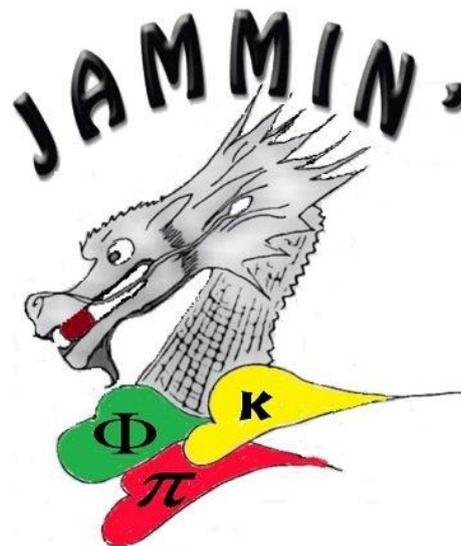


international society
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begins
in wonder

NO-ONE EVER DOES WRONG KNOWINGLY

Ben O'Hare



3. 'No-one ever does wrong knowingly.' - Why is that a paradox? Explain the philosophical problem of weakness of will.

INTRODUCTION

In this short essay I will briefly look at the statement attributed to Socrates that, “*No-one ever does wrong knowingly.*” I will look at why people have taken it to be a paradox and explain why from the point of view of Socrates it is not paradoxical at all.

SOCRATES AND KNOWLEDGE

According to Socrates, any action that is morally bad comes about because of a misunderstanding of what is right by the agent. Moral wrongdoing is intellectual wrongdoing, as all instances of wrongdoing can be explained as falsely believing that some action is best (Protagoras 358c).

For Socrates, knowledge can never be slave to the passions, and weakness of the will, therefore, is a misnomer which more accurately amounts to a deficiency of the intellect. An individual acting erroneously, against their own best interest, does so simply because they know no better. Even when a person truly believes that they do in fact know what the good and right thing to do is, but, for whatever reason, feels compelled to act contrary to it, the problem, according to Socrates, remains one of cognition in that they are actually mistaken in that belief.

For Socrates, the acts of Adolf Hitler was motivated by his belief that creating a pure German race was the moral thing to do. The "master race" that he wanted to create would have been made up out of the most athletic, smartest people that he could get his hands on. You have to admit, with a race made purely out of these kinds of people would be a very strong German community. Furthermore, since Hitler blamed the Jews for the ills of the world the holocaust seemed like the logical and moral point of view and right action.



For Socrates people would eat-meat or dairy not because they didn't care about the unimaginable suffering involved or the death of 200 farm animals every second but rather because they didn't believe that those animals felt pain or emotions like humans.



THE PARADOX

A paradox is a statement or proposition which, despite sound (or apparently sound) reasoning from acceptable premises, leads to a conclusion that seems logically unacceptable or self-contradictory. The paradox here lies within the consequences issuing from that and although resting on very plausible assumptions it conflicts with our ordinary experience of life in which we feel we are free to act as we will. In addition, this claim is tautologous as to err or to go wrong implies a failed effort, that is, an effort to hit a target. However, no one willingly fails to hit the target at which one aims. In the contexts in which the claim is made, the relevant target is achieving the opposite of what would constitute 'doing wrong'.

SOCRATES AND THE WEAKNESS OF THE WILL

Socrates says that everyone will always do what he thinks he ought to, when he is physically and psychologically able. It may seem that this is simply not always the case (even if it is *usually* the case). To quote from the Stanford Encyclopedia Of Philosophy (Stroud, 2008):

“Have you, dear reader, never failed to get up off the couch and turn off the TV when you judged it was really time to start grading those papers? Have you never had one or two more drinks than you thought best on balance? Have you never deliberately pursued a sexual liaison which you viewed as an overall bad idea? In short, have you never acted in a way which departed from your overall evaluation of your options? If so, let me be the first to congratulate you on your fortitude. While weak-willed action does seem somehow puzzling, or defective in some important way, it does nonetheless seem to happen.”

For Socrates and Plato, akratic action presented something of a dilemma since it went against their rationalist paradigm assumed that given the right information, people will do the rational thing, but if we were to follow Stroud above then it seems, on the face of it that people do not do that. However, do the claims of Stroud stand up?

WHEN THE PUB IS THE RATIONAL CHOICE

Stroud gave several examples, quoted above, that were supposed to show weakness of will. For example, neglecting work, drinking and so on. But the assumption here is that there's something wrong with choosing TV over the superficially productive option.

I guess most of us can relate to the TV watching professor who chooses to enjoy her favourite film over a boring pile of papers. Of course we all know that '*rationality*' it is better in the eyes of the university, society, family and so on to do those boring chores above enjoying oneself, but it does not follow that having a bit of fun does not have some or a lot of merit. And getting drunk has as much in its favour as it's fun and life is short and often dull – and it is not irrational at all. It fact having fun, taking time out, unwinding is essential for your physical and mental wellbeing.



Furthermore, I would argue that the fact ones subconscious overrides what one has deduced as the rational course indicates that in some situations the bodies own instincts shows an innate '*knowledge*' and highlights the '*poverty of philosophy*' and reason as it's understood in the 21st century.

