Why Do The Right Thing?

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SUMMARY

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You now know a little about the nature of philosophical ethics and what it means to examine questions of right and wrong from a rational, secular--that is, a nonreligious--point of view. You've been introduced to the two main approaches to ethical questions, one which examines the results of an action, the other which examines the action itself. With this "conceptual machinery," you can analyze the main features of any ethical dilemma you face.

But simply knowing what's "right" isn't enough. Lots of times we say to ourselves, "I know I shouldn't do this, but I'm going to do it anyway."

Take a case like this. You're dating someone and have an explicit understanding that you won't see anyone else. However, one day you meet someone whom you find very attractive. You would like to start seeing this person, but you don't want to jeopardize your original relationship in case this new one doesn't work out. Since you feel that the person you've been seeing trusts you, you figure that you could get away with a few lies. But would this be justifiable?

There really shouldn't be any question that lying in this situation is wrong. The action itself is clearly unethical (you are breaking your promise and deceiving) and the consequences are dubious (since you'll be spending less time with the person you have an understanding with, he or she will probably experience some

unhappiness; if you're guilty, you'll be less fun to be with when you are together, even if your deception is successful; both of the people you're dating will be deeply hurt if they find out what's going on). Nonetheless, many people would lie and deceive in a case like this, simply because they want the pleasure of dating someone else. Maybe deceiving someone is wrong, but if it'll make you happier, why not go ahead and lie?

In situations like this, there's more to it than a simple question of right or wrong. All of us have an interest in adding to our happiness, whether that is some pleasure of the moment, success in a job, or whatever it takes. If what is right and what is in our own interest coincide, we have no problem doing the right thing. Or maybe we're willing to do the right thing (and avoid some guilt) only if it's a little inconvenient. But when what is right and what makes us happy are 180 degrees from each other, that's when we've got real problems.

At times like this, when strong desires pull us in opposite directions, it's hard to do the ethical thing. When we do resist the pull of temptation, we usually want to feel that somehow we're going to get something for it. That may not be very high-minded, but most of us, when confronted with moral dilemmas, really want to ask: What's in it for me if I do what's right? It doesn't have to be fame and fortune--it may just be a good feeling about who we are. But most of us want a good reason to be good.

Why should we do the right thing? The question is simple; answering it probably the most difficult task in ethics. Legal systems and religious traditions have an easy time giving us answers, of course. We should do what's right in order to avoid punishment for doing wrong--either in this life or the next. But philosophy does not approach it this way. It has to give a rational, secular account of why living the moral life is valuable in its own right, here and now. This is very hard to do.

Think about it for a minute. What reasons would you give someone for why they should try to do what's right? Most of you will be parents; some of you already are. How will you explain to your children, particularly as they get older and can argue with you, why they should act according to the values you hold? Perhaps you'll say that unethical actions hurt people and that since your children wouldn't want others to hurt them they shouldn't hurt others. Or perhaps you'll claim that other people won't like them if they do this or do that. But what if your children say they don't care about any of these things? What would you say then?

WHY DO THE RIGHT THING?

Plato: the case of Gyges' ring

Few philosophers take up the problem of why we should be virtuous. Of two who do, the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates and his pupil Plato, address it head on. We will begin with Plato because he sets the question up in the toughest form imaginable. He does this in a fictional dialogue called the Republic, a work in which he covers a wide range of philosophical topics--justice, the ideal society, knowledge, the nature of reality, and ethics.

The portion of the dialogue that is relevant here concentrates on the question of how we ought to live. A character named Glaucon claims that people aren't good willingly and that the only reason any of us does what's right is that we

get something from it. If we develop a reputation for being honest, telling the truth, and keeping our commitments, then people will do business with us, elect us to office, and be our friends. But Glaucon thinks the task is too hard. Living ethically is difficult, unpleasant, and, when it comes right down to it, worse than living unethically, he says. Thus, according to Glaucon, most of us do what's right only because we don't have the power to do what we really want and get away with it.

To illustrate his point, Glaucon tells the story of a man named Gyges.

> The story is that Gyges was a shepherd in the service of the ruler of Lydia. There was a violent rainstorm and an earthquake that broke open the ground and created a chasm at the place where he was tending sheep. Seeing this and marveling, he went down into it. He saw, besides many other wonders of which we are told, a hollow bronze horse. There were window-like openings in it; he climbed through them and caught sight of a corpse which seemed of more than human stature, wearing nothing but a ring of gold on its finger. This ring the shepherd put on and came out. He arrived at the usual monthly meeting which reported to the king on the state of the flocks, wearing the ring. As he was sitting among the others he happened to twist the hoop of the ring towards himself, to the inside of his hand, and as he did this he became invisible to those sitting near him and they went on talking as if he had gone. He marveled at this and, fingering the ring, he turned the hoop outward again and became visible. Perceiving this he tested whether the ring had this power and so it happened: if he turned the hoop inwards he became invisible, but was visible when he turned it outwards. When he realized this, he at once arranged to become one of the messengers to the king. He went, committed adultery with the king's wife, attacked the king with her help, killed him, and took over the kingdom.

The moral of the story is, says Glaucon, that given the opportunity, everyone would act just the way Gyges acts.

> Now if there were two such rings, . . . no one . . . would be so incorruptible that he would stay on the path of justice or bring himself to keep away from other people's property and not touch it, when he could with impunity take whatever he wanted from the market, go into houses and have sexual relations with anyone he wanted, kill anyone, free all those he wished from prison, and do the other things which would make him like a god among men.

Plato raises a very interesting question here. If you knew you could get away with absolutely <u>anything</u> you wanted to do, however unethical, how ethical would your behavior be? Plato's character Glaucon thinks that it wouldn't be ethical at all. What would <u>you</u> do if you had a ring like Gyges'?

Plato uses Glaucon to say what he thinks most people believe, and he's probably right. Life in the twentieth-century AD United States isn't all that different from life in fifth-century BC Athens. We don't have to look very far to see that dishonest, unscrupulous, selfish people get most of what they want while the rest of us settle for a lot less. Many of these people don't get caught, or, if they do, they're not punished very severely. If we knew that we could get away with anything we wanted, most of us would be sorely tempted to cut a few moral corners--or worse.

