



# Felix Socrates?

## Citation

Jones, Russell E. 2013. "Felix Socrates?" *Philosophia* 43: 77-98.

## Link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:11006835>

## Terms of use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Policy Articles (OAP), as set forth at

<https://harvardwiki.atlassian.net/wiki/external/NGY5NDE4ZjgzNTc5NDQzMGIzZWZhMGFIOWI2M2EwYTg>

## Accessibility

<https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy>

## Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.  
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#)

## **Felix Socrates?**

Russell E. Jones, Harvard University

Abstract: I argue that Socrates, by his own lights, failed to achieve happiness. This result is important not so much for what it reveals about Socrates' own well-being, but for what it reveals about the Socratic conception of happiness.

### **1. Felix Socrates – a powerful portrait**

I want to challenge a widely held view about Socrates<sup>1</sup>, a view that Gregory Vlastos eloquently articulated in a brief epilogue to *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, titled “Felix Socrates”<sup>2</sup>. Vlastos' piece is worth quoting at some length, not only because of his characteristically flowing prose, but also because of how well he articulates a view that many readers of Plato have found compelling: Plato's Socrates, contrary to what the majority of the jury thinks of him, and contrary to what many of his interlocutors like Calicles and Thrasymachus think of him, is no misguided or misfortunate failure but a grand success. He has achieved happiness; he is flourishing. Indeed, the central lesson to be learned from Socrates' life is that happiness is achieved through the single-minded and relentless pursuit of virtue. It is precisely through his own practice of philosophy and the pursuit of virtue that Socrates achieved happiness. As Vlastos puts it:

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout, I am talking about the character Socrates in Plato's dialogues.

<sup>2</sup> G. VLASTOS, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991, pp. 233-235.

Confronting an imaginary detractor who reviles him for having lived in a way which now puts him in danger of being executed as a criminal, [Socrates] replies:

*Ap.* 28b-d: “Man, you don’t speak well if you believe that someone worth anything at all would give countervailing weight to danger of life or death or give consideration to anything but this when he acts: whether his action is just or unjust, the action of a good or of an evil man. Mean, on your view, would be those demigods who died in Troy, the rest of them and the son of Thetis . . . Do you think *he* gave any thought to life or death?”

. . . Achilles gambles happiness for honor, prepared to lose. And lose he does. He dies grief-stricken. . . . So too other heroic figures in the tragic imagination of the Greeks die overwhelmed by grief. Antigone goes to her death in unrelieved gloom, fearing that even the gods have forsaken her. Alcestis is so devastated, she thinks of herself as having already “become nothing” before her death. But not Socrates.

In the whole of the Platonic corpus, nay in the whole of our corpus of Greek prose or verse, no happier life than his may be found. He tells the court how happy he has been plying daily his thankless elenctic task, expecting them to think what he tells them too good to be believed:

*Ap.* 38a: “And if I were to tell you that there can be no greater good for a man than to discourse daily about virtue and about those other things you hear me discuss, examining myself and others – for the unexamined life is not worth living by man – you will believe me even less.”

If we are to “count no man happy before the end,” we have Plato’s assurance that his hero’s happiness would meet that test:

*Phd.* 117b-c: “He took the cup most cheerfully, O Echeocrates, without any change of color or expression on his face . . . He drained it very easily, in good humor.”

Is this surprising? If you say that virtue matters more for your own happiness than does everything else put together, if this is what you say and what you mean – it is for real, not just talk – what is there to be wondered at if the loss of everything else for virtue’s sake leaves you light-hearted, cheerful? If you believe what Socrates does, you hold the secret of your happiness in your own hands. Nothing the world can do to you can make you unhappy.

In the quest for happiness the noblest spirits in the Greek imagination are losers: Achilles, Hector, Alcestis, Antigone. Socrates is a winner. He has to be. Desiring the kind of happiness he does, he can't lose.

Vlastos' confidence in Socrates' happiness comes primarily from two elements of Socrates' speech in the *Apology*. On the one hand, Socrates makes various claims to the effect that the pursuit of virtue ought to take precedence over all other pursuits. So at 28b-d (quoted above), Socrates reveals his commitment that the pursuit of virtue ought even to take precedence over the pursuit of survival. This is not the only passage Vlastos could have cited. A bit later, Socrates famously tells the jurors how he would respond if they offered to acquit him on the condition that he cease to practice philosophy.

I would say to you. . . “I shall not cease to practice philosophy, to exhort you and in my usual way to point out to any one of you whom I happen to meet: Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?” Then, if one of you disputes this and says he does care, I shall not let him go at once or leave him, but I shall question him, examine him and test him, and if I do not think he has attained the goodness that he says he has, I shall reproach him because he attaches little importance to the most important things and greater importance to the inferior things. I shall treat in this way anyone I happen to meet, young and old, citizen and stranger, and more so the citizens because you are more kindred to me. Be sure that this is what the god orders me to do, and I think there is no greater blessing for the city than my service to the god. For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, as I say to you: “Wealth does not bring about virtue, but virtue makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively.” (*Ap.* 29d2-30b4; Grube trans., lightly modified)

In this passage, Socrates makes it clear that the pursuit of virtue, the best or most excellent condition of the soul, ought to trump the pursuit of wealth, esteem and honor, and the excellent condition of the body. To place such things as wealth above virtue, and to pursue such things more zealously, is to turn the proper value scheme on its head. Attaching the appropriate importance to virtue is such a benefit, and failure to do so such a shame, that, as Socrates tells us, he spends all his time going around exhorting and persuading people to care for virtue above wealth and the like. He does so in his customary manner of confronting others to elicit their claims to care for virtue above other things. When they make such claims, he tests them and, if he finds that their claims do not hold good, he reproaches them. He goes so far as to claim that virtue is not only more important than wealth and other goods, but is actually the source of their goodness. Clearly, Socrates advocates the single-minded pursuit of virtue.

On the other hand, Socrates also makes various claims to the effect that the practice of philosophy, to which he devotes his life, is the greatest good or the thing that produces happiness<sup>3</sup>. Vlastos is not the only scholar to pick up on this and use it to argue forcefully that Socrates is happy; Brickhouse and Smith do so, as well<sup>4</sup>. So at

---

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the pursuit of virtue and the practice of philosophy amount to the very same thing, for Socrates.

