

Cambridge University Press

0521846188 - Socratic Virtue: Making the Best of the Neither-Good-nor-Bad

Naomi Reshotko

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

Introduction

There is a story that I have heard told many times.

A very poor farmer lives in a small town on the outskirts of a large kingdom. One morning, the farmer awakens to find that a beautiful and wild stallion has wandered into his field. The farmer catches the stallion and puts it in his corral. The townspeople come to the farmer and say, "This is good, you have managed to catch a beautiful stallion." The farmer replies, "I don't know if it is good, what I do know is that I now have a stallion."

The next day, the king himself happens to be passing through the farmer's village. Upon seeing the stallion, the king feels he must own this beautiful animal. He sends his servant into the farmer's home to offer him a large amount of gold in exchange for the horse. But the farmer refuses to sell the animal at any price and the king rides away very angry. Seeing what has happened, the townspeople go to the farmer and say, "This is bad, you might have a beautiful horse, but you are still a poor farmer and the king is now angry with you as well." The farmer replies, "I don't know if it is bad, what I do know is that the king is angry with me."

That night while the farmer is sleeping, the stallion breaks free from his stall and vanishes into the surrounding forest. The next day, when the townspeople hear what has happened, they gather around the farmer and say, "This is bad, not only is the king mad at you, but now you don't even have the horse." The farmer replies, "I don't know if it is bad, what I do know is that I no longer have a horse."

The next morning, the beautiful stallion returns to the poor farmer's field and with him he has five of the most beautiful mares that the townspeople have ever seen. When the farmer opens the corral, the majestic stallion leads them all in. The townspeople are in awe. "This is good," they marvel, "you are a poor farmer, but you have six of the most beautiful horses in the world." "I do not know if it is good," replies the farmer, "what I do know is that I now have six horses to train and feed."

Cambridge University Press

0521846188 - Socratic Virtue: Making the Best of the Neither-Good-nor-Bad

Naomi Reshotko

Excerpt

[More information](#)

That very afternoon, the farmer and his oldest son take the stallion out into the field to break him for riding. The stallion throws the farmer's son from his back and the boy's legs are broken. When the farmer carries his son home and puts him in his bed the townspeople gather round and say, "This is bad, your son is injured and cannot work." The farmer replies, "I do not know if it is bad, what I know is that my son must stay in bed for a while."

That evening the king's men come to the town and conscript every able-bodied young man to serve in a war that the king has declared upon a fierce and brutal enemy to the far north of the kingdom. But the farmer's son is not taken because he cannot walk. The townspeople say, "It is good that your son was injured, now he will not be killed in this brutal war." The farmer replies, "I do not know if it is a good thing, what I do know is that my son will not have to go to war."

I have heard this story told many times in different contexts and for different reasons.¹ Whenever I hear it, I appreciate the lovely way in which it illustrates Socrates' views concerning the good, the bad, and the neither-good-nor-bad.

Contrary to accepted lore, Socrates was not the first moral philosopher. He was not the *first* moral philosopher because he was not, in fact, a *moral* philosopher at all. *Socratic ethics*, the theory which can be attributed to the Socrates of a certain group of Plato's dialogues,² is not a moral theory. It is not prescriptive. It does not consider any actions, intentions, or agents to be necessarily, or by definition, good. It does not tie successful human activity – human flourishing – to any moral sense of goodness. It does not divine what is good from some set of moral principles or some one overarching moral mandate. It does not decide what is good through purely logical or transcendental arguments. Rather, the theory describes human nature and the natural world, and makes observations about the way in which they interact. Socratic ethics is remarkable because it is not itself a prescriptive theory, and it actually eliminates the need for (or possibility of) a prescriptive theory.

Given the way that human motivation works according to Socrates, it is inevitable that anyone who comes to understand the connection that he elucidates between knowledge and happiness will be compelled to become as virtuous as possible. Thus, while Socrates' is not a prescriptive theory, it does influence human behavior and does shape human behavior for

¹ I am grateful to Daniel Bennett for telling me this particular version.

² The justification for the isolation of these particular dialogues as "Socratic" will be addressed in the next section.

Cambridge University Press

0521846188 - Socratic Virtue: Making the Best of the Neither-Good-nor-Bad

Naomi Reshotko

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

the better. To say that Socrates' theory shapes human behavior for the better, however, is of course not to say that it makes human beings more moral. Rather, it is to say that it helps them to flourish. It helps them to approach – and maybe even attain – the ultimate ends for which they strive. These ultimate ends are not to be identified with virtue, although the account holds virtue to play an important and unique role in shaping human activities. The ultimate end that constitutes human flourishing is to be associated with happiness. Our comprehension of how we fit into the world combines with our desire for happiness to compel our pursuit of virtue.