An extreme case

Plato sees the foolishness of arguing that we should all do what's right in hopes of tangible rewards. Instead, he comes at the question of whether the moral

life has any value by making the starkest possible comparison between the lives of a perfectly just person and a perfectly unjust one. He writes,

> Let us grant to the unjust the fullest degree of injustice and to the just the fullest justice, each being perfect in his own pursuit. First, the unjust man will act as clever craftsmen do--a top navigator for example or physician distinguishes what his craft can do and what it cannot; the former he will undertake, the latter he will pass by, and when he slips he can put things right. So the unjust man's correct attempts at wrongdoing must remain secret; the one who is caught must be considered a poor performer, for the extreme of injustice if to have a reputation for justice; if he makes a slip he must be able to put it right; he must be a sufficiently persuasive speaker if some wrongdoing of his is made public; he must be able to use force, where force is needed, with the help of his courage, strength, and the friends and wealth with which he has provided himself.
>
> Having described such a man, let us now in our argument put beside him the just man, simple as he is and noble, who, as Aeschylus put it, does not wish to appear just but to be so. We must take away his reputation, for a reputation for justice would bring him honour and rewards, and it would then not be clear whether he is what he is for justice's sake or for the sake of rewards and honour. We must strip him of everything except justice and make him the complete opposite of the other. Though he does no wrong, he must have the greatest reputation for wrongdoing so that he may be tested for justice by not weakening under ill repute and its consequences. Let him go his incorruptible way until death with a reputation for injustice throughout his life, just though he is, so that our two men may reach the extremes, one of justice, the other of injustice, and let them be judged as to which of the two is the happier.

Here Plato sets the toughest ground rules imaginable. He forces us to compare the life of an unethical person with the reputation for goodness with the life of a good person with the reputation for vice. Now any reason for being virtuous must depend on the value of moral virtue itself, not anything that reputation brings.

This, of course, is the question. Is the moral life intrinsically valuable? Is it worthwhile in and of itself for us to live a moral life instead of getting what we want by lying, cheating, stealing, and manipulating others? Is there any reason to be ethical, especially if we are as clever at vice as Plato' s unjust person is--not only getting away with all sorts of wrongdoing but having a reputation for being good to boot?

Think about this for a minute. Which would you rather be, the unethical person with a good reputation or the ethical person with a reputation for injustice? Be really honest with yourself. Is there a solid, rational argument for going with the latter?

Plato And Socrates: Virtue, Vice And The Soul

It should come as no surprise, of course, that the two philosophers whom we will study in this chapter, Plato and Socrates, think that moral virtue is valuable. Essentially, they believe the saying that "virtue is its own reward," and the key to their ideas on the subject lies in the interesting notion that "virtue is the health of the soul."

People use the term "soul" in many different ways. We need not go into a long comparison of what the Greeks meant by "soul" and what we mean by it today. For our purposes, it's enough to know that "soul" means the most important part of who we are--our moral and intellectual essence, our "real" self, our "character," the core of our personalities.

Whether or not the soul lives on after death in one form or another is also irrelevant. We're interested in the intrinsic value of moral virtue, that is, the good it does in this life. (Any good that virtue might do for the soul after death would be an extrinsic benefit.) To keep the issues clear in your mind, then, assume that the soul does not survive death (whether it does or not) and that Plato and Socrates are talking about the importance of virtue in the here and now.

In trying to understand what these philosophers mean by the idea that virtue is the health of the soul, there are two critical ideas that we have to explore. First, whatever part of us Socrates and Plato mean when they refer to the soul, they believe that, like the body, it can be healthy and unhealthy. And health is something that most of us would agree is intrinsically worthwhile. We all know what healthy and unhealthy bodies are like, but what is the difference between healthy and diseased souls?

The other important idea in all of this is Socrates' belief that the soul's health is determined by what we do--that is, it is affected by the moral character of our actions. Socrates even describes the soul as "that part of ourselves that is improved by just actions and harmed by unjust actions." In particular, Socrates believes that unethical actions harm the one who does them more than who they're aimed at. If someone steals something from you, Socrates thinks that the thief is actually hurt more than you are by the deed.

Admittedly, Socrates' and Plato's ideas about the value of moral virtue may seem very strange to you. Being good is like being healthy? If you lie about denting someone's new car so that you don't have to pay the repair bill, you hurt yourself more than someone else? These aren't the easiest notions to swallow when you first hear them. Yet, Plato and Socrates have developed them into a substantial answer to the question "Why bother about ethics?" Understanding and exploring that answer is our task in this chapter.

PLATO: VIRTUE AS THE HEALTH OF THE SOUL

Plato thinks that virtue is to the soul what health is to the body? What might a "healthy soul" be like? And what is the difference between healthy and unhealthy souls?

Healthy bodies, healthy souls

All of us understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy bodies, so let's start there before we extend the comparison to souls.

A healthy body is free of disease and in relatively good shape. When you're healthy, you may not feel excited or euphoric, but you probably feel calm and contented. When you're sick, on the other hand, all you can think about is how rotten you feel. Your discomfort keeps pushing itself into your awareness--you can't get away from it. When you're healthy, you probably don't even notice it. Your

body has its full range of capabilities and you can do what you want to. Your mind is clear, free of worry and distraction. You can see things objectively, and this lets you make better decisions.

In other words, as long as we stay healthy, we can choose what we want to do. The effects of illness and neglect, clouded minds and weak, damaged bodies, limit our activities. With health comes freedom and control over our lives. Health is intrinsically enjoyable and it enables us to get more of what we want. Thus, we are likelier to live happier lives.

So the healthy body is superior to the unhealthy one in having a clear head, freedom and control. Having these things makes it more likely that we'll live happier lives. Not only are we more likely to be able to get what we want, but health is just intrinsically enjoyable.

What can we say, now, about the healthy "soul," "character," or "personality"? Much the same thing that we said for the healthy body. The absence of disease in your "soul" or personality means that your mind is clear and you can see things as they really are. Your view of the world is not distorted by fears, insecurities, irrational anxieties, or overpowering desires. Your judgment is not blinded by greed or self-interest. Thus, your assessment of whether something is right or wrong can be objective. We might say that a healthy soul has a fairly clear moral vision. A healthy soul also has a freedom and control like that of a healthy body. Once you decide about something, you have the capacity to carry it out. We might call this strength of will.

Let's say that a friend asks you to help him cheat in his history course. He wants to take a paper you wrote last term and change it just enough so that it won't be recognized as yours. You feel uneasy, but your friend says, "Come on, everybody does it. There's nothing wrong. Besides, I'd do it for you." It's clear that he expects you to do this because he's your friend, and you're afraid he will get angry and dump you if you refuse. To see this situation for what it is and to go ahead and do what you know you should takes clarity of mind and courage. We might say that it requires the strengths characteristic of a "healthy soul." But if you are controlled by your fear of being disliked by your friend, you will waffle in your own mind about the morality of the deed, and you won't have the nerve to stand up against your friend for what you believe. With a weak and "unhealthy soul," something other than your mind and will controls you in that situation--your fears.

With a healthy soul, you have the freedom and control to live your life according to your moral insights. Once you decide what the right thing to do is, you're able to do it. You aren't overwhelmed by selfishness or meanness. You have the will or power to live according to your sense of right and wrong.

