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Socrates' Bleak View of the Human Condition

Russell E. Jones

It's true, after all, that the matters in dispute between us are not at all insignificant ones, but pretty nearly those it's most admirable to have knowledge about, and most shameful not to. For the heart of the matter is that of recognizing or failing to recognize who is happy and who is not.

-*Gorgias* 472c6-d1 [Socrates to Polus; Zeyl trans.]

Was Socrates, by his own lights, happy? I recently argued that he wasn't.¹ Couple such a view with Socrates' assessment of nearly everyone else as even worse off than himself, and we get a bleak outlook on the human condition. Professor Smith alleges (in this volume) that I misconstrue several aspects of Socrates' thought. Once corrected, we can dispense with this bleak outlook. Unfortunately – and I do mean unfortunately, since Smith's is the more cheerful view – the bleak outlook remains the one we should attribute to Socrates. Here I explain why, first giving a brief synopsis of my earlier argument, but then confining myself to new considerations.

I began with the “death is one of two things” argument at *Apology* 40c5-41a8. The argument is uncontroversially a constructive dilemma in form:

1. Death is one of two things: Either (a) the dead are nothing and have no perception of anything, or (b) death is a change and relocating for the soul from here to another place.
2. If (a), then death is an advantage.
3. If (b), then death is an advantage.
4. So, death is an advantage.

¹ See Jones 2013 for full details of the argument, including texts and scholarship.

The first question to ask, naturally, is: an advantage for whom? And the answer, in the first instance, is: an advantage for Socrates. He is explaining to the jurors why *his* death is a good thing. In fact, just before, he has given reasons for thinking death is a good thing that apply only to him: His *own* divine sign has not opposed him *today*. The “death is one of two things” argument is meant to provide additional reasons for thinking that Socrates’ death is a good thing. But in this argument he provides reasons that do not apply especially to him. Indeed, he supposes that those features of his own life that warrant the conclusion will be shared by most if not all other people. And so even as he reaches a conclusion about his own circumstances, he offers one that will apply quite broadly.

The argument, contrary to near universal opinion, is a rather good piece of reasoning. The first premise is quite plausible: Death is either simply the end for us or it is a relocation of the soul. We might fuss about the third premise: Why think that if death is a change and relocating for the soul from here to another place, then death is an advantage? Mightn’t the afterlife be hellish? Not if we allow Socrates to appeal to a background commitment which he clearly holds, that the gods are good. Any serious implausibility will have to be located in the second premise, that if the dead are nothing and have no perception of anything, then death is an advantage. Criticism tends to focus on the analogy Socrates gives: death, understood as annihilation, is like a dreamless sleep. A dreamless sleep is pleasant only because you wake up from it. But you don’t wake up from death. So the analogy is inapt.

Such an objection misses the point. Socrates does not say that a dreamless sleep is pleasant. Rather, he encourages us to compare the days and nights of our lives to a dreamless sleep. In other words, he ranks our lives against a completely unconscious state.

Such a state is completely neutral: it is neither good nor bad, for it is not anything. To rank a life higher than such a state is to say that it is better than neutral; to rank it lower is to say that it is worse than neutral. And so, to extend the point explicitly to death, to say that death understood as annihilation is an advantage over life is to say that life is worse than neutral. It is to say that one is living a life that doesn't rise to the level of being worth living, that one would be better off not existing at all. Now, it's one thing to fuss about whether it is accurate to rank annihilation above life, whether for Socrates or for the Great King or for ourselves. What I want to emphasize is that *Socrates commits himself to the ranking*. He ranks his life, in company with most others, below non-existence. A life that ranks below non-existence is not a happy one. So, Socrates assesses his own life as less than happy.

To see *that* Socrates' argument implies that he is not happy is not yet to see *why* he takes himself not to be happy. Here, I claim, we can appeal to some pretty conventional understandings of Socrates to explain his self-assessment. Socrates makes frequent claims that virtue, understood as a kind of ethical knowledge, is necessary for happiness. And yet, he equally frequently denies that he possesses the ethical knowledge that is virtue. If we take these two commitments - to the necessity of virtue for happiness and to his own lack of virtue - straightforwardly, they explain why Socrates takes his own life to fall short of happiness: He lacks a necessary condition for happiness. Rather than linger on the way I understand Socrates' claims, I want to turn to the way Smith understands them, for much of what he has to say about the connection between virtue and happiness is plausible but perfectly compatible with my account. I would even go so far as to say that attending carefully to Smith's insights strengthens my case.