Socratic ethics does not supply motivation and it does not produce mandates. Its capacity for shaping human behavior is completely parallel to that of any scientific, descriptive theory. My knowledge of gravitational theory does not – by itself – mandate any particular action on my part. However, in concert with an independent source of motivation, I find that my grasp of the laws of gravitation persuades me to pursue some projects and to avoid others. Socratic ethics simply combines a more comprehensive scientific theory with an ultimate and overarching source of motivation.

What does it mean to say that Socrates does not tie human flourishing to any moral sense of goodness? Socrates does tie human flourishing to *arete*, which we generally translate as “virtue.” The English word “virtue” does have a moral connotation. It is not clear when that moral connotation became attached to the Latin *virtus*. It is clear that *arete* always maintained a sense other than a moral one, even in Plato's text.³ There is debate over whether Plato (and even Aristotle⁴) ever came to use it in a distinctly moral way. I believe that how it was used in the Socratic dialogues can be settled by looking at these works in a philosophical light; this is what I propose to do. I will conclude that Socrates was not narrowing the use of *arete*, or treating it as a moral commodity. Socrates used *arete* as a label for human excellence at the same time that he used it for the excellence of a horse or a knife. He often talked about how to improve a knife or a horse. A horse or knife are improved when they become more able to do what they do best. When it comes to human excellence, human beings become more excellent when they are more able to engage in purposeful activity that secures some degree of human good. As *arete* helps us procure what is good, it is also

³ See the entry in Liddell and Scott 1996: 238.

⁴ As Anscombe (2002 [1958]: 530) remarks: “If someone professes to be expounding Aristotle and talks in a modern fashion about “moral” such and such he must be very imperceptive if he does not constantly feel like someone whose jaws have somehow got out of alignment: the teeth don't come together in a proper bite.”

Cambridge University Press

0521846188 - Socratic Virtue: Making the Best of the Neither-Good-nor-Bad

Naomi Reshotko

Excerpt

[More information](#)

good. But there are two reasons why we should not interpret this as a moral pronouncement.

First, while *arete* is importantly connected to human flourishing (which is often labeled *eudaimonia*), Socrates' motivational theory requires no logical (analytic or conceptual) connection between the two. There need only be an *actual* connection, a connection that results from the way that the world, including its human inhabitants, happens to be. This is a nomological connection and need be no stronger than a causal connection.

Second, Socrates says nothing about either *arete* or *eudaimonia* that – without anachronistic embellishment – imports into them anything beyond a practical or prudential notion of good. Happiness is good because it is what each human being inevitably seeks for him or herself. *Arete* is good because it enables human beings to have a chance at getting, or at least getting closer to, what is sought.

For these reasons, it is probably misleading for me to continue to translate *arete* as “virtue.” It is more appropriate to lean toward the less value-laden “excellence.” But to do so would make it unnecessarily difficult for a reader to map out and compare my discussion with those of other scholars. So I will continue to use the term “virtue” with the stipulation that it simply refers to Plato's “*arete*.”

I hope that what I have said makes it clear that the acceptance of Socratic ethics entails the rejection of further conclusions that are often associated with moral theories. To enumerate some of these: people's goodness does not reside in their intentions, sincerity, or character, but in their happiness, which results from their having put their knowledge to practical use. We need not examine and apply categorical imperatives, but must explore hypothetical ones. Goodness does not come from having “other-focused” motivations.

The foundation for the view of Socratic ethics that I describe in this book has been laid by Terry Penner. This interpretation begins on a completely different footing concerning Socrates' account of human motivation and its consequences than is found elsewhere in the literature. It is Penner's theory of Socratic desire and intellectualism that I describe in the next three chapters.⁵ I cannot, however, promise that he would agree with the specific ways in which I have characterized the view, filled in the details, or defended it against its opponents.

I use Penner's contributions to anchor and develop some new and further theses concerning Socratic ethics. I contend that, once the appropriate

⁵ Except where noted, the nicknames, terminology, and examples are my own.