Let's go back to the example that opened this chapter for a minute and see if this way of looking at things adds anything. O.k., what would someone with a really healthy and strong personality do when confronted with the dilemma of whether or not to cheat on someone they have a relationship with? First, he or she could probably assess the ethics of the situation without being blinded by their own selfish desires. They'd also be able to act according to their decision. That is, the strong soul wouldn't immediately reach for a cheap rationalization ("Everybody does something like this now and then--besides, no one will get hurt"). If you wanted to pursue the new relationship, you would probably have the nerve and

sensitivity to talk about it with the person you were already dating and agree how to handle things.

Plato's idea of the healthy soul: balance and control

In the Republic, Plato develops this simple parallel between healthy bodies and healthy souls. In the course of that book he contrasts healthy with unhealthy souls.

Each of us, Plato says, is made up of three parts: the physical, the spirited, and the intellectual. (The "spirited" part is our emotions.) In the healthy soul, these three are properly balanced. As we make decisions about how to live, our minds give due regard to our emotional and physical needs, and each of the three parts performs its proper role. The mind is in control, and our emotions help us follow the mind's judgment, particularly when it goes against the inclination of our physical desires. In an unhealthy soul, our actions flow not from our good judgment, but from either our emotions or our physical appetites.

For example, think of people who are obsessed with their bodies or their physical appearance. You may know some people who expend huge amounts of energy playing sports, working out, worrying about their diet, or spending time shopping for the right clothes or getting their hair or make-up just so. Virtually everything in their life revolves around the physical side of their being--what they do, what they avoid doing, with whom they hang out. It may even look like they are addicted to, say, their daily five mile run. Such individuals are driven so much by their bodies that they might cut classes, miss work, or neglect a relationship because of their obsession. For people like this, their bodies dominate their lives.

Others are driven by their emotions. Perhaps it's needing to be in love, popular, admired by others, or famous. For instance, think of someone who will do anything to be liked by someone of the opposite sex. They may even do things that hurt other people--or themselves--to hold onto their latest love. And when that relationship ends, they can't relax until they find someone new. These people may also seem to be addicted to whatever they are driven by. Clearly, their lives are dominated by their emotions.

Plato thinks that the unhealthy soul is unbalanced and controlled by the wrong aspect of our being. Our mind yields to our bodies or emotions. The healthy soul, however, is balanced. In deciding how to live, it gives due weight to our bodily and emotional needs, but our head is still in control and keeps us from going overboard. In Plato's opinion, the individual with a healthy soul has a clear mind, freedom, and self-control. In his judgment, this is simply the way things are supposed to be for us.

The soul's health and virtue: the ethical connection

Plato believes that physical and emotional desires, particularly when they are out of balance, are the primary factors that cloud our judgment about right and wrong. Plato figures that unethical people generally act wrongly to serve some physical desire (sex, alcohol, the physical pleasures that money can buy) or some emotion (jealousy, ambition, anger, fear, greed). Plato thinks that in the unbalanced, unhealthy soul, people are so driven by physical or emotional wants that they literally do not think straight about right and wrong. Their mental power is put to use in servicing their wants, not in examining the morality of their actions. Their

minds follow their bodies or feelings, not, as Plato believes should be the case, the other way around. So if we allow either our bodies or emotions to control us, he thinks that there is a strong chance that we will behave unethically in order to get what we want. Having a soul that is out of balance, "unhealthy" according to Plato, goes hand in hand with wrongdoing.

On the other hand, Plato believes that the freedom, control, and balanced perspective that come with the soul's health results in ethical behavior. If you are not dominated by your physical or emotional wants, you can make good decisions. Thus, virtue is an expression of the strong, healthy soul, the soul that is characterized by a clear mind that is the dominant force in someone's life.

At this point you, like Glaucon, may still be skeptical. It's one thing to talk about virtue and health, you say. But if a little larceny will help us get what we want, why is that so bad?

And what about the claim that acting unethically hurts us? At this point, we must turn from Plato's thought to that of his teacher, Socrates, who had more to say about the unhealthy soul. In particular, it was Socrates who formulated the idea that vice harms the doer more than those who are its victims.

Socrates' View Of Vice

The philosopher who could be said to have "invented" ethics is Socrates. During the two centuries before Socrates, earlier ancient Greek philosophers had speculated about questions concerning the nature of reality. They were interested in "natural philosophy," what today we would call "science," speculating on questions such as: What is the world made of? Is there a basic element out of which everything else is composed? How does the cosmos work? In the words of the Roman philosopher Cicero, "Socrates was the first one to call philosophy down from the heavens and put it into the cities with people and made it ask questions about life and about right and wrong." He was the first philosopher to take how we should live as his main concern.

Socrates is an interesting figure for a number of reasons. For one thing, he represents the rare case of a major philosopher who never wrote down a word. We know about his ideas primarily through the writings of his pupil Plato, who makes Socrates the main figure in most of his dialogues. For another, Socrates was an eccentric character in ancient Athens, having come to believe that he had a mission from the god Apollo to go around encouraging people to live a moral life.

Socrates did not do what most religious teachers do, however. He did not try to change people by preaching to them about the need for virtue. Instead, he approached his fellow Athenians individually, engaging them in philosophical dialogues that tested the validity of their deepest beliefs. For example, Socrates would ask someone what was most important in life. If the person answered "money," for example, or "fame," Socrates would ask for an explanation. His companion would respond, but Socrates would ask more, pursuing every point of the answer, trying to show the problems with the other person's thinking. Back and forth it went like that until Socrates had convinced his partner. This <u>Socratic method</u> of question/answer, question/answer is still used by many teachers, and it is especially popular in law schools.

An overview of Socrates' ethical beliefs

For someone who is universally considered one of philosophy's brightest lights, Socrates advanced some unusual ideas about how to be happy in life, ideas that are very much out of phase with ordinary human experience. In terms of everyday life and the dominant values of Western culture from Athens to the present day, Socrates' moral beliefs seem at best peculiar.

For example, Socrates claims:

- All that we really need in order to be happy is to live a moral life. Even though we suffer poverty, injustice, illness, or other misfortune, moral virtue is enough to guarantee our happiness.
- Our greatest protection is moral virtue. Even though someone may kill us, our virtue makes it impossible for anyone to harm us.
- When we treat someone unethically to get what we want and escape without being punished, we hurt ourselves more than we hurt our victim.
- Using the image that virtue is the soul's health and vice its disease, an idea that Plato developed, Socrates talks about immorality in a way that suggests that moral compromise makes as little sense as deliberately infecting ourselves with a terminal illness.
- If we do something wrong, Socrates believes that we should seek someone to punish us with the same speed and care that we look for someone to cure us when we're sick.

Citing divine revelation, religious teachers preach ideas every bit as peculiar as those of Socrates. But Socrates does not attribute his beliefs to special advice from Apollo. Rather, he believes that the truth of these propositions can be made evident through intellectual examination and rational argument. In fact, Socrates takes these ideas to be absolutely certain, observable facts of human nature. He thinks that these are no more opinions or beliefs than it is somebody's "opinion" that drinking contaminated water makes us sick.