<sup>4</sup> They argue that happiness derives from good activity, and that one activity in particular stands out in Socrates' life: his practice of philosophy, or the examination of himself and others.

It is precisely this activity, according to Socrates, that has made his life worthwhile. Socrates shows that he regards this activity as necessary for happiness when he says, "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being" (*Ap.* 38a5-6). He goes on to show that he thinks it is sufficient for happiness when he indicates that so long as he could engage in this activity, Socrates would consider himself happy: he would count it as an "inconceivable happiness"

38a, quoted above, Socrates says that there is no greater good than the daily discussion of virtue, which Socrates wholeheartedly engages in, while encouraging others to do the same. But, plausibly, if this practice is the greatest good for humans, then those who engage in it – and thereby attain this highest good – are happy. Indeed, we might think that Socrates expresses this idea quite explicitly at 41b1-c7, when he describes what life in Hades might be like:

It would be a wonderful way for me to spend my time whenever I met Palamedes and Ajax, the son of Telamon, and any other of the men of old who died through an unjust conviction, to compare my experience with theirs. I think it would be pleasant. Most important, I could spend my time testing and examining people there, as I do here, as to who among them is wise, and who thinks he is, but is not. What would one not give, gentlemen of the jury, for the opportunity to examine the man who led the great expedition against Troy, or Odysseus, or Sisyphus, and innumerable other men and women one could mention? It would be an extraordinary happiness (ἀμήχανον ἄν εἴη εὐδαιμονίας) to talk with them, to keep company with them and examine them. In any case, they would certainly not put one to death for doing so. They are happier (εὐδαιμονέστεροι) there than we are here in other respects, and for the rest of time they are deathless, if indeed what we are told is true. (*Ap.* 41b1-c7; Grube trans.)

In this passage, Socrates imagines himself continuing in the afterlife in Hades his daily practice of philosophy. He imagines himself doing just what he is doing here: talking to people about virtue, and testing and examining those who think they are wise to see if they really are wise. The only apparent differences are the notoriety of his interlocutors and the lack of limitations on how long this practice can continue, since the participants would be “deathless”. But if the limitless continuation of his

---

(*Ap.* 41c3-4) if death offers him the opportunity to pursue his mission with the dead in Hades. (T. C. BRICKHOUSE AND N. D. SMITH, *Plato's Socrates*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 129-130)

current activities – albeit with more famous interlocutors – would be “extraordinary happiness”, then it seems that Socrates must be happy now and in this life. For in this life he practices constantly the very same activities that are alleged to bring extraordinary happiness in the next life. If this is what brings happiness in the next life, it is plausible to think that this same thing brings happiness in this life, as well.

There is quite a bit of evidence, then, especially in the *Apology*, that seems to suggest that Socrates is happy. Nevertheless, I do not think that this portrait of Socrates can be sustained. To show this, I will argue that a famous argument in the *Apology*, that death is one of two things, either of which is good, has implications for how happy Socrates can take himself to be. Indeed, the argument shows that Socrates must take himself to fall short of happiness. I will then suggest that given certain Socratic commitments that are widely attested in the dialogues, this is exactly what we should expect from Socrates. Finally, I will consider how to account for the apparent evidence in the *Apology* that Socrates does count himself happy.

## **2. Evidence against the powerful portrait**

### 2.1 *Apology* 40c5-41a8

There is clear evidence in the *Apology* that Socrates is not happy. The passage I want to focus on is a familiar one, the so-called “death is one of two things” argument at 40c5-41a8. Here is the passage:

Let us reflect in this way, too, that there is good hope that death is a blessing, for it is one of two things: either the dead are nothing and have no perception of anything, or it is, as we are told, a change and a relocating for the soul from here to another place. If it is complete lack of perception, like a dreamless

sleep, then death would be a great advantage. For I think that if one had to pick out that night during which a man slept soundly and did not dream, put beside it the other nights and days of his life, and then see how many days and nights had been better and more pleasant than that night, not only a private person but the great king would find them easy to count compared with the other days and nights. If death is like this I say it is an advantage, for all eternity would then seem to be no more than a single night. If, on the other hand, death is a change from here to another place, and what we are told is true and all who have died are there, what greater blessing could there be, gentlemen of the jury? If anyone arriving in Hades will have escaped from those who call themselves jurymen here, and will find those true jurymen who are said to sit in judgment there, Minos and Rhadamanthus and Aeacus and Triptolemus and the other demi-gods who have been upright in their own life, would that be a poor kind of change? Again, what would one of you give to keep company with Orpheus and Musaeus, Hesiod and Homer? I am willing to die many times if that is true. (*Ap.* 40c5-41a8; Grube trans.)

As Socrates formulates it, the argument is a simple constructive dilemma. Death is one of two things. Either the dead are nothing and have no perception of anything, or death is a change and relocating of the soul from here to another place. Either way, it is a great advantage. So, death is a great advantage. The passage is familiar not only to scholars, but also to many undergraduates, who have been given the passage as an example of how *not* to argue. It is, of course, valid. But each of the premises has been questioned. Plato scholars have tended to agree that there is something wrong with the argument, and as a result some have tried to downplay Socrates' reliance on it, suggesting that he does not mean it seriously, or that he does not mean it to bear much weight, or that he means it to be persuasive only to the non-philosophical members of the jury. I will return to the merits of the argument momentarily. For now, suffice it to note that Socrates certainly seems to take it seriously. If it did not strike us as a bad argument, we would not doubt that Socrates means it seriously.

Supposing he does mean it seriously, it has a simple and striking implication for our main question, whether Socrates was happy. The first of the two possibilities is that the dead are nothing and have no perception of anything. Put another way, after you die you no longer exist. Call this ‘annihilationism’. What is striking is that Socrates claims that if annihilationism is true, then death is a great advantage. But to say that annihilation would be a great advantage for Socrates is to say that he would be better off not existing at all than to go on living. Someone who would be better off not existing at all than to go on living is not happy<sup>5</sup>. So Socrates, at least by his own lights, is not happy, for he thinks annihilation would be an advantage for him<sup>6</sup>. Supposing Socrates means the argument seriously, then, it puts a ceiling on how happy we can take Socrates to take himself to be: that ceiling is just short of minimally happy.