Smith objects to my understanding of Socrates' disavowals of knowledge and commitment to the necessity of virtue for happiness. In short, he argues that Socrates disavows *full* ethical knowledge, rather than any measure *at all* of ethical knowledge; and that Socrates takes knowledge and happiness to be *gradable*, and furthermore takes it that one needs greater and greater degrees of knowledge in order to achieve greater and greater degrees of happiness. I focus on the latter point.

In passages in which Socrates argues for the necessity of wisdom (as I shall call ethical knowledge) for happiness, he often does so by appeal to the crafts. Consider a passage from the *Euthydemus* (281a1-b6):

“Well then, in working and using things concerning wood, surely there is nothing else that produces correct use than knowledge of carpentry?”

“Clearly not,” he said.

“And also in work concerning utensils, the producer of the correctness is knowledge.”

He agreed.

“Then,” I said, “also concerning the use of the first of the goods we spoke of - wealth and health and beauty - was it knowledge which directed and made our action correct with respect to using all such things correctly, or something else?”

“Knowledge,” he said.

“It seems then that knowledge provides people not only with good fortune but also with well-doing, in all possession and action.”

He agreed.

“Then, by Zeus,” I said, “is there any benefit from other possessions without intelligence and wisdom?”

Smith notes that if we are to take the appeal to other crafts seriously here, we cannot suppose that Socrates is saying that *full* knowledge is required for *any* correct action or benefit. For surely this would be implausible in the case of carpentry. Carpentry is graded, such that between the complete novice and the full master there is a wide range of other skill levels. We can expect someone to succeed in carpentry *to the extent that they*

have mastered the craft. But it would be implausible to suppose that someone who falls short of full mastery is therefore doomed to failure. Yes, the master carpenter will succeed most, but we should expect others to succeed roughly in keeping with the level of skill they have achieved. Likewise for virtue: It is implausible to suppose that full wisdom is required for any correct action and any benefit, and thus any achievement of happiness. Rather, we should expect people to succeed in attaining their own well-being to the extent that they acquire wisdom.

Now, the effect that's supposed to have on the present debate is to block my move from Socratic ignorance to Socratic unhappiness. For surely Socrates doesn't mean to indicate that he is *wholly* ignorant about how to live his life, a complete novice when it comes to virtue. But that opens the door to conceiving of him as having achieved some level of happiness.

So far, I agree, even with the final point that Socrates' conception of moral knowledge does not *on its own* foreclose the possibility that he has achieved some level of happiness. If virtue is a kind of expertise, we should think of it as gradable.² Yet none of this is reason to doubt seriously that Socrates maintained a bleak outlook on the human condition. Consider carpentry again, and imagine someone trying to build a house. This is a very complex task, involving a number of interconnected elements. The master carpenter will execute each element skillfully and successfully, and thus the overall product of her work will be a well-crafted house. The complete novice, on the other hand, will execute pretty much none of the elements skillfully or successfully. Thus the overall product of his work will be a terrible house, if he even manages to produce something that could be called

² For an account of Socrates' conception of virtue as a complex expertise, see Hagen 2013.

a house at all. This leaves lots of room in the middle for would-be house builders of varying skills, and as a rough guide we can suppose that the quality of the final product will vary with the degree of skill.

But notice just how much this leaves open. One thing it leaves open is how good a house needs to be before it counts as minimally decent. Surely it shouldn't be dangerously unstable; it should provide a certain amount of shelter; and it should have some minimal aesthetic quality. But for the moment, conceive of this collection of minimal standards however you like. Even fairly low standards may be hard to satisfy. For remember that house-building is a complicated task. Someone who learns enough to successfully execute one task related to house-building may not have the skills to execute some other tasks. And since the sub-tasks of house-building are not merely additive but interdependent, failure to execute some tasks well might not only fail to add value to the house, but might even undermine the good of tasks that were, considered just on their own, well-executed. Someone who knows how to put up straight walls but doesn't know how to lay a stable foundation doesn't get things half right, but rather all wrong. Ignorance about laying foundations undermines the value of the knowledge of wall-construction.