If we look at human behavior from the Athenian agora to Wall Street, however, we find little support for Socrates' ideas. Most people certainly don't live as though they agree with Socrates. Contemporary Americans, like ancient Athenians, believe that success, wealth, power, and fame--not moral virtue--are the keys to happiness. Human opinion does not see virtue as the way to the "good life," and human behavior has not changed much in two thousand years.

Nonetheless, the fact that most people disagree with him would not convince Socrates that he was wrong. (Does the fact that most people at one time thought that the earth was flat convince you that it isn't round?) He would simply find it irrelevant. Socrates takes it as an empirical fact that virtue is necessary for happiness and that when we do something wrong, we're hurt by it. This is a truism of human nature, he believes. And when he talks about virtue as the health of the soul, this is not some figure of speech. Socrates means it literally. No one can be fully healthy without moral virtue. In that unethical people lack certain capacities and strengths, they are genuinely unhealthy. And they are made that way by their wrongdoing.

How did Socrates try to argue for these odd ideas, (1) that we can't be happy without moral virtue and (2) that unethical actions actually harm the soul of those who perform them?

Philosophical interpretation

The fact is that Socrates did not provide us with a fully developed explanation and conclusive proof of these ideas. As mentioned above, Socrates wrote down nothing himself, and even Plato's account of Socrates' ideas is incomplete. Getting less explanation about a philosopher's ideas than we want is not, however, an unusual problem when we study the history of philosophy, particularly when we talk about thinkers who lived hundreds or thousands of years ago. Many writings have been lost forever over the years; with some thinkers we have only a small percentage of what they wrote or even simply fragments.

So what do we do? Speculate and interpret. We look at what writings we do have and we try to fill in the gaps as best we can. We try to imagine what Socrates, for example, might have meant by certain ideas or how he might have answered our questions. We take what we know for certain as our point of reference and see what other ideas are consistent with this. Thus, when we do philosophy, not only do we speculate about life's basic issues, but we often also speculate about the missing pieces of philosophers' explanations. When we do this we must keep in mind that our speculations might not be correct, and we have to remain open to opposing interpretations. Nonetheless, at times like this, speculation and interpretation are our only choice.

In getting a detailed understanding of Socrates' ideas that happiness depends on virtue and that vice harms the doer, then, we will be forced to speculate. We will begin with teachings that Socrates unquestionably held, but in short order we will enter the world of philosophical interpretation.

So what might Socrates mean by these unusual ideas? Let's begin with his idea that vice harms the doer. That will lay the groundwork for his belief that virtue is all we need for happiness.

How vice changes us: an ordinary example

The idea that doing wrong harms the doer is a prominent Socratic idea, yet it is puzzling. Socrates says, "Wrongdoing is in every way harmful and shameful to the wrongdoer." It's so harmful that even if somebody else hurts us first, counsels Socrates, "we should never do wrong in return, nor injure any man, whatever injury we have suffered at his hands." But precisely how are we hurt if we do something wrong? How are we harmed if we hurt somebody else, especially if they have already wronged us? And what is it that we have to lose?

At stake here is what Socrates calls "that part of ourselves that is improved by just actions and destroyed by unjust actions." Today we call this our character, or our personality, or our self. As you saw earlier, the Greeks called it the soul. Whatever we call it, it is that essence which we feel is most uniquely who we really are, and Socrates takes it to be far more important than our bodies.

Because Socrates believes that moral virtue is all we need to be happy, the only thing he sees as harmful for him is something that makes us less able to be virtuous--and therefore less able to be happy. Unethical actions corrupt us and break down our ability to act virtuously. Thus, each unethical act makes it more

likely that we'll act unethically in the future by weakening those capacities and faculties we need in order to act more morally.

At first, Socrates' belief that doing wrong hurts the wrongdoer may strike you as odd. Hurting other people--that seems obvious. But hurting ourselves--that seems unlikely.

But take a simple example. Most people think there's something wrong with telling lies. (Virtually all of us do it at sometime or other, but we still believe there's something not quite right about it.) Think back to the first time you told a lie. It was probably after you'd disobeyed your parents and knew you'd get in big trouble if they found out. That first lie was probably hard to tell, and you most likely felt guilty afterwards. But if your parents believed you, you found out that lying can get you out of some tough spots. Now think of your second lie, your third lie, and on down the line. Odds are that it got easier and you felt less guilty the more you did it. At this point in your life, you probably feel that lying isn't as wrong as you once thought it was, and you probably feel less guilty when you do it.

The question here is, what's happened to you? Socrates would say that you've been corrupted by this whole, gradual process. You haven't turned into Jack the Ripper, but you're less likely now to tell the truth than you were before. Face it, you've lost some ground. Getting away with lying lowers our resistance to it in the future. It makes it easier to do, and increases the odds that we'll do it again in tight spots. It also changes our thinking about how wrong it is. Most people come to feel that there's <u>some</u> good in any act that gets you out of trouble, even though it's not completely right.

<u>How</u> did this happen to you? Did someone force this on you? No, you chose it each time, little by little, by doing what you did. Your allegiance to the truth lessened, even if only to a small degree, with each falsehood. Socrates would argue that you harmed, or weakened, yourself each time by acting unethically. He would claim that it is now less likely and more difficult for you to do the right thing and tell the truth in a tight spot.

Now whether you agree that you've been harmed or weakened in this process, it's clear that you've been changed by it. What you <u>do</u> and what you <u>think</u> about what you do has been changed by actions that were initially at odds with your original values. So Socrates' argument has a common-sense validity. We have not seen enough specifics about precisely <u>how</u> you were harmed for you to judge whether you completely accept this notion, but you can probably agree that the process actually exists.

How vice harms us: an example from the Gorgias

If the process that Socrates is talking about is plausible, is his claim that it leads to serious harm equally plausible? If we are to have good reason to be ethical, we should also have good reason not to be unethical. So far, we are still missing a description of exactly how Socrates sees such vice harming us.

An excellent place to find such a description is in the ideas attributed to Socrates in the philosophical dialogue entitled <u>Gorgias</u>. This dialogue begins with a discussion of the value of rhetoric (the art of public speaking). But then the question of how we should live our lives and the value of moral virtue is introduced and takes over as the heart of the discussion.

Four characters speak in the dialogue. There's Socrates, of course. Then there's Gorgias, a well-known and highly respected teacher of public speaking, for whom the dialogue is named. Gorgias travels from city to city teaching the skills of rhetoric, and, at the beginning of the dialogue, he has just arrived in Athens. Such teachers were common in ancient Greece and they were particularly popular in Athens where speaking eloquently was essential to success. Athens was a democracy in which any citizen could speak at the city's democratic Assembly, and politics was at the heart of the life of the city. The surest key to success in Athens was a reputation as an intelligent and effective speaker. The third character, Polus, is Gorgias' rambunctious young student and follower. And then there's Callicles.