That is the simple and striking implication of the argument. Now let’s address the objection that Socrates couldn’t mean such a bad argument seriously. The objection is motivated by charity, though it is not clear that this sort of charity should

---

<sup>5</sup> Someone might object at this point that perhaps Socrates is not comparing annihilation with his current condition, but with an expected future condition. Perhaps Socrates anticipates a deterioration of his physical or mental health, which would make his life *no longer* worth living, even if it has been worth living up to this point. And so we needn’t conclude that Socrates fails to count himself happy at the time of his trial. This is consistent with his conclusion, but it ignores the way he establishes his conclusion. He establishes his conclusion by noting that most days of a person’s life fail to measure up to a period of completely senseless sleep. If he thought his own life an exception to this general claim, but failed to say so or to explain how it is an exception, then his argument is misleading and fails to establish his conclusion. And so it could hardly count as an adequate consolation for his companions and the sympathetic jurors who are upset about his sentence.

<sup>6</sup> Notice that this argument does not entail that Socrates is worse off than others. Indeed, the general way he puts the point, appealing “not only to a private person but [to] the great king”, suggests that most or even all people would be better off dead. It may even be that Socrates is better off than most or all other people. The fact that he has rid himself of ignorance of his own ignorance, and therefore is less likely unwittingly to act in harmful ways out of a false pretension to knowledge, suggests that he is better off than most.

rule the day. We find a great number of questionable arguments in Plato's corpus that seem to be meant seriously. Just one that comes to mind is the argument for the immortality of the soul in *Republic X*, which Julia Annas calls "one of the few embarrassingly bad arguments in Plato"<sup>7</sup>. Yet good or embarrassingly bad, it is pretty clear that Socrates means it. The mere fact that an argument is bad is not sufficient reason to think Socrates is not putting it forward seriously. Regardless, though, I do not think that the "death is one of two things" argument is embarrassingly bad. Though I do not want to dwell too long on it, I do want to address some common objections<sup>8</sup>.

One objection is to the first premise, that death is one of two things. Objectors often note that Socrates hardly canvasses all the possibilities. In addition to annihilation and an afterlife that is relatively pleasant and justly organized, we might consider all sorts of other, hellish versions of the afterlife. Perhaps the just and the unjust are tormented alike, or perhaps even the unjust are given preferential treatment. But, so long as he does not rule out such possibilities, Socrates cannot reasonably conclude that death is a great good. I think that this objection can be met, or at least postponed. In its most general form, as he presents it initially, the first premise is simply that either death is annihilation, or it is a relocation to another place. And this is a pretty plausible premise. What would the alternatives be? Perhaps remaining in exactly the same place, as a shade among men? That is possible, but unlikely, and at

---

<sup>7</sup> J. ANNAS, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 344.

<sup>8</sup> My general line of interpretation has affinities with the excellent and detailed interpretation of the argument in E. AUSTIN, *Prudence and the Fear of Death in Plato's Apology*, *Ancient Philosophy*, 30, 2010, pp. 39-55.

any rate may count loosely as a “relocation”, since one is no longer “in” a body. In any case, the first premise is plausible even if not a necessary truth. Any problems along the lines of the first objection are really problems with how the relocation is characterized, so let’s turn to the third premise, that if death is a relocation it is an advantage.

This is where the first objection really gets its bite: Why think that the relocation is to a good state? I suggest (along with Rudebusch, Austin<sup>9</sup>) that Socrates feels entitled to this premise because of his commitment to the goodness of the gods. Socrates thinks that the gods are good, and therefore are producers of good things only and are concerned with the welfare of humans. Moreover, at this point Socrates is addressing that subset of the jurors who voted for his acquittal, and he may therefore have reason to believe that his intended audience will be inclined to agree with him on the goodness of the gods. (As a rhetorical point, in a trial centered on charges of impiety, any member of the jury would be hard pressed to maintain publicly that the gods are not good.) Though he would not be entitled to the third premise if he lacked confidence in the goodness of the gods, this very confidence underwrites the plausibility of the third premise.

The second premise is the most interesting for our purposes: If death is annihilation, then it would be an advantage. Socrates compares annihilation to a dreamless sleep. Someone might object along the following lines: Annihilation is disanalogous to a dreamless sleep in at least one respect, for you do not wake up from

---

<sup>9</sup> See G. RUDEBUSCH, *Socrates, Pleasure, and Value*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, ch. 6; AUSTIN, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

annihilation. Plausibly, a dreamless sleep is pleasant only because you wake up from it, or you feel refreshed by it, or something of that sort. That is, a dreamless sleep is pleasant only because it is followed by conscious states. But annihilation is not like that; it is not followed by conscious states. So, we have no reason to think that annihilation would be pleasant. Besides, to make the obvious point, once you are annihilated there is no *you* there to be the subject of pleasant experiences! Obviously, annihilation cannot be more pleasant than this life, for it cannot be pleasant at all. But if all this is right, Socrates is either making a serious blunder or, in some sense, he does not mean the argument seriously.

We ought to agree with the objector all the way up to the last sentence. Of course utter and eternal lack of consciousness is not pleasant. (There are people who deny that, but it seems obvious to me<sup>10</sup>.) Indeed, it is neither pleasant nor painful; it is nothing. But this is all Socrates needs to make his case. His point is that such a state is an improvement, an advantage, a gain. This, at heart, is not a point about the quality of the state of annihilation, but a point about the quality of life now. If nothingness is a gain, then this life is relatively worse than nothingness. But if this life is relatively worse than nothingness, then it is bad on an absolute scale. Socrates' claim that if death is annihilation then it is a great gain is plausible just in case this life is bad. If charity demands that we formulate the argument in a plausible way so far as that coheres well with the text, then charity demands that we attribute to Socrates a commitment to his life being bad. If Socrates thinks that annihilation would be a great

---

<sup>10</sup> See RUDEBUSCH, *op. cit.*, ch. 6.

gain, then he does not think that he is happy. The truly charitable interpretation has it that Socrates is giving a reasonably good argument, rather than supposing that the argument is so bad that Socrates must not have been committed to it.