Cambridge University Press

0521846188 - Socratic Virtue: Making the Best of the Neither-Good-nor-Bad

Naomi Reshotko

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

5

account of human desire is in place, and once we understand that Socrates equates virtue with knowledge,⁶ it is Socrates' doctrine of the good, the bad, and the neither-good-nor-bad that functions as the central reference point for the rest of what he says about ethics. To the extent that Socrates' views concerning ethics have been interpreted without a proper appreciation for this critical element, they have been misunderstood. Socrates' pronouncements on the neither-good-nor-bad form the core of his descriptive and amoral theory concerning human good because it is his reasoning in this area that allows him to conclude that virtue and happiness are not only logically distinct but are *each unique and distinct kinds of goods*.

By establishing the thesis that virtue and happiness are unique and distinct kinds of goods, I can further explore their relationship in illuminating ways. In particular, I can place some of the traditional debates which have dogged Socratic theory for generations on a new footing, and I can remove others from their distracting and unwarranted central positions.

Ultimately, I contend that Socrates equated virtue with knowledge because he saw a craft-like knowledge as the key to a person's ability to make the best of the resources and materials available to her by using them in ways that contribute to her well-being. I call this craft-like knowledge *scientific knowledge*, using that term in a general and ancient sense. I mean for it to cover careful and methodical thinking about both the natural world and what lies beyond it. This includes, but is not limited to, empirical investigation and the forming and testing of empirical and other hypotheses through empirical and other means. Socrates assumes that what is best is also determined by a comprehensive study of the natural world. This study would necessarily include the objective, albeit elusive, nature of personal happiness. My understanding of Socrates reveals an ethical perspective that has contemporary relevance and is more coherent and plausible than those that others have attributed to him.

One virtue of studying an ancient theory of ethics and psychology is that it allows us to examine ethical intuitions that have not been affected by the supposed lessons of philosophers who have been influential in the times after the theory was expounded. However, in order to reap these benefits we must be vigilant as we work through these ancient views. We are more unaware than we would like to admit of how many philosophical assumptions we bring with us when we read a philosophical text. In the case of an ancient text, the author's intentions and intelligence can often be obscured because we end up reading his work through a lens that imports assumptions and

⁶ An important element of my view that is widely endorsed throughout Socratic scholarship.

Cambridge University Press

0521846188 - Socratic Virtue: Making the Best of the Neither-Good-nor-Bad

Naomi Reshotko

Excerpt

[More information](#)

strategies that came on the scene recently and that obfuscate rather than clarify the work's substantive claims.

I believe that the theories concerning ethics and human psychology that emerge through the study of Socrates are strikingly elegant, suitably sophisticated, and eminently plausible. Certainly they are no less plausible than – even more contemporary – competing theories. Failure to recognize the significance of the neither-good-nor-bad is a major factor that has allowed Socrates' theories to remain in the dark. However, this failure is not the only factor that impedes the understanding of Socratic ethics.

I opened this chapter by discussing what is, perhaps, the major assumption which impedes the understanding of Socratic ethics: there is a tendency for contemporary readers to place an unwarranted overlay of post-Kantian morality back upon Plato's text. This is the notion of morality that emerges in the preface to the *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*. There, Kant proposes the project of constructing a "pure moral philosophy, perfectly cleared of everything which is only empirical."⁷ The justification for this approach is that "if a law is to have moral force . . . it must carry with it absolute necessity." Kant elaborates:

The basis of obligation must not be sought in the nature of man, or in the circumstances in the world in which he is placed, but *a priori* simply in the conceptions of pure reason.

Indeed, Kant believes that moral law cannot be motivated by anything the least bit empirical. Moral duties do not derive from contingent facts about us as humans, they stem from pure rationality and constitute imperatives for all rational beings; they are not particular to humans. He summarizes his discussion by making a categorical distinction:

Thus not only are moral laws with their principles essentially distinguished from every other kind of practical knowledge in which there is anything empirical, but all moral philosophy rests wholly on its pure part. When applied to man, it does not borrow the least things from the knowledge of man himself but gives laws *a priori* to him as a rational being.

Kant advises that goodness must be analyzed independently of the beings that want to personify and achieve it. Anything we need to know about them, from a moral point of view, can be figured out by the rational person *a priori*. I will show that this is far from the advice that Socrates would heed or offer. Socrates thinks that human virtue and human good are to

⁷ I use T. K. Abbott's translation (1949:5)

Cambridge University Press

0521846188 - Socratic Virtue: Making the Best of the Neither-Good-nor-Bad

Naomi Reshotko

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

be discovered empirically and that their relationship is a contingent one. There is no room in Socratic ethics for any notion of moral good that derives from Kant.