Callicles is a very bright, ambitious young Athenian who's hungry for wealth and power. He's talented, educated, refined--but also quite immoral. He believes that people who are bright and cunning should rule the city because they're superior to the rest of the citizenry. He also thinks the strong should take whatever they want as long as they can get away with it, and indulge themselves in all kinds of pleasures as well. He rejects fairness, equality, and moderation as conventional ideas of morality which he dismisses as ways that inferior people make virtues out of their own weaknesses and hold superior people in check. It's in Socrates' discussion with Callicles that we get a clear picture of the harm vice does. After all, considering how unethical--and dangerous--Callicles is, he ought to be a prime example of the damage wrongdoing can do.

Setting up the issue

The dialogue starts as a conversation between Socrates and Gorgias about the nature of rhetoric. Gorgias sings the praises of the art he teaches, but Socrates points out its weaknesses--especially that it can be used for unjust ends.

At this point Polus speaks up. Unlike Gorgias, who is a man of great integrity, Polus isn't really bothered that rhetoric can be abused. The discussion slides from the nature of rhetoric to how we ought to live. And Polus holds up the example of Archelaus, the king of Macedonia, who acquired his throne through injustice and brutality. To be a tyrant and to have your evil go unpunished, claims Polus, is a life that everyone envies. Socrates disagrees, however. He argues that doing wrong--particularly if you go unpunished--is the greatest of evils. It's always better, argues Socrates, to be the victim of injustice rather than the person who does it. Polus laughs at Socrates, but is eventually shamed into silence. In the presence of his teacher, the virtuous Gorgias, he is obviously embarrassed to press his point with Socrates.

Callicles, however, has no such shame. Taking up the dialogue at this point, Callicles too ridicules Socrates' idea that the key to happiness lies in moral virtue, justice, and self-control. Then he launches into a passionate defense of the unbridled pursuit of pleasure and of the strong dominating the weak. "A man who is going to live a full life," proclaims Callicles,

> must allow his desires to become as mighty as may be and never repress them. When his passions have come to full maturity, he must be able to serve them through his courage and intelligence and gratify every fleeting desire as it comes into his heart. This, I fancy, is impossible for the mob. That is why they censure the rest of us, because they are ashamed of themselves and want to conceal their own incapacity. And, of course, they maintain that licentiousness is disgraceful, as I

> said before, since they are trying to enslave men of a better nature. Because they can't accomplish the fulfillment of their own desires, they sing the praises of temperance and justice out of the depths of their own cowardice. But take men who have come of princely stock, men whose nature can attain some commanding position, a tyranny, absolute power; what could be lower and baser than temperance and justice for such men who, when they might enjoy the good things of life without hindrance, of their own accord drag in a master to subdue them: the law, the language, and the censure of the vulgar? How could such men fail to be wretched under the sway of your "beauty of justice and temperance" when they can award nothing more to their friends than to their enemies? And that, too, when they are the rulers of the state! The truth, which you claim to pursue, Socrates, is really this: luxury, license, and liberty, when they have the upper hand, are really virtue, and happiness as well; everything else is a set of fine terms, man-made conventions, warped against nature, a pack of stuff and nonsense!

This speech establishes sets the terms of the long debate between Socrates and Callicles that dominates the rest of the dialogue. The philosopher champions virtue and self-control--a life of being "one's own ruler." The aspiring politician endorses the uncontrolled and totally self-interested pursuit of pleasure by whatever means you can get away with.

In the ensuing discussion, Socrates goes on to identify two distinct ways we harm ourselves when we do something wrong. Our ability to control ourselves is weakened, and so is our intellect. Although Socrates did not put it in these words, we might interpret him as saying that when we do wrong we weaken our strength of will and our moral vision. In other words, Socrates suggests that vice destroys precisely those qualities that, as we saw above, characterize the healthy soul.

The wine jar metaphor: desires and strength of will

Socrates would surely see Callicles as an example of someone who's been badly damaged by vice. And the first thing Socrates would point to is that Callicles' remarks show that he has lost control over his desires. What Callicles takes as a strength, Socrates regards as a weakness.

Trying to show Callicles the error of his ways, Socrates contrasts the uncontrolled life his opponent praises with that of a self-controlled and ethical person. To illustrate his point he draws an analogy with wine jars--some intact, others leaky. "See if you don't say," proposes Socrates,

> that, in a fashion, this metaphor expresses the difference between the two lives: the self-controlled and the unrestrained. There are two men, both of whom have many jars; those of the first are sound and full, one of wine, another of honey, a third of milk, and many others have a multitude of various commodities, yet the source of supply is meager and hard to obtain and only procurable with a good deal of exertion. Now the first man, when he has filled his jars, troubles no more about procuring supplies, but, so far as they are concerned, rests content; but the other man, though his source of supply is difficult also, yet still possible, and his vessels are perforated and rotten, is forced to keep on trying to fill them both night and day on pain of suffering the utmost agony. --Gorgias

Socrates' analogy is that the healthy, self-controlled individual is like a solid wine jar, while someone like Callicles, an unethical individual who gives into his desires, is like the leaking wine jar. If you are like a leaky wine jar, Socrates suggests, you inevitably feel the growing hunger of desire, no matter what you do. And the longer you wait to "fill your wine jar," the worse you feel. Thus, your desires are in charge of your life. You must constantly satisfy them or feel pain. By contrast, the individual analogous to the solid wine jar is content and untroubled. He does not feel the growing craving of unsatisfied desire. He does with his life what he wants to do--not what his desires compel him to do.

Socrates' analogy implies that the unethical individual's ability to experience a stable sense of contentment or satisfaction has been harmed. Someone like Callicles can't be satisfied because his desires are unchecked and any satisfaction is only temporary. If an unethical person is like a leaky wine jar, then he or she is ultimately unsatisfiable. Just as she feels a comfortable contentment or fulfillment, the feeling starts slipping away. She's then unsatisfied again and looking around for her next thrill. And this pattern simply repeats itself over and over.

Not surprisingly, Callicles is unpersuaded. He rejects Socrates' ideas saying that the life of someone analogous to the wine jar that is intact is dull and boring, "For the man who is full has no longer the slightest taste for pleasure; his life is the life of a stone. Once he's sated, he no longer feels pleasure or pain. But in the other life is the true pleasure of living, with the greatest possible intake." Callicles needs constant new gratifications of his desires in order to feel pleasure. He feels virtually no stimulation in the temperate and ethical life, that includes only what he has rightfully earned.

Most of us wouldn't succeed if we tried to live as Callicles recommends. Constantly finding new sources of pleasure--more money, power, new jobs, new successes, different lovers, new drugs, exotic places to travel to--is a tall order. Of course, Callicles believes that a truly superior man, a man such as he is, will be able to do this. Surely, he thinks this refutes the idea that he has been damaged in any way. Socrates, of course, disagrees.