One more objection is worth considering. This is not an objection to the argument itself, but to Socrates' entitlement to give the argument. This argument is Socrates' second argument in the *Apology* that death should not be feared. The first (29a-c) was essentially an argument from epistemic modesty: No one knows whether death is good or bad; we do know that injustice is bad; one should not fear a known bad over an unknown thing that may be good or bad; so, we should not fear death over injustice. The objection is that Socrates' first argument depends on epistemic modesty, but the "death is one of two things" argument requires confident judgment. Indeed, the final lines of the *Apology* seem to reinforce Socrates' epistemic modesty: "I go to die; you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god." Two considerations should serve to blunt this objection. First, Socratic standards of knowledge are high, and confident or reasoned judgment is consistent with lack of knowledge<sup>11</sup>. Second, Socrates has new information that increases his confidence that death will be good, at least for him. When he gave the first, epistemically modest argument, he was merely risking death. Death was one of the possible sentences he faced, if convicted. When he gives the "death is one of two

---

<sup>11</sup> That is to say, Socrates' epistemological commitments will sometimes underwrite statements of the following form: 'I have excellent reasons to believe that *p* and I have no doubt that *p*, and yet I fail to know that *p*.'

things” argument, he is no longer *risking* death, but *facing* it<sup>12</sup>. Famously, Socrates has a *daimonion* that warns him away from wrong courses of action. Given that Socrates has gone through his whole trial without a peep from the *daimonion*, he has confidence that there was not a better course of action available to him. And this gives him some reason to believe that death will not be bad for him, for he almost certainly could have avoided the death penalty had he approached his defense differently.

The upshot is that Socrates is giving a valid argument whose premises he has reason to support. We should take him to be endorsing the argument. That is, we should take him to be endorsing the premises and the conclusion. And one of those premises clearly entails that he is not happy. So, we should take him to be committed to that entailment, as well.

## 2.2 Two Socratic Commitments

The “death is one of two things” argument provides evidence that Socrates was not happy. I suggest that two Socratic commitments should lead us to expect exactly this. Socrates takes himself to lack moral knowledge, or virtue<sup>13</sup>. And, Socrates takes virtue to be necessary for happiness. These two commitments immediately and obviously entail that Socrates is not happy. Since the entailment is immediate and

---

<sup>12</sup> AUSTIN, *op. cit.*, makes the point nicely.

<sup>13</sup> I take it that, for Socrates, virtue just is moral knowledge. From here on, I will rarely distinguish between virtue and moral knowledge. So long as moral knowledge is at least necessary for virtue, the arguments will be unaffected. Sometimes I will use the term ‘wisdom’ in a way I intend to be synonymous with ‘moral knowledge’.

obvious, if we take Socrates actually to be committed to these two propositions, we should also take him to deny that he is happy.

Each of the two commitments has been the subject of a great deal of scholarly literature, and it is beyond the scope of the present paper to engage this literature in anything approaching a comprehensive way. I think that Socrates is committed to these two propositions, but my main objective is to note that *if* Socrates is committed to both propositions, that would explain why he was prepared to give an argument at *Apology* 40c-41a that entails that he is not happy. Moreover, those readers who take Socrates to be committed to these two propositions should be prepared to endorse my main thesis, that Socrates takes himself not to be happy, without further ado. However, since one important way of motivating the powerful portrait of a happy Socrates depends on rejecting as Socratic a commitment to the necessity of virtue for happiness, I will devote some space to this necessity thesis<sup>14</sup>.

Brickhouse and Smith maintain that Socrates takes himself to be happy. Their strategy is to argue that the *Apology* shows that one can be good and happy without being virtuous. They acknowledge that at *Ap.* 21b1-d7 Socrates claims that he does not possess moral knowledge, and they take this to indicate that he lacks virtue. Despite this, however, Socrates seems to take himself to be both good and impervious to attempts to harm him. Only a few pages after his disavowal of moral knowledge, he tells the jury:

---

<sup>14</sup> For treatments of the claim that Socrates took himself to lack moral knowledge or virtue, see H. BENSON, *Socratic Wisdom: The Model of Knowledge in Plato's Early Dialogues*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, ch. 8; BRICKHOUSE AND SMITH, *op. cit.*; and the works cited therein.

“Be sure that if you kill the sort of man I say I am, you will not harm me more than yourselves. Neither Meletus nor Anytus can harm me in any way; he could not harm me, for I do not think it is permitted that a better man be harmed by a worse; certainly he might kill me, or perhaps banish or disfranchise me, which he and maybe others think to be great harm, but I do not think so. I think he is doing himself much greater harm doing what he is doing now, attempting to have a man executed unjustly.” (*Ap.* 30c7-d6; Grube trans.)

And at the end of his trial, after he has been sentenced to death, Socrates exhorts the jury:

You too must be of good hope as regards death, gentlemen of the jury, and keep this one truth in mind, that a good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death, and that his affairs are not neglected by the gods. What has happened to me now has not happened of itself, but it is clear to me that it was better for me to die now and to escape from trouble. That is why my divine sign did not oppose me at any point.” (*Ap.* 41c8-d6; Grube trans.)

Since Socrates’ goodness seems to guarantee that he cannot be harmed, and since one who is never harmed (and generally attains what is “better”) is plausibly thought to be happy, Brickhouse and Smith conclude that Socrates is happy. But since Socrates’ goodness does not consist in virtue, virtue must not be necessary for happiness.