So it is with a life. On the one hand, we need to decide what minimal standards a life needs to meet before it counts as happy to some degree. I don't want to make a proposal about that here, either for myself or on behalf of Socrates: I note only that how high you take the minimal standards to be makes an enormous difference in how achievable a minimally happy life is. But, again, specify them how you like. Constructing such a life will be a complex task. And getting certain things wrong may not merely fail to add to the goodness of a life, but may actually undermine aspects of the life that might otherwise have

been good. It is not a trivial move from supposing that wisdom and happiness are gradable and that greater wisdom will tend to greater happiness to the claim that some minimal happiness is fairly achievable. To make that move, we'd first have to determine what minimal standards a life must meet to count as happy at all; and then to determine what degree of wisdom is required to achieve such standards. Even if we concede that the standards are fairly low, it does not at all follow that the degree of wisdom required to meet them is low. And the higher we set the standards, and the more complex we take the construction of a good life to be, the greater will be the degree of wisdom required to meet the standards.

So, just as one might have developed skills in house-building significantly greater than those of a complete novice and yet not be able to construct a minimally good house, so one might have developed skills in living significantly greater than those of a complete novice and yet not be able to construct a minimally happy life. Indeed, suppose that Socrates has developed skills in living significantly greater than those of a complete novice. The "death is one of two things argument" reveals that he doesn't take whatever degree of wisdom he has achieved to be enough for him to attain a minimal level of happiness.

This shouldn't be surprising, if we reflect on how Socrates characterizes what degree of wisdom he has achieved in those very texts we've been considering. In the *Apology*, he claims not to know anything "καλὸν κάγαθόν" (21d4) - nothing "fine and good" - and a bit later (23a5-b5) says that the god intended to indicate that any wisdom Socrates has is worthless or nearly so. That's a strange way to characterize matters if Socrates thinks that his wisdom makes him happy, even if he doesn't think it makes him maximally happy. In the *Euthydemus*, he similarly downplays the value of his knowledge, allowing

that he knows quite a lot of things, but characterizing them all as of little account (“σμικρά”; 293b7-8). Even more tellingly, in this dialogue Socrates cannot even characterize what wisdom or virtue is in broad terms. Socrates is no physician, yet he could tell you that medicine is the skill of restoring health to bodies. Socrates is no farmer, yet he could tell you that farming is the skill of getting nutrition from the earth. But he doesn’t even get this far when it comes to describing virtue! That is hardly the mark of a partial expert who can do a lot of good in his field, but who simply hasn’t achieved full mastery yet. It rather indicates someone who is much closer to the novice end of the spectrum. And this is perfectly in keeping with the plain sense of the “death is one of two things” argument.

What alternative sense might we make of the “death is one of two things” argument? Smith proposes to understand it as follows. Socrates’ professed aim is to convince his friends that “what has happened [his conviction and sentencing] may well be a good thing, and those of us who believe death to be an evil are certainly mistaken” (40b7-c2; Grube trans.). Smith thinks that the second horn of the dilemma, that death is a relocation for the soul, answers to the first part of this aim: what has happened may well be a good thing. And he reads the first horn of the dilemma, that the dead are nothing and have no perception of anything, as answering to the second part of this aim: those of us who believe death to be an evil are certainly mistaken. As Smith puts it (p. ##):

Strictly speaking, then, what Socrates needs to do if he is to console his “friends” among the jurors is to give them some reason to think that death is *not* the “worst of evils” and perhaps not even anything bad *at all*. If he can go on and actually give them some reason for thinking that “what has happened may well be a good thing,” then so much the better.

On Smith’s view, Socrates’ purpose is accomplished by appeal to an obvious fact, that we often look forward to the loss of consciousness that comes with sleep, no matter what our

day has been like and even if we don't know that we will ever wake up. I'm not convinced this is obvious, or even true. Regardless, it opens Socrates up to a standard set of objections that rely on the disanalogy between annihilation and a dreamless sleep. In the face of such objections, the best we can do, it seems, is to recognize that Socrates is guilty of "overstatement" or "hyperbole", but to insist that it is innocent because the jurors aren't going to take his remarks "quite literally".

This, in effect, is to give up on reading Socrates' argument as an argument, even though he presents it as such. Or at the very least, it is to concede that as an argument it is fundamentally misguided, and that any persuasive force it may have is to be found in its rhetorical rather than its logical power. This interpretation abandons the straightforward reading of the argument in order to avoid the implication that Socrates is unhappy. But such an interpretation comes at too high a cost, convicting Socrates of misrepresentation or poor argumentation in order to save him from a view which he nowhere rejects and whose contrary he nowhere endorses.

