigation, we must first interpret the quote with respect to the cultural context of the philosopher and his contemporaries. Socrates' assertion relates to a dichotomy between two main concepts: "suffering" and "injustice" (or what is "unjust").

The concept of suffering has not radically changed between the times of Ancient Greek philosophy to our contemporary notions of suffering. For the purpose of this essay, we can regard suffering to include both the physical and psychological pains inflicted upon a subject. Thus, suffering affects both the mind and body of the subject in question.

Conversely, the notion of what is "just" or "unjust" has undergone several revolutionary changes through history, and contemporary philosophers still possess drastically different views on what constitutes a just action as opposed to an unjust one. For the purpose of this essay, rather than subscribing to a specific ethical viewpoint (utilitarianism, Kantian deontology, etc.), I will evaluate Socrates' claim through the use of different philosophies for a more cohesive investigation of the citation.

Regarding suffering and injustice

As established in the previous paragraph, the concept of suffering has not undergone significant change through the course of time, but I would like to first detail several attributes regarding the nature of this suffering.

First, suffering lies on a continuum. When an entity is suffering, their suffering is not black or white. In other words, one cannot simplify the suffering of an entity to either "suffering," or "not suffering." Rather, there exist various degrees of suffering. Although two different entities may be suffering, the

degrees of their suffering could be radically different, which will later affect the analysis of the morality of committing an unjust action.

Second, the continuum on which suffering lies is relative. In other words, two entities could undergo the same event or external influence but end up with different amounts of suffering. For instance, persons A and B could both undergo the death of a family member. However, depending on the person's past experiences with death, this could drastically influence the degree to which they suffer due to this event. When observing the current state of events, a conscious being inevitably compares this current state to their experiences in the past, and evaluates the current state with respect to this standard (that is unique to each conscious being). Thus, depending on these past experiences, this can radically change the degree to which an entity feels that they are suffering, although they may undergo similar external influences to others.

Additionally, I would like to consider the concept of injustice, or an "unjust action."

There exist many metrics to determine the justifiability of one's action. For instance, a utilitarian calculus (Consequentialism) allows one to quantify the justifiability (or morality) of an action depending on the net utility caused by the action. On the other hand, other philosophies regarding the morality of an action require one to consider the intentions behind an action when evaluating its justifiability.

The dichotomy presented by Polus on the morality of committing an unjust action when the alternative is suffering an injustice raises several different cases. However, for the purpose of this essay, I would like to investigate the case when the unjust action that Socrates is contemplating on committing is a response to the injustice that may be caused on him. For example, Socrates may be contemplating whether to unjustly attack another person, if the person is planning on unjustly attacking him.

Then, we are faced with the following dilemma. How does the justifiability of an action depend on the causes of the action? Or rather, does an action that would ordinarily be considered unjust become justified when an injustice is committed on the entity in question? In answering these questions, one must consider the criteria used to evaluate the ethicality of an action. If the ethicality of an action is dependent on the intentions, then the circumstance (namely, that the person in question will soon have an injustice committed on them) must be taken into account when analyzing Socrates' claim. On the other hand, if the ethicality of an action is independent of intention, then one must only consider the injustices committed as opposed to the one suffered separately.

Rebuttal against Socrates' assertion

Now that we have established a framework regarding the concepts of "suffering" and "injustice" that we will utilize in our discussion of the thoughts of Socrates, I would now like to engage in a philosophical critique of the claims of Socrates from the standpoint of two differing ethical criteria for morality — one which takes into consideration the intentions behind an action, and another that does not.

When one incorporates a utilitarian calculus in determining the injustice of an action in comparison to another, one must also consider the extenuating circumstances behind that action. For instance, take into consideration the aforementioned two entities A and B. Consider the case where A is plotting to commit an injustice on B, and an injustice of the same degree must be committed by B to ensure that he himself does not suffer this injustice. Then, one must consider the relativistic nature of suffering in the determination of the course of action that must be taken. Although the injustices are of comparable nature, their effects on both entities differ depending on the relative continuum of

suffering mentioned above. For example, if the suffering that A experiences due to the injustices committed by B (on A) outweigh the opposite case, then it is not morally permissible for B to retaliate against A, as B's act of retaliation against the actions of A lead to a decrease in utility compared to the alternative case, where B suffers. On the other hand, in the opposite case where A's injustice on B does more harm than B's retaliation, the injustice committed by B on A would be justified. In conclusion, in the case where intention affects morality, the action that one ought to take in Polus's dilemma is reliant on the comparison between the consequences of inaction and action, and one ought to choose the action that leads to the most benefit.

On the other hand, let us consider the case where the morality of an action is independent of the circumstance in question. In this ethical criterion, the action that one ought to take remains consistent in all scenarios, and the moral worth of such action is independent of the circumstances that precede it. Then, regardless of the circumstances presented by Polus, it is morally impermissible to commit an injustice on another.

However, one may counter this standpoint with the following counterargument. When analyzing the practice of this ethical viewpoint in a real-life scenario, the real-life outcomes seem to contradict the theory. The claim that Socrates would allow a man to kill him, when he has the option to prevent his own death through self-defense seems tenuous at best. However, the ethical standpoint that suggests that an injustice committed against another is categorically immoral seems to imply that Socrates ought to let the man kill him.