Despite the initial plausibility of their interpretation, Brickhouse and Smith depend too much on considering these two brief passages in the *Apology* in isolation from the rest of the Platonic corpus. There are several passages that suggest quite clearly that virtue is necessary for happiness. Perhaps the clearest of these is *Euthydemus* 278-282, which Brickhouse and Smith recognize is potentially

problematic for their view<sup>15</sup>. This passage is standardly taken to be an argument for the necessity and sufficiency of virtue for happiness. On my interpretation, Socrates does not argue, claim, or presuppose that virtue is sufficient for happiness<sup>16</sup>. But he clearly argues that virtue is necessary for happiness. Indeed, there seem to be at least two arguments for this claim. At 280b-281d, Socrates argues that wisdom is necessary for correct use, that correct use is necessary for benefit, and that benefit is necessary for happiness. From this he concludes that wisdom is necessary for happiness. And at 281d-e, Socrates argues that the goodness of all other things requires wisdom, and he has maintained throughout 278-282 that happiness requires goodness. From this he concludes that happiness requires wisdom.

Brickhouse and Smith attempt to downplay the apparent force of this passage in the *Euthydemus* by focusing on the central role of *correct use* in the argument. Two points are central to their treatment of the passage. First, because use is an activity, the importance of correct use seems to cohere nicely with Brickhouse and Smith's focus on virtuous activity, rather than virtue itself, as the thing that directly contributes to happiness. Second, however, they argue that plainly virtue is not necessary for correct use, and so apparently we are not licensed to conclude on the basis of this passage that virtue is necessary for happiness, even if we are licensed to conclude that correct use is necessary for happiness. As evidence, they imagine a "well-intended, but not fully virtuous person who uses his money to buy wheat to sustain his body for

---

<sup>15</sup> BRICKHOUSE AND SMITH, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-131.

<sup>16</sup> In that respect, I am in agreement with Brickhouse and Smith. For a detailed interpretation of *Euthydemus* 278-282, see my paper *Wisdom and Happiness in Euthydemus 278-282*, forthcoming in *Philosophers' Imprint*.

several more hours of philosophical argument to dissuade someone who is thinking about becoming a sophist”<sup>17</sup>. Suppose that a fully virtuous person would do exactly the same thing with her money. Then it seems that both the virtuous and the non-virtuous person have used their money correctly, since (a) we can assume that the virtuous person has used her money correctly, and (b) both the virtuous and the non-virtuous person have used their money in exactly the same way. So, virtue is not necessary for correct use.

This analysis ignores the strong way that Socrates makes his case:

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 men 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? (281a1-b6; my trans.)

Socrates seems to hold that “there is nothing else that produces correct use than knowledge” in any given domain; that knowledge “directs and makes our action correct” with respect to using goods like wealth and health and beauty; that “knowledge provides men with well-doing [i.e., correct action] in all possession and action”; and that there is no “benefit from other possessions without intelligence and

---

<sup>17</sup> BRICKHOUSE AND SMITH, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

wisdom”. But these claims appear to be expressions of the necessity of wisdom or virtue for correct use, full stop. In the face of these claims, it is difficult to maintain that Socrates would deny that virtue is necessary for correct use.

Nevertheless, there is something persuasive about the counterexample Brickhouse and Smith give to this principle. Let us suppose for a moment that, despite the appearances of 281a1-b6, Socrates accepts such counterexamples as disproving the principle that virtue is necessary for correct use. Perhaps, then, Socrates would confess to having overstated his case. What he really means is that wisdom or virtue is the only thing that *reliably* or *consistently* produces correct use. Any other cases of correct use will be somehow accidental or lucky. His overstating the case could then be explained by his conviction that wisdom is required for consistent correct use, and that a life without consistent correct use is not a happy one. So, wisdom is necessary for the sort of consistent correct use that is necessary for happiness, but is not necessary for every particular instance of correct use. Such a view would remain consistent with the protreptic aims of the passage: it still gives Clinias sufficient reason to pursue wisdom.

Would this interpretation give Brickhouse and Smith a way to block the argument to the necessity of virtue for happiness? Not as it stands, for modifying our reconstruction of Socrates’ argument in the way I have just suggested does not alter the conclusion. The argument, as modified, goes as follows: Virtue is necessary for consistent correct use; consistent correct use is necessary for consistent benefit; consistent benefit is necessary for happiness; so, virtue is necessary for happiness. But

perhaps Brickhouse and Smith could block this modified reconstruction of the argument, in light of an important fact about Socrates' life to which they give some attention. Socrates has long been blessed with a *daimonion*, and this *daimonion* is action-guiding. Brickhouse and Smith rely centrally on the *daimonion* to explain Socrates' claim at *Apology* 37b that he has wronged no one. The *daimonion* turns him away, even in small matters, whenever he is about to do something wrong. Because of this, Socrates does not use his possessions incorrectly, that is, in a way that produces harm. And so, because of this divine intervention, Socrates is able to achieve consistent correct use, and so consistent benefit, and so happiness, without being virtuous.

This way of accounting for Socrates' happiness does not fit well with the *Euthydemus* passage, though. For immediately following the text quoted above, Socrates continues:

“Then, by Zeus,” I said, “is there any benefit from other possessions without intelligence and wisdom? Would a man benefit more from possessing many things and doing many things without sense, or from possessing and doing little with sense? Examine it this way. Doing less, wouldn't he err less? And erring less, wouldn't he do less badly? And doing less badly wouldn't he be less miserable?”

“Certainly,” he said.

“Then would someone do less if he were poor, or wealthy?”

“Poor,” he said.

“And if weak or strong?”

“Weak.”

“And if honored or dishonored?”

“Dishonored.”

“And would he do less if courageous and temperate or cowardly?”

“Cowardly.”

“So then also if he were lazy rather than hard-working?”

He agreed.

“And if slow rather than fast, and dull of sight and hearing rather than sharp?”

With all such things we agreed with one another. (281b4-d2; my trans.)

For someone like Socrates who lacks wisdom, doing less is better than doing more, for doing less provides less opportunity for harm and thereby makes one less miserable.

Certainly, to be less miserable is to be further down the continuum toward happiness, but someone properly described as less miserable is not properly described as happy.

Quite the contrary: Socrates is here endorsing the idea that happiness requires wisdom-guided action, while also allowing that the ignorant may be better off – that is, less miserable – by virtue of doing less and so doing less harm to themselves.