The key to this dispute is who is in control. Callicles himself describes the situation as one in which he ministers to, or serves, his desires. He obviously does not see that this then makes his ideal person weaker than his own desires, and, in fact, the servant of those desires. It's not whether someone can satisfy his or her desires that matters to Socrates, but whether a person is his or her "own ruler." An ethical person like Socrates can decide which of his desires he'll satisfy. Callicles doesn't have this choice--his only decision is how to satisfy them. His desires control his life. Furthermore, if Socrates is correct and the desires of someone like Callicles (the leaky wine jar) are ultimately unsatisfiable, the whole project is doomed to fail.

In other words, someone like Callicles doesn't have the strength of will to resist his own desires. In Socrates' opinion, when someone goes from virtue to vice, his "wine jar" goes from being solid to leaky, and that individual has lost some power over his or her own life.

Non-cognitive harm: insatiable desires and loss of control

The first kind of harm that comes from vice, then, is to make the person who indulges in it uncontrolled and intemperate. Socrates' wine jar analogy implies that the intemperate person lives a life out of his or her own control. Driven by the need to satisfy the gnawing hunger of unfulfilled want, unethical individuals experience only transient satisfactions because such people are essentially unsatisfiable. This literally compels them to seek more and different pleasures.

There are three important points here. First, the fact that a vice-ridden person's desires become insatiable must mean that at least part of vice's harmful effect is on the non-cognitive dimension of the human personality. That is, the first kind of harm that Socrates points out involves not the mind, but the will and our feelings of desire and satisfaction. The point at which we're satisfied by food, money, sex, power, or whatever is largely a psychological, not an intellectual matter. For example, people with eating disorders "know" perfectly well that their behavior makes no sense, but some psychological difficulty makes them unable to control themselves. If we become "leaky wine jars," a psychological mechanism, the one that produces feelings that our wants have been satisfied, has been disabled. In this case, instead of feeling a stable sense of contentment with what we have and how we get it, we feel unsatisfied.

Second, it does seem as if genuine harm has been done. To go from master to servant in one's own life is a significant reversal. It is much like the dynamic of addiction in which most of the addict's life becomes geared to gratifying the desire for whatever he or she craves. Although Socrates did not have the concept of "addiction" that we have today, he describes it well where he claims that the "leaky-jar" person "suffers extreme distress" if he doesn't satisfy his desires. With desires so compelling, the victim won't spend much time worrying about the ethical character of what has to be done to satisfy them. This means that such a person is in a downward spiral, becoming even more harmed, more out of control, and more corrupt as his or her intensifying desires dictate.

Third, Socrates does describe a behavior that seems real enough. Think about what happens to people once they give themselves over to self-interest and start acting unethically. Nothing is ever enough for them. Think about the number of times you've heard about someone rich and powerful--a stockbroker, a politician, a minister--who gets caught doing something crooked to get a little more. Haven't you said to yourself, "I don't get it. This guy already has it all, and now he risks losing everything." There's a regular stream of such people, many of them otherwise bright, accomplished people who were caught taking incredibly stupid chances for what amounted to small change. The only explanation that makes sense is that these people somehow lost control. Their strength of will must have all but evaporated. On this evidence, at least, we can say that Socrates has a real point in suggesting that once we cross the line from ethical to unethical behavior to get what we want, our "wine jar" starts to erode, and we lose some control over what we want and what we do.

This loss of control that is caused by vice, then, is quite serious. To use an analogy of our own, we might say that vice turns the unethical individual into someone trying to navigate a rudderless sailboat, at the mercy of the winds of his or her own desires. If virtue and happiness are analogous to reaching a safe harbor, this person doesn't stand a chance of getting there.

Cognitive harm: weakened intellect and damaged moral vision

It may surprise you that the first kind of harm that Socrates sees as coming from vice is not of an intellectual nature. After all, Socrates is a philosopher. If vice harms the doer, you'd think he would find that the mind would be affected. Actually, he does find that this is so. We just have to dig for it a little. Socrates sometimes refers to unscrupulous people who make mistakes in judging what is actually in their own interest. Vice, he implies, has somehow clouded their view of situations and altered their perception of what advances their own ends.

This is nothing new, by the way. Let's return to the example of, let's say, a financier who is already a multi-millionaire but who gets caught trying to cheat his way to a little more money. To an outside observer, there's no way this man could be thinking straight. In terms of what he gets by breaking the law, the risks of losing what he already has are astonishingly high. A little more money, bending the rules, outwitting a few more "straight" people--none of this adds anything significant to his life. Yet the cost is astronomically high--public disgrace, divorce, a ruined career, lifelong dreams shattered, jail.

What was he--and everyone like him--thinking when he took the first step over the line and then got himself in deeper and deeper? It's unlikely that he didn't think at all--he's a bright, accomplished, highly rational person. The answer is that somehow he just didn't think straight. Socrates' would probably say that he didn't think straight because he couldn't think straight. His earlier unethical behavior had dramatically eroded that ability.

Part of that erosion occurs in what we can call someone's conscience, or their moral vision--their basic sense of right and wrong. Like Callicles, people who have suffered this damage come to believe that ordinary ideas of right and wrong don't apply to them. As if that weren't bad enough, there also seems to be additional damage to one's practical ability to identify and carry out what is genuinely in one's own interest. Wrongdoers end up misreading the odds, misjudging the likelihood of getting away with their deeds, and taking chances so foolish that they're sure to be caught.

Common sense has shown you how Socrates might be right when he says that vice harms its doer by causing us to lose some control over our desires. Now you can see as well the validity of the idea that vice also causes the deterioration of our rational faculties.

Callicles as the embodiment of vice

Since Callicles embodies so clearly what Socrates regards as vice, we should be able to see in him the full range of the harm Socrates alleges that vice does. Callicles certainly explicitly endorses the unordered, intemperate, and licentious life as the path to happiness. We might expect, then, that he lives that way himself, that is, out of control. If that is so, then we can further expect to see signs of a weakened intellect. In fact, the way that Socrates responds to Callicles' entry into the conversation is very revealing on just these grounds.

Callicles begins by asking Socrates if he really meant what he's been saying to Polus that it's worse to be the doer than to be the victim of injustice. Instead of answering directly, however, Socrates starts by pointing out how out of control Callicles is. Socrates describes Callicles as someone enslaved by the idea of pleasing

the two current loves of his life--one, a beautiful young man, the other, the Athenian public. Socrates remarks,

> Now I have noticed that in each instance, whatever your favorite says, however his opinions may go, for all your cleverness you are unable to contradict him, but constantly shift back and forth at his whim. If you are making a speech in the Assembly and the Athenian public disagrees, you change and say what it desires; and in the presence of the beautiful young son of Pyrilampes your experience is precisely similar. You are unable to resist the plans or the assertions of your favorite; and the result of this is that if anyone were to express surprise at what you say on various occasions under the influence of your loves, you would tell him, if you wanted to speak true, that unless your favorites can be prevented from speaking as they do, neither can you. --Gorgias

Socrates' unflattering remarks reinforce our picture of Callicles as someone who can control neither his desires nor the behavior those desires dictate. In the hope of getting their approval, and, probably something more than that, Callicles cannot resist agreeing with either of his two loves, the boy or the people in the Assembly. And because each is fickle, Callicles is also constantly changing. Of course, this is in keeping with Socrates' idea that the person who is analogous to the "leaky wine jar" is going to be constantly seeking gratification. Callicles desperately wants the adulation of the Athenian public and their support for his rise to power in the democracy. He's also looking for admiration and sexual pleasure from the boy. Socrates' point is that Callicles has no strength of will. He can't control himself in either his professional or personal life.