In addition to Kant's "fundamental principles," several other assumptions – some anachronistic and others simply foreign – concerning morality, epistemology, and psychology inhibit many people from seeing in Plato's dialogues a Socratic notion of ethics that might otherwise emerge more straightforwardly. These imported assumptions are responsible for the fact that even those who recognize the presence of viable Socratic philosophical theories in some of Plato's dialogues have tended to highlight certain features of these texts at the expense of others.

A subset of these further anachronistic assumptions has led readers to wed Plato's words with post-Cartesian assertions about epistemology and psychology, particularly the assumption that we know what we desire. Modern philosophers like Descartes and, more recently, Frege, have had a tremendous impact on the assumptions that we make about the epistemology of human psychology. Descartes' arguments for our incorrigibility when it comes to the content of our psychological states have been so embedded in our philosophical perspective that we no longer recognize this incorrigibility as an assumption, or even as controversial. The result is that we adopt – without question – the claims that we *know* what we desire and that we *know* whether or not we are happy.

Frege's assertion that the object of an intentional verb must be understood to be the sense and not the reference of the term has further encouraged our adoption of the assumption that the object of a desire is known to the subject of that desire. After all, the verb "desire" places its object into an intentional context. Thus the object of a desire can be understood to be a Fregean sense. Since a Fregean sense is an intentional object, Cartesian epistemology suggests that the object of desire is incorrigibly known. This interpretation of desire-statements leads us to conclude that the subject of a desire cannot be mistaken when it comes to isolating the object of her desire. The steadfastness with which we hold this assumption, even while we interpret Plato's text, obscures the work of a philosopher who, I argue, rejected this assumption and its consequences. My exploration of the neither-good-nor-bad, and of the theory of desire which governs our use of good, bad, and neither-good-nor-bad things, results in an exegesis that overcomes and disarms several of these anachronistic assumptions.

Further distortion results from our easy integration of religious pronouncements (like the Ten Commandments) into Socrates' ideas. Popular

Cambridge University Press

0521846188 - Socratic Virtue: Making the Best of the Neither-Good-nor-Bad

Naomi Reshotko

Excerpt

[More information](#)

discussions of morality and ethics flood our everyday sensibilities with codified evaluations of actions.⁸ Abstract actions like “killing” are categorized and labeled “good” or “bad” without reference to the context in which they might be performed. In this case, we are not guilty of anachronism: in the dialogues, Plato’s characters make similar determinations. Socrates often counsels his contemporaries to resist the urge to evaluate actions and objects categorically in the absence of information about the context in which they are performed or used. Socrates urges his interlocutors to think critically about what others have deemed “good” or “pious” before embracing and extending those opinions. I think that it is fair to say that Socrates saw this sort of abstract evaluation in the absence of contextual information as a sign of the worst kind of ignorance – it is made by those who don’t even recognize that they know nothing.

Another foreign presupposition is that a good person puts the benefit of others before her own. Figures who loom larger than life (like Jesus and Kant) have made it seem obvious that we are delinquent if we take the consequences of our actions – particularly with respect to benefits that accrue to ourselves – into account when we decide whether or not to perform them. Christian philosophers are fond of pointing out that virtue – if it is *really to be virtue* – must be its own reward. Notice, however, that in order for it to be a concern that I put anyone’s benefit before anyone else’s, I must hold the further assumption that there is likely to be some *conflict* between the benefits that accrue to me and those that accrue to others. A person who rejected this further assumption, one who believed that the benefit of an agent couldn’t be obtained at the expense of others, would not find these admonitions compelling. Socrates’ view that what is of actual benefit to any one person cannot be in conflict with what is of actual benefit to others, renders these statements about self-benefit and virtue incomprehensible.

In addition, preoccupation with the distribution of benefit imports another assumption that clouds our vision when we try to understand Socrates’ views. This is the assumption that human good is necessarily a scarce commodity. Many ethical questions in today’s world have been reduced to discussions of “lifeboat ethics.” They have been regarded as questions of how we should allocate scarce resources to various populations. While Socrates would agree that these are important questions, I think that he would reject the assumption that our pursuit of what we actually desire – namely happiness – is part of a zero-sum game.

⁸ Anscombe connects religious ethics to our current tendency to codify ethical conduct claiming that any notion of moral obligation is a vestige of divine law (2002 [1958]:532).