It has been shown that taking time out and engaging in activities you enjoy really does lead to both psychological and physical wellbeing (Pressman, 2009) (Jansen, 2004) and despite being looked down on by philosophers and many religions laughter is an essential part of being social.

LAUGHTER, REASON AND BLACK AND WHITE THINKING

Plato, the most influential critic of laughter, treated it as an emotion that overrides rational self-control. In the *Republic* (388e), he says that the Guardians of the state should avoid laughter, “*for ordinarily when one abandons himself to violent laughter, his condition provokes a violent reaction.*” Plato’s attitude was the norm until the 18th century when new accounts of laughter were born (Relief Theory and the Incongruity Theory), but even then it was generally seen as something irrational and negative. However, modern findings have shown that the philosophers have been wrong and laughter is essential to health and wellbeing and it’s an excellent tool for simulating social support and contact (Provine, 2001) (Marano, 2003). In addition to the social benefits of laughter it also has many physical and mental benefits including, relaxation, energy boosts, increased brain activity and mood while and reducing stress (Provine, 2001).

Since the philosophers have got leisure so drastically wrong calling the instinct to health and happiness ‘*passions*’ and ‘*weakness of the will*’ it makes one question the modern rationalist paradigm of western philosophy and it seems that our subconscious animal instincts often override our so-called rational decisions and what we think of as rational and good is actually harmful. In other words, we don’t often actually know what we know and our body often knows better than our rational minds.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU KNOW?

If the argument above holds that what we consider to be rational is sometimes actually harmful and thus we do not have enough knowledge to make judgements about what is rational where does that leave Socrates argument that ‘*No-one ever does wrong knowingly?*’ In fact, do we even know what we know? Do we even know what it would be to know what we know? – what is knowledge?

One option, of course is the traditional ‘tripartite’ of knowledge. According to this analysis, justified, true belief is necessary and sufficient for knowledge.

The Tripartite Analysis of Knowledge:

S knows that p iff

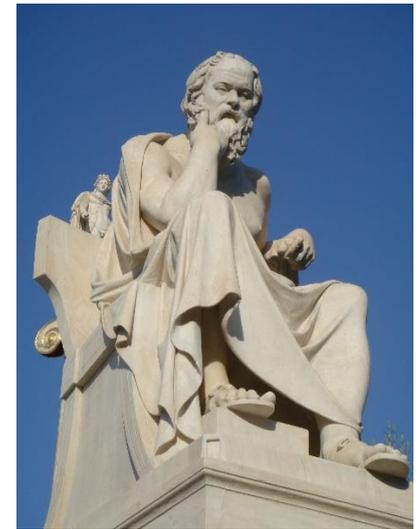
- i. p is true;
- ii. S believes that p ;
- iii. S is justified in believing that p .

The tripartite analysis of knowledge is often abbreviated as the “JTB” analysis, for “justified true belief”.

However, Edmund Gettier showed that JTB is not knowledge (Gettier, 1963) by offering cases where you could have JTB which would not count as knowledge. So after all this time we have been talking about knowledge, when we don’t even know what it is.

WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE ANYWAY?

Modern philosophy hasn't solved the problem of what knowledge is, but clearly Socrates's meant something quite different from what we moderns mean. It seems that Socrates's conception of knowing truth and ethical conduct cannot be equated with modern post-Cartesian conceptions of knowledge (Foucault, 1992) and he's as inclined to spiritual insight as dry formal philosophical logic. Socrates has as much in common with a Zen monk than a philosophy professor.



Like a Zen monk Socrates would spend time in meditation and spend hours on end alone and unmoving (*Symposium*, 175a-b, 220c) and received spiritual revelations (*Crito*, 44a; *Apology*, 33c; *Phaedo*, 60e; *Apology*, 31d) and was totally unconcerned for money, power, or status, and spent all his time on his spiritual work (*Apology*, 23b).

For Socrates virtue and knowledge are synonymous and some actions are universally good and right (Gunnar Skirbekk, 2001). And this knowledge and virtue is not something that a House of Lords select committee will arrive at by thinking through an ethics problem but will be found by the sage through meditation and inner transformation.

THE PARADOX REVISITED

Socrates says that everyone will always do what he thinks he ought to, when he is physically and psychologically able and people have said this is a paradox as it is based on logical premises but doesn't seem to be born out in practice. However, when Socrates uses the word '*think*' it is not in the sense of the modern logical analytical tradition but a much broader sense of to '*know*' at a basic and spiritual level.



For Socrates, it is not enough to intellectually '*know*' something is wrong. It is not enough to know that eating meat is cruel, but when you feel deep compassion for animals as living sensuous beings then you '*know*' at a fundamental spiritual level and thereafter '*cannot*' commit that evil act. It is no coincidence in this context that Socrates is a vegetarian. Socrates '*knowledge*' is a way of knowing that goes beyond merely thinking something through.

This is the same approach taken by a Zen master who spends time and effort in meditation in order to transform herself on that spiritual level in the same way, it seems, Socrates was suggesting.

Seen in this way there is not a paradox at all and it remains true that once a person really knows what is good and right they will not act contrary to it.

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