Note that Socrates makes a point of saying that what Callicles says is influenced by his desires. That Callicles' very words are now aligned with his search for pleasure and not his reason and his search for truth is a major sign that his thinking, or his intellect, has been affected by the way he's living--a life Socrates no doubt considers far from virtue.

However, Callicles' unwillingness to change his position during his conversation with Socrates is the most powerful sign that vice has harmed his ability to think rationally. Callicles is Socrates' strongest opponent in the dialogue--far stronger than Gorgias or Polus. Despite all the damage that Callicles has presumably suffered by being unethical, his mental faculties seem undiminished. Callicles hangs in there with Socrates: he doesn't allow Socrates to refute him on trivial grounds, and he even toys with the philosopher a couple of times in the argument to show his mastery of the issue. Socrates gets Gorgias and Polus to back off and change their minds, but he makes no headway with Callicles. Even though Socrates tries to point out a number of contradictions in Callicles' position, Callicles is convinced that he's right and that Socrates hasn't been able to show otherwise.

Callicles no doubt thinks that he's holding his own against Socrates, that his selfish and relentless pursuit of power and pleasure has in no way diminished his intellectual prowess. Socrates would say, however, that the fact that Callicles doesn't budge an inch in their discussion is proof enough of the harm done to him. It's because Callicles' intellect is in such bad shape that he believes he's held his own against Socrates.

The damage to Callicles' intellect shows up in two main ways. First, in the course of the discussion, Socrates tries to show Callicles that as long as he believes the way he does about pleasure and power, right and wrong, his thinking will be

riddled with confusion and contradictions. Callicles simply can't see it. His mind has somehow been clouded to the extent that either he doesn't know or he doesn't care whether he contradicts himself or not. And since tolerating contradictions is an obvious sign of weak thinking, to disregard them in such a cavalier fashion is a serious matter.

Second, and much more important, is why contradictions don't matter to Callicles. It's not that Callicles' unethical behavior fried some neurons in his brain and now he can't think any more. Rather, we can speculate that it's because most of his mental energy is spent on keeping himself convinced that what he thinks is right.

No doubt you've met people who are so intent on being right that they don't listen to anybody else who has some facts to the contrary. Even if they do listen, they're only waiting to shoot back an answer that proves they're right in spite of what you say. Such people often spent lots of energy trying to convince you that they're right about something you don't even care about. You wonder why they're wasting their time with you--you don't care, so who are they trying to convince? And that question is the key to understanding what's going on here, because people like this--and like Callicles--are really only trying to convince themselves that they're right. It may look as if they're trying to convince other people, but other people have nothing to do with it. They are talking only to themselves.

When this happens, some part of us other than our conscious mind is controlling our life. As we've already seen, in Callicles' case it's his physical and emotional desires. And when our desires become so strong, it appears as though the mind is also affected and pulled in to help the cause and keep everything in place. More than anything else, the intellect is supposed to come up with reasons and good arguments for why the course you're following is unquestionably the right way to go. Of course, to the outside observer, you aren't coming up with good reasons. You're finding excuses. You're going to do what you want to anyway. You just want some good excuses to throw at people so that you don't have to consider the possibility that you may be wrong.

Psychologists call this process rationalizing. When confronted with something negative about how we're living, we often feel internal pressure to make ourselves feel better, and so we sometimes reinterpret our behavior to make it seem more rational and acceptable. For example, if you do poorly on an exam, instead of feeling remorse for spending so much time in fraternity activities and not studying very hard for the test, you may convince yourself that academic success is less important than being involved in campus organizations. to change something wrong into something right. In a genuine case of rationalization, we don't even realize that we're just making excuses, so at such a time, unconscious forces rule our lives.

If we interpret Callicles' behavior this way, we can say that his arguments are nothing more than a sophisticated set of rationalizations that keep him from seeing his condition. Because Callicles' mind now serves his desires, he is forced to reinterpret how he is living, justifying it to himself as rational, sensible, and defensible. He has been completely fooled by his own greed, lust, and ambition.

A common-sense assessment

Socrates sees virtue as necessary for the health of our "souls" and vice as unhealthy. Vice, he suggests, harms the doer in two specific ways. First, when we get caught up in the selfish pursuit our own ends at others' expense, we damage a basic mechanism within ourselves that gives us emotional stability and a sense of satisfaction, or contentment, with our lives. This means that we lose some control over ourselves. We don't remain content once our desires are satisfied, we're driven to find and gratify more needs. Ultimately, our desires become insatiable. We're never really happy, we just want, want, want.

Second, when we becomes slaves to our desires, our minds are pulled into their service too. Our intellects become dulled, we may become less sensitive to important contradictions in our thoughts or behavior, and we're pressured from within to devise rationalizations that keep us on the path we've chosen. We may explain to others--but primarily to ourselves--that such behavior is reasonable, good, and fulfilling. But we're only kidding ourselves, and we don't even know it.

Such a claim about the harm done by vice does seem to make good common-sense. Most of us already know that as we do unethical things, they get easier to do and harder to resist. Ultimately, we lose our sense that there's really anything wrong with them. If you've ever cheated on a test, for example, you know that it's easier to do and to live with the next time you do it--and the next. Or look at someone you know who manipulates people all the time. That person doesn't hurt others on purpose. He believes he's only doing what's best for himself, his company, or some cause he believes in, and he doesn't see the suffering he causes. Or take a really rich person who gets caught cheating to avoid paying the sales tax on her jewelry purchases. Somehow these people couldn't see how foolish they were.

This is what corruption is all about. It's a deterioration of strengths and abilities accompanied by an inability to see what is happening. Do you think that corrupt people think they're corrupt? Hardly. They think they've finally gotten smart, or courageous, or just realistic. They think they've now found the guts to do what ordinary innocent people don't dare do. And when they're caught, do they think that punishment is justified? No, they feel that they were trapped unfairly and that they are being held to unreasonable standards while the real crooks get away with murder.

People aren't born corrupt. In most cases no one coerces them into corruption either. How, then, does it happen? Unethical behavior starts with a free choice. But once made, people continue that way, drawn in deeper and deeper until their "souls" have sustained serious harm .