Socrates’ *daimonion* acts in a way that is consistent with this picture. The *daimonion* directs Socrates only *away* from particular actions, never *toward* them. That is, the *daimonion*’s guidance is always for Socrates to refrain from action that would be harmful, but is never toward action that would be beneficial. Given Socrates’ account in the *Euthydemus*, this is exactly the sort of behavior we would expect from a benevolent *daimonion* with an ignorant man in its charge, for an ignorant man is better off doing less. The *daimonion* is a great blessing to Socrates because it makes him less miserable. But this is not at all to say that it makes him happy<sup>18</sup>.

---

<sup>18</sup> Though Brickhouse and Smith make the *daimonion* central to their account of Socrates’ goodness (and so his happiness), they seem to recognize some of the limitations of the *daimonion* (BRICKHOUSE AND SMITH, *op. cit.*, p.133): “But in spite of the enormous benefit afforded him by the daimonic alarms that have warned him away from the commission of evil, his *daimonion* would nevertheless not allow him to draw authoritative inferences regarding what course of action would express moral virtue.”

The next passage in the *Euthydemus* confirms this view, for here we have the argument that goodness requires wisdom.

“In sum, Clinias,” I said, “it is likely that concerning all the things that we first called goods, the account of them is not that they are by nature goods just by themselves, but rather it seems to be this: If ignorance leads them, they are greater evils than their opposites, insofar as they are better able to serve the evil master; but if intelligence and wisdom lead them, they are greater goods, though just by themselves neither sort is of any value.”

He said, “Apparently, it seems to be just as you say.”

“Then what follows from the things we’ve said? Is it anything other than that none of the other things is either good or evil, but of these two, wisdom is good, and ignorance is evil?”

He agreed. (281d2-e5; my trans.)

Here Socrates argues that health, wealth, and the other recognized goods are greater evils than their contraries if used without wisdom, but greater goods than their contraries if used with wisdom. From this he concludes that each recognized good other than wisdom is just by itself neither good nor evil, and so wisdom is the only good just by itself<sup>19</sup>. The upshot of the argument is, again, that wisdom is required for goodness. This is further strong and explicit evidence that virtue (moral knowledge) is

---

<sup>19</sup> T. IRWIN, *Plato’s Ethics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 57 usefully describes the two main interpretations of this passage:

*The Moderate View*: “When Socrates says that the recognized goods are not goods ‘in themselves’, he means that they are not goods when they are divorced from wisdom. When he concludes that wisdom is the only good, he means simply that only wisdom is good all by itself, apart from any combination with other things.”

*The Extreme View*: “When Socrates says that the recognized goods are not goods ‘in themselves’, he means that they are not goods; any goodness belongs to the wise use of them, not to the recognized goods themselves. When Socrates concludes that wisdom is the only good, he means that nothing else is good.”

As I have put it, Socrates is expressing the moderate view. If he is instead expressing the extreme view, that only strengthens my case in the present context.

necessary for happiness. Socrates' summary statements confirm this reading of these arguments in the *Euthydemus*:

Then let us consider the consequence of this. Since we all want to be happy, and since we appear to become happy by using things and using them correctly, and since it is knowledge that provides the correctness and good fortune, it is necessary, it seems, for all men to prepare themselves in every way for this: how they will become as wise as possible. (282a1-6; my trans.)

Now then, since you believe both that it can be taught and that it is the only existing thing which makes a man happy and fortunate, surely you would agree that it is necessary to love wisdom and you mean to do this yourself. (282c8-d2; Sprague trans.)

Again, the explicit focus is on the necessity of wisdom for happiness.

Other texts, too, support the necessity of virtue for happiness. Consider the following passage, which occurs near the end of the *Charmides*.

Socrates: All this time you've been leading me right round in a circle and concealing from me that it was not living knowledgably that was making us fare well and be happy, even if we possessed all the other knowledges put together, but that we have to have this one knowledge of good and evil. Because, Critias, if you consent to take away this knowledge from the other knowledges, will medicine any the less produce health, or cobbling produce shoes, or the art of weaving produce clothes, or will the pilot's art any the less prevent us from dying at sea or the general's art in war?

Critias: They will do it just the same.

Socrates: But my dear Critias, our chance of getting any of these things well and beneficially done will have vanished if this is lacking. (*Charm.* 174b11-d1; Sprague trans., with changes)

Here Socrates tells us that we require the knowledge of good and evil – which just is moral knowledge or virtue<sup>20</sup> – in order to “fare well and be happy”. Without it, our chance of doing things “well and beneficially . . . will have vanished”. This is an

---

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., *Laches* 199c-e.

explicit claim that virtue is necessary for happiness. This passage, then, provides strong evidence to corroborate the evidence from the *Euthydemus* that Socrates is committed to the necessity of virtue for happiness.

### 3. Revisiting the evidence for the powerful portrait

There is a great deal of evidence that Socrates is committed to the necessity of virtue for happiness. What, then, should we make of the passages at *Ap.* 30c-d and 41c-d, which Brickhouse and Smith take to show that a good man cannot be harmed, that Socrates is a good man, and that Socrates is therefore happy? One possible response, which I am not much interested in, is to suppose that Socrates simply does not express a consistent view on the matter. Perhaps this is right, but here I take it for granted that this is an interpretation of last resort. Another response is to recognize that these passages really do provide support for the view that by his own lights Socrates is happy, but to suppose that he must here be speaking loosely, given the strong evidence to the contrary outside of these passages. Socrates may here express a proposition that goes beyond his own considered judgment, perhaps because of the rhetorically charged situation of the *Apology*.

While I might be content to retreat to this second response if necessary, it would be more satisfying if we could read these passages in a way that shows them to be consistent with the accounts of the necessity of virtue for happiness we find in many other parts of the Platonic corpus, as well as the evidence of the “death is one of two things” argument. I propose just such a reading. Again, here are the passages:

“Be sure that if you kill the sort of man I say I am, you will not harm me more than yourselves. Neither Meletus nor Anytus can harm me in any way; he could not harm me, for I do not think it is permitted that a better man be harmed by a worse; certainly he might kill me, or perhaps banish or disfranchise me, which he and maybe others think to be great harm, but I do not think so. I think he is doing himself much greater harm doing what he is doing now, attempting to have a man executed unjustly.” (*Ap.* 30c7-d6; Grube trans.)