Cambridge University Press

0521846188 - Socratic Virtue: Making the Best of the Neither-Good-nor-Bad

Naomi Reshotko

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

Individually, and as a group, these assumptions might seem so reasonable that it is hard to believe that Socrates would go against such wisdom. Yet, when we insist that Socratic philosophy must be consistent with all of these assumptions, we find the texts to be internally incoherent and more puzzling than enlightening. Some of the most troublesome puzzles that crop up in discussions of Socrates' philosophy concern the relationships among four things that he clearly holds to be of unique importance: knowledge, virtue, pleasure, and happiness. In fact, interpretations of Socrates' views concerning knowledge, pleasure, virtue, and happiness have produced conundrums that appear to admit of no completely satisfying solution. But there is hope, once we have sorted out Socrates' psychology of desire – and given up our commitment to a *moralistic* interpretation of such central components of the theory as virtue and pleasure – the stark and elegant doctrine of the good, bad, and neither-good-nor-bad will provide the key to a more straightforward understanding of knowledge, virtue, pleasure, happiness, and their relationships with one another.

WHAT IS SOCRATIC PHILOSOPHY?

Before we can discuss Socrates' doctrine of the neither-good-nor-bad, we must first agree that it is possible that there is such a thing as a "Socratic" theory or doctrine. We must acknowledge that Plato has the character "Socrates" advance a distinct group of philosophical theses in certain dialogues. This proposition has not always been readily accepted. A number of the claims that Plato puts into Socrates' mouth in many of the dialogues that have come to be regarded as "Socratic" strike us as counterintuitive, paradoxical, and even absurd when we come upon them for the first time. Occasionally,⁹ this has led scholars to say that the thrust of these dialogues is largely negative. They have taken it that, here, Plato did not even attempt to offer a defensible account of how human beings operate with respect to such things as desire, virtue, knowledge, and happiness. Rather, they contended that the goal of the character "Socrates" was only to undermine the preconceived views of those with whom he interacted; they assumed that this Socrates had no positive philosophical views to offer. They concluded that Plato's goal in writing these dialogues was to rescue readers from the

⁹ This was the treatment given the dialogues by the "New Academy" (c. 269 to the early or middle first century BCE). See Rowe 2003.

Cambridge University Press

0521846188 - Socratic Virtue: Making the Best of the Neither-Good-nor-Bad

Naomi Reshotko

Excerpt

[More information](#)

precarious position of believing themselves to know what they do not know so that they could enter the preferable state in which one knows only that one knows nothing.

This view of the “Socratic” dialogues might be said to have been prevalent among Plato scholars from the start of the nineteenth century until relatively recently.¹⁰ Yet, I think it is also safe to say that this thesis underwent major reconsideration in the latter half of the twentieth century. Since that time, many books and articles have been published regarding Socrates as a philosopher in his own right – not merely as a character used by Plato as a mouthpiece in dialogues that communicated Plato’s own particular views. The authors of these works argue for many different Socratic positions. However, these works are all similar in that they attribute positive philosophical views to Socrates and cite the text of many of the same Platonic dialogues in order to show that Socrates held the views that they attribute to him.

Not all authors who have focused on the distinctive philosophical views that are found in these dialogues will agree that they are uncovering the views of the historical Socrates. In fact, a decidedly “unitarian” thesis was advanced in the early twentieth century¹¹ and is now being revisited.¹² It is arguable that many of Plato’s ancient commentators were also unitarians. But, those who support unitarianism put themselves at odds with Plato’s most intimate interpreter, commentator, and critic. As I will discuss shortly, the major support for calling any philosophical view that was written by Plato “Socratic” is the testimony that Aristotle provides concerning an historical Socrates. Aristotle had contemporaries who had had direct contact with Socrates, thus it is reasonable to suppose that Aristotle’s occasional attempts to distinguish between the views of Plato and his character “Socrates” and those of the actual Socrates are based on credible evidence.¹³

The main approach to establishing the relative chronology of Plato’s dialogues is stylometry. Stylometry analyzes the trends in an author’s habitual use of language independent of content. Thus, it has the potential to identify works that are similar at a minute (and presumably unconscious) level. The operative assumption is that such similarity carries the implication that the works were written at about the same time. Stylometric evidence divides the dialogues into the following three groups:

¹⁰ See Rowe 2003 and Taylor 2002.¹¹ See Shorey 1904.¹² See Kahn 1996 and Annas 1999.¹³ Although Kahn rejects the notion that Aristotle was a reliable historian (1996: 83–7).