

Philosophy paper on plato's meno



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The paper "All People Desire Good Things" is an outstanding example of an essay on philosophy. The word *akrasia* is the translation for the Greek concept of a "weakness of the will". By it, we refer to an act which one knows not to be best, and that better alternatives exist. Socrates addresses *akrasia* in Plato's *Meno*. And by "addressing it", we mean that he problematically denies that weakness of the will is possible. This notion of the impossibility of *akrasia* seems at odds with our everyday experience, where we undergo weakness of the will daily. The standard case of a weak will can be found in common experiences. We find examples in gambling, alcohol drinking, excess eating, sexual activity, and the like. In such cases, the individual knows perfectly well that the decision was against his or her better judgment and might be considered a case of the weakness of the will. It is precisely this situation that Socrates asserts is not a case of *akrasia*. Although this seems counterintuitive, his argument rests on very reasonable premises. Socrates' argument is that all people desire good things. This seems to suggest that if an action is morally good, then a person will perform it (assuming the person has the power to do so). Likewise, if action is evil, then a person will refrain from performing it (assuming that the person is not powerless to do otherwise). According to Socrates, then, all morally wrong actions are performed voluntarily but involuntarily. It is only the case that if a person commits an evil action, he or she must have done so without the ability to do otherwise. Socrates' bases his assessment on what is seemingly "in human nature", namely the fact that when faced between two alternatives, human beings will choose the lesser of two evils. Needless to say, Socrates' arguments seem to lack credibility. The premise that if an action is evil then a person will not desire to do it, or that if an

action is good then a person will desire to do it, on its face seems false, for there are clearly cases of inherently evil individuals consciously and willingly choosing evil deeds to follow through upon. It seems that Socrates' argument does not justify his conclusion: that weakness of the will, or akrasia, is impossible. However, this may be a matter of misrepresenting the arguments of the Meno and a straw man response. Perhaps a more in-depth look at that first premise will yield a more favorable view of Socrates' rhetorical constructs.

Remember that what Socrates is arguing for is that everyone desires good things and refrains from bad things. Of course, one can unintentionally pursue those things which are harmful to him. Thus, the key premise of the argument (that if a particular action is evil then one will not desire to do it unless powerless to resist) must be changed to something which takes fallible knowledge into account. Thus, if akrasia becomes strongly connected with the belief in the following way: we can desire bad things not knowing that they are bad or desire bad things knowing that they are bad. According to Socrates, the second one is impossible, and so this distinction allows his key premise to stand. It is believed, for Socrates, that guides our actions and not infallible knowledge of what will best serve our self-interests. It is a part of human nature to desire what one judges to be in his or her best interests. On its face, this change makes the argument more plausible and less resistant to attack.

On this basis, it is unclear where the argument goes wrong. Hence, we have derived a conflict between our daily experience and a reasoned philosophical argument. We might turn to disregard this everyday experience as false and say that the weakness of the will is an illusion based on faulty concepts. One

might challenge either the thought that in all cases human beings desire what is judged as best, or alternatively challenge the thought that in cases where we have the power to act on our desires that we will in all cases. Attacking in the argument in the first proposed direction is difficult: it is nearly impossible to create such a strong argument as to convince the majority of people that how they view the world is wrong. Secondly, attacking the argument on the basis that people do not always desire what they judge as best will prove difficult in terms of psychology and underlying motives. The third mode of attack encounters the same obstacles in getting off the ground.

Ultimately, Socrates' arguments leave us with a difficult paradox. Being good consists of having virtues. Virtues, of course, depend on having knowledge of a certain kind: knowledge of moral facts. In essence, then, a person can only be considered "moral" if he or she has moral knowledge. If it is a fact that a person is only moral if he or she has a certain kind of knowledge, then those who act in an evil fashion do so out of ignorance, or a lack of such knowledge. This is equivalent to saying that what is done wrongly is done so involuntarily, which is an acceptable thought under the Meno's conclusions about akrasia.

We might think of an example of the weakness of the will in the context of excessive eating. While on a diet, a person might buy a salad to eat at lunch. But waiting in line, he or she might see a pizza and impulsively buy it, along with a candy bar and a soft drink. Knowing that these other foods contradict the aims of the diet, the person has acted against her will by acting impulsively. Our traditional notions of akrasia might hold this up as a standard example of a weakness of the will. However, Socrates can reply to

this by pointing out that the person did not judge the fattening food items to be “ bad” in the sense that the action would be contrary to his or her self-interest. After all, why would the person buy the items if they were harmful to his or her health? It is simply the case that the person does not value the diet, or the diet’s effects, enough to avoid purchasing the items and consuming them. Hence, at the moment the decision was made, the action of buying and consuming them was judged as “ good” and not an example of the weakness of will at all.