You too must be of good hope as regards death, gentlemen of the jury, and keep this one truth in mind, that a good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death, and that his affairs are not neglected by the gods. What has happened to me now has not happened of itself, but it is clear to me that it was better for me to die now and to escape from trouble. That is why my divine sign did not oppose me at any point.” (*Ap.* 41c8-d6; Grube trans.)

The first thing to notice is what Socrates does *not* say in these passages. First, Socrates never claims either that he himself is happy or that good men are happy. Indeed, he never mentions happiness at all. Second, he never claims that benefits come to him because of his goodness. As with happiness, he never mentions benefit at all, but only harm. The absence of harm alone is not sufficient to make one happy; recall that at *Euthydemus* 280b-281d Socrates argues that benefit is necessary for happiness. He does at one point make a comparative claim, that “it was better for me to die now and to escape from trouble”, but it is far from clear that he means to endorse the thesis that death is positively a benefit to him. Perhaps death is just the removal of certain harms, or “troubles”. This would certainly be the case if death is annihilation. Put all this together and it is far from clear that Socrates is making any claims about happiness or the connection between goodness and happiness in these passages.

Not only this, but Socrates never even explicitly claims to be good in these passages. Again, he makes (or rather, strongly implies) a comparative claim: He is better than Meletus and Anytus. But 30c-d never even mentions a good man. At 41c-d, Socrates does mention a good man, but again it is not at all obvious that he means to be calling himself good. Socrates says these things in his remarks to those members of the jury who voted to acquit him, and his remarks (as is the case at 30c-d) are aimed at encouraging the members of the jury to pursue and fear the right sorts of things. They should pursue wisdom and virtue rather than money and power, and they should fear ignorance rather than death<sup>21</sup>. The lesson of the *Euthydemus* is that the wise and virtuous will gain all the happiness available to them in their circumstances, and so wisdom is to be pursued over all else, including longer life. The lesson of 41c-d is the same: the jury should attend to virtue rather than things like preserving their lives. They should fear ignorance rather than death, for if they attain wisdom they will gain all the happiness available to them in their circumstances, but if they remain ignorant even the very things they care about will bring them harm.

Likewise at 30c-d, Socrates is encouraging the jury to give supreme attention to virtue, for without virtue even the things one pursues may cause one great harm. The passage calls to mind the *Gorgias*, where Socrates argues that suffering injustice is less harmful than acting unjustly (see esp. 469ff). In the *Gorgias*, Socrates allows that we should try to avoid the harm of suffering injustice (469c), but that above all we should try to avoid the great harm of acting unjustly.

---

<sup>21</sup> See BENSON, *op. cit.*, pp. 243-247, for an interpretation along these lines.

At 30c-d, Socrates begins and ends the passage with comparative claims: “harm me more than yourselves”; “which he and others think to be a *great* harm” (emphasis mine); “he is doing himself much greater harm”. But in the middle, he makes claims that seem to be categorical: “Neither Meletus nor Anytus can harm me in any way”; “I do not think it is permitted that a better man be harmed by a worse”. I propose that we read the comparative claims throughout, so that the apparent categorical claims are not actually categorical. Some evidence for this comes at 37b-c, where Socrates says that imprisonment, a fine, and exile are things that “I know very well to be an evil”. This contradicts the categorical reading of 30c-d. If Socrates is allowing that these may be harms (and harms Meletus and Anytus could inflict on him), though not great harms in comparison with acting unjustly, the apparent inconsistency is dissolved. Again, this reading fits well with the surrounding context: 30c-d is flanked on one side by the famous passage in which Socrates describes his divine mission of exhorting the Athenians not to care for wealth, reputation, and honors while ignoring wisdom, truth, and the best possible state of the soul (28e-30b); and it is flanked on the other side by the famous metaphor of Socrates as a gadfly stirring up Athens, a great horse (30e-31b). The point of the larger passage is to exhort the Athenians to direct their efforts to the right sorts of pursuits. The comparative reading fits this context nicely, for it emphasizes that the greatest harm comes to those who act without regard for the condition of their souls.

Apart from these considerations, it is highly questionable whether Socrates could consistently maintain that he is good but not wise, as he must on Brickhouse and

Smith's account. There is some evidence to think that, according to Socrates, goodness entails wisdom. There is the suggestive evidence that 'good' and 'wise' often occur as a pair of adjectives describing a person. But this is merely suggestive. There is a passage at the end of the first protreptic of the *Euthydemus* that seems to indicate (though not quite decisively) that wisdom is required for goodness: Socrates encourages Euthydemus and Dionysodorus to "start where I left off and show the boy what follows next: whether he ought to acquire every sort of knowledge, or whether there is one sort that he ought to get in order to be a happy man and a good one, and what it is" (282e; Sprague trans.). One passage, though, seems to me to be decisive, or very close to it: *Laches* 194d1-3. Nicias tells Socrates (Sprague trans): "I have often heard you say that every one of us is good with respect to that in which he is wise and bad in respect to that in which he is ignorant." Socrates confirms that he has often said this: "By heaven you are right, Nicias." The significance of the passage is plain: Goodness entails wisdom. Someone might object that the principle is ambiguous between (i) *If a person is wise with respect to x, then she is good with respect to x* and (ii) *A person is good with respect to x just in case she is wise with respect to x*. The first formulation leaves room for someone who lacks wisdom but is nevertheless not ignorant (someone like Socrates?) to be good. Perhaps. But Nicias' next line (4-5) shows that he has the second formulation in mind: "Then if the courageous man is good, it is clear that he is wise<sup>22</sup>." The inference is not immediately from courageous to wise, but from good to wise, and the principle is taken from Socrates' own (oft

---

<sup>22</sup> Here I depart from Sprague's "if a man is really courageous", for the text reads as follows: "Οὐκοῦν εἴπερ ὁ ἀνδρεῖος ἀγαθός, δῆλον ὅτι σοφός ἐστιν."

repeated) conviction. I submit that we have no reason to think that Socrates (or the author, for that matter) has in mind a different formulation of the principle than Nicias does.