This last claim, that Socrates nowhere claims to be happy, requires some defense, for Smith appeals to a passage that might be thought to be the "smoking-gun" in the case that Socrates was happy: *Gorgias* 527c4-6, where Socrates is exhorting Callicles to the life of justice. Socrates tells Callicles, "Ἐμοὶ οὖν πειθόμενος ἀκολούθησον ἐνταῦθα, οἷ ἀφικόμενος εὐδαιμονήσεις καὶ ζῶν καὶ τελευτήσας, ὡς ὁ λόγος σημαίνει." If we read with Zeyl (as Smith does), the point seems obvious: "So, listen to me and follow me to where I am, and when you've come here you'll be happy both during life and at its end, as the account indicates." Socrates is claiming that Callicles will be happy if only he gets to where Socrates is. Notice that even on Zeyl's rendering, Socrates never quite says that he is

happy, though it is strongly implied. Indeed, it is hard to read Zeyl's *Gorgias* without having the impression that Socrates takes himself to be happy.

Zeyl, however, mischaracterizes the thought of the passage. The decision that gives Zeyl's rendering the crucial effect is the translation of 'ἐνταῦθα' as 'here'. Sometimes that is indeed an appropriate translation of 'ἐνταῦθα'. But it can just as easily be translated 'there', or, with a sense of movement here secured by the surrounding verbal expressions, 'thither'. And if we translate with 'there' instead of 'here', any implication that Socrates is claiming to be happy immediately vanishes.³

In contrast to Zeyl, I would render the lines much as Irwin, Lamb, and Woodhead do,⁴ but with one difference. I would translate 'ἀκολουθήσον' as 'accompany' rather than 'follow', for as e2 makes clear, the *logos* is to be the guide for both of them: "And so be persuaded by me and accompany me to where you'll be happy both in life and in death, as the account indicates." Socrates is here contrasting the way of life he advocates with the way of life Callicles advocates. Just before, he sums up the points he has defended against Callicles. And shortly after, in the closing lines of the dialogue, he exhorts Callicles to follow the way of life Socrates advocates, not the worthless one Callicles advocates. We might paraphrase Socrates' point as follows: "I'm already committed to all these things, both in

³ One might protest that Socrates could have used 'ἐκεῖ' had he wanted to indicate a point he hadn't yet reached. It is true that 'ἐκεῖ' is a further demonstrative than 'ἐνταῦθα'. (Smyth 346, for example, gives 'there' for the latter and 'yonder' for the former.) But in fact using 'ἐκεῖ' at c5 would have been wholly misleading, for in the present context it would have signaled a concern exclusively with the afterlife (as 'ἐκεῖσε' at b2 above, just one sentence removed from c4-6). Only 'ἐνταῦθα' will do here.

⁴ Irwin: "And so be convinced by me, and follow me to where you will be happy, both in life and in death, as the account signifies."

Lamb: "Take my advice, therefore, and follow me where, if you once arrive, you will be happy both in life and after life's end, as this account declares."

Woodhead: "If you will listen to me then, you will follow me where on your arrival you will win happiness both in life and after death, as our account reveals."

argument and in the way I live my life. So, you too, Callicles, should be persuaded by my argument, and as a consequence you should adopt my way of life. For the path I am on is the only one that leads to that point at which you can be happy, whether in life or in death. That is to say, when I achieve the aims I'm pursuing in my way of life, I'll fare well; and so will you, if you do likewise."

Nothing of what Socrates says here implies that he takes himself to be happy. To be sure, it is *possible* to construe the lines as Zeyl does. But to depend so much on a translation that risks importing ideas into the text rather than reading them out is a bit like trying to hang a ten-gallon hat on a two-penny nail. Much better to render the lines more neutrally, and to recognize that they then fit neatly with the evidence that Socrates took his life to fall short of happiness. For Socrates never denies that his aims are correct; he is pointed in the right direction. He simply hasn't reached his goal. There is no smoking gun at the end of the *Gorgias*; the real smoking gun is the "death is one of two things" argument.

Now, I want to go briefly beyond the dispute with Smith to another potentially troublesome passage, this one in Plato's *Phaedo*. Though Smith doesn't mention it, presumably because it is not one of the canonical Socratic dialogues,⁵ it is nevertheless highly relevant to the *Apology*. Given the similarities in dramatic context and the many linguistic parallels between the two dialogues, it would be striking if they adopted radically different outlooks on the question of whether it is good for Socrates to die.

The particularly troublesome bit I have in mind is 63b5-9.⁶ Socrates says, "For, Simmias and Cebes, I should be wrong not to resent dying if I did not believe that I should go first to other wise and good gods, and then to men who have died and are better than

⁵ See, for example, the list of "Socratic dialogues" in Brickhouse and Smith 2010, p. 18.