Our speculation that this damage takes place on an unconscious level also makes Socrates' claim that vice harms the doer more plausible. The way that self-interest, greed, jealousy, or hatred lead people into self-defeating behavior in which they do not even assess the risks of their actions rationally is explained more effectively by an unconscious, rather than a conscious process. And even though Socrates himself does not talk this way, it seems that his ideas are supported by a contemporary psychological understanding of the human personality.

Is Socrates right that vice harms the doer? Without a doubt.

How virtue leads to happiness

By now you should have be able to guess why Socrates thinks that we need to live virtuous lives in order to be happy. You' re familiar with his claim that acting unethically affects both our ability to be satisfied and our ability to see things clearly. If this is right, no matter how much money, power or success we have, we will never be content. We' ll constantly want more. And it' s hard to imagine such a state of continuous discontent as happiness. Furthermore, vice clouds our minds to the extent that we' ll see things wrong, make mistakes, and probably get caught for our wrongdoing. And this surely also makes happiness less likely.

Socrates obviously thinks of happiness as a state of stable contentment produced by satisfying desires that are reasonable and within our power. For this we need to have a realistic view of what is in our reach, enough self-control to keep our desires within bounds, and the good sense not to take foolish, self-destructive risks. And, as we have seen, Socrates claims that we retain these capacities only if we' re virtuous. Not that we have to live like saints to be happy. But it looks as if living a basically decent life is the only way to get the inner contentment and sense of freedom and self-control that we need to feel good about life. As Socrates expresses it to Polus, one of the other characters in the Gorgias, "I call a good and honorable man or woman happy, and one who is unjust and evil wretched. ... You believe it is possible for a happy man to be wrong and be unjust, ... and I say this is impossible."

What about a moderate Callicles?

Despite the common-sense validity of Socrates' ideas, you may have some doubts about all of this. "This talk about self-control, rationality, virtue, and happiness seems all well and good," you might say, "but isn' t it possible to be a really successful unethical individual. The trick is to let your desires grow, but not let them get out of hand, to be prudent in your larceny, to assess the odds of success and failure realistically. In short, if you can become be a moderate and more restrained Callicles, you' ll have the happiest life imaginable. You' ll get most of what you want, you' ll be satisfied with it, and won' t get caught."

This brings us full circle to the unprincipled person with the reputation for integrity that Plato described and rejected at the start of this chapter. The problem with this proposal is, however, that a "moderate Callicles" may simply be impossible. There are too many highly intelligent, successful, accomplished individuals who run foolish risks, make mistakes, and get caught to suggest that all the people who get mired in scandal are second-rate when it comes to using unethical means to achieve their ends. One interpretation of these stories is that objective judgment is one of the first casualties of moral corruption.

So many very bright people get caught--often over seemingly trivial things--that this calls into question whether a moderate, self-controlled Callicles can exist. It' s not that these people didn' t try to keep their wrongdoing within bounds--surely that' s what all unethical people aim at. Rather, it' s that they couldn' t pull it off. And if we entertain the interpretation of Socrates' ideas that suggests that the harm done by vice takes place on the unconscious level of the personality, it' s no surprise that these people would be unable to ride herd on how corrupt they were becoming.

Another way of putting this would be to return to Socrates' "wine jar" analogy. Unethical behavior erodes the "wine jar" of our "soul," and as the jar' s contents leak out, the bottom simply becomes more and more porous. As this

process progresses we become aware of the resultant empty feeling, but the desire to fill the void is so powerful that it gradually overwhelms us. Our ability to control our desires and our rational perspective become severely damaged. We become like the addict who believes that his next "fix" is worth the risks associated with committing a crime in order to get the money to pay for it.

You still may not be convinced by this. Perhaps you think that all the truly capable wrongdoers never get caught, and you may have a point. However, the issue here is not to settle unequivocally the issue of whether vice harms us. Rather, when we confront a philosophical position that does not have as much detail as we would like, as in the case of Socrates' ideas about vice harming the doer, the task is to try to understand what these ideas might mean and to consider the plausibility of such an interpretation. And at this point, it's fair to say that our interpretation fits well enough with what we know of the human personality that it deserves very serious consideration by anyone who thinks that vice has no cost or that it's possible to be both unethical and genuinely happy in life.

Repairing the damage

The two main consequences of vice that we isolated in our speculation about Socrates' ideas occur largely in the unconscious. The essence of the philosopher's claim that vice harms the doer, then, is that it affects that part of our personalities that lies beneath our conscious awareness. Thus, the overwhelming danger of vice is that it hurts us in ways that we can't see, and also builds a psychological mechanism that keeps it in place once we notice it. However, does the fact that we may not be able to see the damage ourselves mean that it can't be repaired? No, there are various ways of reaching and changing unconscious forces. It isn't easy, but it can be done.

Sometimes people don't get the point until they've been hung out to dry as a result of their own vice. Confronting hard, cold reality--getting caught, fired, jailed, having those you love leave you--can shock some people into realizing they were deceiving themselves--and only themselves. The world didn't work the way they thought it did. Seeing the ruin caused by their false ideas, they're then willing to approach life differently.

It doesn't always have to be so painful, however. Socrates obviously thought that a "diseased" soul could be healed by getting the afflicted person to see that he or she can never be happy the way they are living. Psychologists and psychiatrists today also think that unconscious mechanisms can be neutralized and dismantled if they are brought up into conscious awareness. We might say, then, that an effective philosophical dialogue with Socrates aims to bring these self-defeating unconscious mechanisms to the surface. In an exhaustive process, Socrates would engage in conversations with people trying to get them to see the truth about their behavior. Socrates would attempt to convince them that as long as they believed that moral virtue wasn't the most important thing in their life, they couldn't be happy. And if the conversation concentrated on an interlocutor's most prized and fundamental beliefs about what's important in life, an encounter with Socrates could be a very powerful emotional experience--the kind that can get you to doubt some of your most basic values and loosen the grip of unconscious forces.

But you don't need a Socrates to do this. Socrates often told people that "the unexamined life is not worth living." In other words, if you don't scrutinize your

own life, there's a chance that you're off course, making some fairly significant moral compromises and thinking that there's no problem. But the unexamined soul may very well be an unhealthy soul. And, as we've seen, an unhealthy soul lacks the freedom, control, and perspective that Socrates thinks is necessary for true human happiness.

And this is one of the most useful things that studying philosophy can do for you. It trains your mind and, in doing so, equips you to examine your own life. If you're absolutely truthful with yourself, you'll see when you're beginning to give into excessive desires, being controlled by your wants, and rationalizing indefensible behavior. And if you're thinking right, you can correct yourself before you go too far.

Apology is an account of Socrates' trial and contains Socrates' own account of his life's work. For a highly readable, but sometimes flawed, account of Socrates by a non-specialist see I. F. Stone, The Trial of Socrates (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1988).