There is another passage that Brickhouse and Smith take to show that Socrates is happy: *Apology* 41c<sup>23</sup>. Here Socrates says that “it would be an extraordinary happiness to talk with” the likes of Odysseus or Sisyphus, “to keep company with them and examine them” (Grube trans.). But of course, keeping company with others and examining them is precisely what Socrates spends his time doing in this life. If the very same activity that Socrates devotes himself to in this life would be an extraordinary happiness in the next, then it would seem that Socrates must be happy in this life as well. But again, Socrates is not virtuous, and so virtue must not (though elenctic activity may) be necessary for happiness. To put it another way, if elenctic activity suffices for happiness but not for virtue, then virtue is not necessary for happiness.

Two observations should serve to undermine the apparent force of this passage. First, this passage, like those considered above, occurs in a context in which Socrates is trying to persuade the jurors to fear death less than they fear ignorance or vice. The focus here is not so much on the distinctiveness of the activity (elenctic activity), but on the superior quality of people with whom Socrates can engage in such activity (great heroes), and on the lack of obstacles (like hostile juries) to engaging in such activity. Given such a set of interlocutors and an unlimited amount of time to

---

<sup>23</sup> BRICKHOUSE AND SMITH, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-130.

talk with them, Socrates may even have high hopes that he will find the wisdom he seeks<sup>24</sup>. The state of affairs he describes, then, is a “happy” one. This shift from talking of Socrates as happy to talking about a happy state of affairs should not be viewed with suspicion. First, Socrates never says explicitly in this passage that he means to describe himself (or rather, his hypothetical future self) as happy. And second, there is a precedent in the *Apology* for use of the term ‘happiness’ as applied to states of affairs. At 25b, Socrates says that “it would be a great happiness” were it the case that he alone corrupted the youth, while all others improved them. But clearly he does not mean to attribute happiness to himself or any particular individual here. Rather, he means something like ‘a very happy state of affairs’. Indeed, this is exactly how Grube translates it<sup>25</sup>.

Second, and even more tellingly, only one page earlier (40c-d) Socrates claims that if “the dead are nothing and have no perception of anything”, then he would count

---

<sup>24</sup> Constructivists, who maintain that Socrates’ elenctic activity may result not only in the exposure of ignorance but also in the attainment of knowledge, can allow that Socrates may find this wisdom through elenctic activity even if none of his interlocutors is wise either. Non-constructivists, too, may suppose that Socrates could find this wisdom through elenctic activity: Perhaps at least one of these great men and women is wise, can be discovered to be wise through elenctic activity, and can impart this wisdom to Socrates.

<sup>25</sup> In the only other use of ‘εὐδαιμονία’ or one of its cognates in the *Apology* outside of 41c, Socrates again uses it in a way that cannot quite be taken as a straightforward attribution of genuine happiness to some individual. At 36d-e, he tells the *entire* jury, “The Olympian victor makes you think yourself happy; I make you be happy.” But surely Socrates does not think that many (or perhaps even any) of the jurors are happy. He must mean rather that he brings them closer to attaining happiness, or something of the sort. But then Socrates’ imagined afterlife spent examining the great men and women of the past may also be interpreted this way: It brings Socrates closer to happiness than his current state. The lines that follow the claim about extraordinary happiness at 41c4 may be interpreted along the same lines: “[Those in Hades] are happier than we are here in other respects.” (c5-6) In what respects are they happier? The line preceding gives us one respect: They would not be put to death for engaging in philosophical activity. The line following may give us another (though this is unclear): For the rest of time they are deathless. In either case, an impediment to their attaining the wisdom required for happiness is removed and so they are better off with respect to happiness, even if they have not actually attained it.

death as “a great advantage”. In other words, as I discussed above, Socrates says that annihilation would be a great gain for him. For someone for whom annihilation would be a great gain, life is not happy. So, whatever Socrates means at 41c, he does not mean to suggest that he is now happy. Perhaps what he means is to emphasize that, while he values his investigations now, it would really be something special if he gained access to the likes of Homer and Ajax and Odysseus. And maybe he even thinks such investigations might lead to his happiness. But we should not infer that he is happy now.

Against a powerful portrait of a happy Socrates, I have argued that there is strong evidence from the *Apology* that Socrates takes himself not to be happy. I noted that this is to be expected if Socrates thinks (i) that he lacks moral knowledge, or virtue, and (ii) that moral knowledge is necessary for happiness. In order to resist one way of motivating the powerful portrait, I argued that there is strong evidence that Socrates is committed to the necessity of moral knowledge for happiness. Finally, I argued that the apparent evidence from the *Apology* for the powerful portrait is merely apparent evidence. I conclude that Socrates does not take himself to be happy. Those who are prepared to endorse (i) and (ii) should also be prepared to endorse this conclusion. But even those who would deny that Socrates holds one or the other of these two propositions must face up to the clear implication of the argument of *Apology* 40c-41a, and offer either some other explanation (other than Socrates’ commitment to the above two propositions) of Socrates’ failure to achieve happiness,

or a plausible interpretation of the argument on which it does not have what I have identified as the clear implication. I contend that the latter, at least, is a difficult task and unlikely to be carried through successfully.

This, for me at any rate, is a disappointing conclusion. But it is no less accurate for being disappointing. There is some consolation to be had, though. For one, Socrates is, by his own lights, less miserable than most others. For another, to the end he spent his days actively searching for happiness, encouraging others to do the same. He had cleared away many of the impediments to happiness, such as ignorance of one's own ignorance, and he has proved an inspiration to a long tradition of philosophers who followed him in trying to achieve and account for happiness<sup>26</sup>.

---

<sup>26</sup> For helpful comments on earlier drafts of parts or the whole of this paper, I am grateful to audiences at the Academy of Athens, the 2012 Arizona Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy (hosted by the University of Arizona), Iowa State University, the Mahindra Humanities Center at Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Toronto, as well as to Hugh Benson, Bryan Reece, Rachel Singpurwalla, and Nick Smith.