⁶ I thank Emily Austin for pressing me to say something about this passage.

men are here.” (Grube trans.) The problem this passage causes is that it looks as if here Socrates says that he should be troubled at death *unless it is the second* of the two options that holds true from the “death is one of two things” argument, but in the *Apology* Socrates says that he should be of good hope *whichever* of the two holds true. The effect, so long as we’re willing to put the *Phaedo* into play, is to put pressure on my interpretation – the straightforward interpretation – of the *Apology* argument.

In fact, the resolution of this apparent tension between the *Phaedo* and the *Apology* is deceptively simple. Up until Cebes’ famous challenge, which begins at 69e6, the first horn of the *Apology* dilemma is not even under consideration. The entire discussion up until 69e6 operates under the assumption that the soul survives separation from the body and journeys to another place. (There is only the tiniest hint of an alternative, at 63c5.) This is perhaps most clear at 61d10-e3, where Socrates sets up the discussion by saying, “Perhaps it is most fitting for one who is about to sojourn there to investigate and tell stories about the sojourn there, what sort we think it to be.” Socrates doesn’t say that it is most fitting to investigate whether there is a sojourn there; that investigation isn’t prompted until Cebes steps in at 69e6.

So, the discussion assumes that there is an afterlife; that is, it assumes that death is the second of the two things in the *Apology*. Socrates then announces that he would be wrong not to be troubled by death were he not confident that he would go to good gods and good men – but the important condition, and the one he insists on, is that he will go to good gods. But it is precisely the commitment to good gods that we had to appeal to with regard to the *Apology* argument in order to avoid the objection that the afterlife might be hellish. Here we find Socrates making explicit the very same commitment that he relies on

implicitly in the *Apology*, and he invokes it in just the way we should have expected from the *Apology*. Assuming there is an afterlife, Socrates should be untroubled by death if and only if he can be confident that he will be under the care of good gods. That's why he goes on to say (63b9-c7; Grube slightly modified): "Be assured that, as it is, I expect to join the company of good men. This last I would not altogether insist on, but if I insist on anything at all in these matters, it is that I shall come to gods who are very good masters. That is why I am not so resentful, because I have good hope that there is something for those who have died and that, as is said of old, it is much better for the good than for the wicked." All of this fits perfectly well with the *Apology* argument, at the same time reinforcing what readers of the *Apology* typically suspect: Socrates thinks that death-as-relocation is more likely than death-as-annihilation. But none of that should lead us to discount his reflections on death-as-annihilation. He argues for a conditional proposition: If death is annihilation, then death is a gain for him.

In sum: The straightforward reading of the "death is one of two things" argument, taken on its own terms, has the implication that Socrates takes his life and most others to fall short of happiness. We should resist Smith's alternative view, which fails to make sense of the argument as an argument. Graded conceptions of virtue and happiness do not undercut such a result. Indeed, nothing in my original argument is inconsistent with graded virtue and happiness (I insisted explicitly on the latter), nor with a scaled necessity relation between the two. Moreover, while the *Apology* argument is a "smoking-gun" passage for my position, there is no such passage available for the opposing position, not even *Gorgias* 527c4-6. And finally, we should remain unmoved even if we bring the *Phaedo* into play, for the apparent tension between it and the *Apology* dissolves with attention to

the larger structure of the dialogue. Once all this is coupled with the arguments of my earlier paper, it becomes clear that the best explanation of Socrates' various commitments is that he does in fact adopt the bleak view of the human condition, and of his own condition as well. If we want to understand Socrates' conception of happiness, it is crucial to recognize this fact. To return to the epigram (*Gorgias* 472c6-d1) and its questions about who is happy and how we ought to live, our first approximation of Socrates' answers must be: not Socrates, at least in his lifetime; and we'd better aim pretty damn high when it comes to virtue.⁷

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⁷ I am grateful to Nick Smith for an ongoing conversation over several years about these and related matters; to Emily Austin and Ravi Sharma for being good sounding boards for some of the claims I make here, and especially for discussions on *Phaedo* 63b5-9 (Emily) and *Gorgias* 527c4-6 (Ravi); to the participants (and especially Naomi Reshotko) in the October 2014 conference on Socrates, held at Lewis and Clark College in honor of Nick Smith, for challenging but constructive feedback; and to Ron Polansky for comments on the penultimate draft.