

Socratic dialogue

Socrates: Antisthenes, greetings to you on this glorious day.

Antisthenes: Greetings, Socrates.

Socrates: Is that a knife and a wet stone I see in your hand? For what purpose does a man of your stature personally concern himself with maintenance of tools? Do you not possess multitude of servants to attend to such matters?

Antisthenes: I am afraid, dear Socrates, the purpose of this knife is one I must fulfill myself. It is true, I own servants to maintain my estate, kill the animals I wish to eat, cut fruit for the celebrations I host... but justice, justice must be carried out by my own hand.

Socrates: Justice against whom? Who has wronged you to such depth that retaliation must be administered by you and you alone?

Antisthenes: It pains me to say it was my own wife. She laid with another man.

Socrates: Apologies, i am so sorry to hear that, my friend. Was it a transgression of passion? Did she act without contemplating the consequences of her actions and expressed regret afterwards?

Antisthenes: I do not believe it so. She may have expressed regret, but here actions were her choice. She has decided to humiliate me, and my entire family, of her own free will.

Socrates: What do you imagine that means? To possess free will?

Antisthenes: She had a choice to make. Staying faithful or destroying me. She chose the latter. Nobody forced her to do it, nobody put a knife to her throat. She acted voluntarily.

Socrates: I see. But surely there must have been circumstances external to her own mind which pushed her to make that choice? The circumstances of your marriage which you yourself helped create? The situation she found herself in made her feel lust, loneliness, emptiness, love or boredom, or any combination of feelings that made her act the way she did.

When a poorly treated, hurt beast escapes its cage and tramples over people in the street, is it the fault of the beast, of the fault of the cage? Would you not say, that we are driven by our emotions, yet have little control over them? Surely you have experienced this yourself on occasion even during your own distinguished life?

Antisthenes: Humans are not animals. But I suppose it is true that dark thoughts can encircle any man or woman. But good men and women control their emotions. They have the strength of character to always do what is right, regardless of feelings.

Socrates: And your wife lacked this strength?

Antisthenes: Evidently so.

Socrates: Why do you think that is? What makes your character strong and hers weak? Is it something you possess since birth? Handed down to you by your parents or gods, the same way a man is born tall or short? Is it a short man's fault, that he is short? Is it just and fair to pass moral judgement on a person based on a fluke of birth?

Antisthenes: A man can be born short, but his character is forged during his life by the choices he makes. A man decides to be principled, a woman decided to be faithful. A faithful woman would deal with the same circumstances my wife was in very differently.

Socrates: So the way your wife has lived her life made her an unfaithful woman.

Antisthenes: Yes.

Socrates: But how much say did she have in the way she lived her life? Was she unfaithful when she was a 4 year old girl?

Antisthenes: No, obviously not.

Socrates: Right, her life was completely controlled by her parents at that point. And would continue to be so for a long time. And when she finally reached the age of adulthood, she lived her life and made her decisions using the way of thinking, habits, mindset and patterns of behavior given to her by her parents and her environment at young age, true?

Antisthenes: I guess so.

Socrates: But did she have control over her environment, any more than she had over her height? Where do you draw the line on that circle of causality? At what point does a person exert their own agency in a way not influenced by things they had no control over?

Antisthenes: So you are saying it is her parents' fault for making her the way she is? For screwing up her character and setting her up for life of deceit and wretchedness?

Socrates: To some extent, perhaps. All parents can make mistakes. But what made her parents bad parents?

Antisthenes: Their parents?

Socrates: Exactly! And they were ruined by their parents! Ruined childhood upon ruined childhood! All the way down to the beginning of time... to some original sin, or a quarrel between the gods, or perhaps to nothing at all.

Antisthenes: So you are saying she is innocent? That she should escape punishment? What then becomes of justice, if people's choices are not their own?

Socrates: I do not know. Perhaps punishment is still necessary. Not to punish people for what they have done but to deter them and others from doing so again. But killing your wife might not be justice, but revenge.

Antisthenes: What possible difference could that make? Besides, if what you are saying is true, then I have no choice but to end my wife's life. Everything I know, everything I have done, everything I have seen has brought me to this place, to this choice, to the only way I can make it. If my wife is without sin, then so am I. She is already dead, the fate wills it so. If she had no choice but to betray me, then I have no choice but to kill her.

Socrates: As I have no choice but to try to stop you. Perhaps if we talk more, you will have no choice but to spare her life. It seems true to me, that if one tries to achieve moral virtue he should treat others as if they possess no free will, yet treat himself as if he does. Maybe your character already made the choice for you. Maybe you can force your character into a shape that conforms to your choices. What do you think you will do?

Antisthenes: I don't know. I guess it's not my decision anyway and I will just see what happens when I confront my wife tonight.

Socrates: You wish to talk about it some more?

Antisthenes: No.

keeps sharpening knife in silence