In resolving this discontinuity between real-life practice and philosophical theory, we must consider an addition to our ethical criterion. In Kantian deontology, one cannot use another human's dignity as a means for an end. However, if we simply adopt this philosophy, we reach a paradox. In particular, if an entity commits an unjust action to counteract their suffering, they are categorically committing an immoral action. However, if they decide the opposite and elect to suffer, then they are sacrificing themselves as a means to the end of another human (who wants them to suffer), which is also an immoral action.

It seems that we have reached a contradiction in the above case, where no matter what action one takes, the outcome is not morally justified. Thus, we must inevitably add onto this ethical system a hierarchy of morality, to ensure that one can resolve the dichotomy. Although the specifics of the hierarchy, or the determination of which actions are more "just" than others (which are preferred), depend on the person, I contend that the ultimate injustice is the infringement upon one's dignity in the orchestration of an action. No other ends can exist without the fundamental existence of life and human dignity, and the infringement of this dignity leads to the cease of all ends. Thus, it seems apparent that the ultimate end is the end of life and dignity.

Thus, after this addition to our ethical criterion, we see that whether the "unjust" act will always remain the preferable and morally correct action when compared to the suffering depends on the hierarchy of morality. However, in the case where the suffering entails the infringement of the ultimate end described above, the "unjust" action remains morally correct for all cases, contrary to Socrates' argument that "suffering" is the preferable choice.

Extensions of Socrates' claim

As the final portion of my philosophical investigation regarding Socrates' claims on the dichotomy between suffering and unjust actions, I would like to extend his claims to realm of political philosophy.

When extending the claims of Socrates to the realm of political philosophy, we are met with some

difficulties. For instance, when the conflict is between two individual entities, we are only required to consider the effects and morality of the actions of these two entities on each other. However, when we attempt to extend the arguments presented in the above argument to a greater audience (e.g. a sovereign ruling over his many constituents, or conflicts between states), we must consider the effect that a greater number of dependents would pose on the morality of these actions.

In consideration of the utilitarian (Consequentialist) case, the extension of the argument is not difficult. Because the determination of which action to take in this case is solely dependent on the net utility of the actions committed, one can easily extend this to the case of many (through simple arithmetic). In other words, rather than a comparison between the relativistic sufferings of persons A and B in the decision of whether an action is moral or not, one can simply compare the sufferings between, for instance, sovereign A and citizens B, where the suffering of citizens B would be calculated as an aggregate of the suffering of all people included in citizens B.

However, when considering the extension of the deontological argument on a larger population, one appears to face more difficulty. The relative morality of various actions in the hierarchy (in comparison to one another) cannot be easily quantified, and thus, it may be more difficult to compare the moralities of both actions. One possible form of resolution to this issue is to utilize the existence of an ultimate end (human dignity), as an absolute metric. In this metric, the use of human dignity as a means for an end is deemed the ultimate immoral action, and is used as the sole criterion to determine which of the options (suffering or committing an "unjust" action) is preferable.

These forms of determining which of the actions is ethically "preferable" is applicable to the conflicts between states/groups of similar size. However, when considering the cases where the groups (or states) in contention are of drastically different sizes, the use of this ethical criterion becomes more biased as the size disparity increases. When a large and small state are in conflict, if one solely observes the suffering of the people and morality of the actions between the states in determining which of the two options is preferable, the larger state holds a significant advantage. For instance, if two states — one consisting of 500 people and the other consisting of 50 — are in conflict, and 100 people in larger state would suffer as opposed to 50 in the smaller state, the actions of the larger will be favored, regardless of whether it leads to the complete decimation of the second state. Thus, we can see that simple utilitarianism can have drastic consequences through the marginalization of the rights of the minority.

Thus, how would one resolve this issue? Through the use of proportions, one can take into account not only the absolute suffering of both groups, but a relativized number depending on the size of the group, so that the rights of the marginalized are also adequately taken into consideration. If one utilizes this proportional ethical criterion, then one can get a more equitable representation of morality and the preferred option in the dichotomy, regardless of the size of both parties.

Conclusion

Through this philosophical investigation on the validity of Socrates' claims regarding the dichotomy between suffering and the orchestration of an "unjust" act as presented by Polus, I first considered the notions of "suffering" and "injustice," as well as the connections between the two concepts when regarding the same conflict. I then refuted Socrates' claim that "suffering" an injustice was more judicious than committing one through the consideration of two different ethical criteria regarding the morality of an action. Finally, I extended the claims that Socrates made, as well as my own philosophical arguments to a larger scale, and observed the differences between the case of groups of similar size in conflict, as opposed to groups of drastically different size, making some alterations to my criteria for applicability in all cases.

When an injustice is committed against an entity, whether it be an individual or a state, the entity often feels the urge to retaliate. Although inaction and the acceptance of suffering (as contended by Socrates) is not always the most judicious choice, retaliation is not necessarily always the preferable choice, either. Furthermore, when we ourselves are involved in the conflict, it is easy to dismiss the opposition as inferior and blatantly disregard the consequences of our actions against them. For the betterment of mankind, we ought to carefully consider the ramifications of the actions of both parties in making our decision regarding Polus's dilemma, or we may end up in a vicious cycle of violence.