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Plato on the Importance of Philosophy

Plato believes that philosophy and wisdom are valuable and ought to influence how we act.

Practicing philosophy is the way to achieve the “best possible state of the soul” (34), which improves a soul’s life on earth and after death. Philosophy helps a person live meaningfully, avoid harm on earth, and prepare for death and the afterlife. In the Apology, Socrates explains that it is good to practice philosophy because “the unexamined life is not worth living” (41). A life without philosophy is meaningless. A life without philosophy is also harmful. In the Apology, Socrates tells his accusers that by rejecting philosophy, they will be “condemned by truth to wickedness and injustice”, and that they cannot “prevent anyone from reproaching you for not living in the right way” (42). Other people will respond to the injustice that comes from rejecting philosophy. Additionally, unjust actions corrupt the soul whereas just actions benefit the soul, and a life with a corrupted soul is not worth living (50). An individual’s unjust actions can also harm a community - for example, Socrates says in the Crito that escaping from jail would undermine the city’s laws and thus harm the city (53). As Socrates points out in the Apology, an community that is corrupted may in turn corrupt the individual (30). In addition to harm on earth, unjust actions also harm a person in the afterlife. A person who has done evil will be punished. In contrast, the person who practices philosophy may, after death, “escape from human evils” (122).

Plato thinks a philosopher should question their beliefs and continue to search for truth, stick to their beliefs even in the face of danger, face death willingly, not care about bodily pleasures, and not do wrong. Socrates frequently questions his beliefs and other people’s beliefs. In the Apology, he explains that humility is a necessary precondition for wisdom, because one must be aware of one’s own ignorance in order to learn. A person who never questions their beliefs may never achieve wisdom and thus never have a meaningful life. Socrates also stresses the importance of sticking to one’s beliefs even in the face of danger (33). The corruption of the soul that would result from abandoning one’s beliefs is much worse than the death of the body. In fact, one ought to face death willingly because the goal of philosophy is to “practice for dying and death” (101). The body gets in the way of wisdom because the senses are unreliable and the body’s needs are distracting, so the soul “reasons best when none of these senses trouble it” (102). Because the soul is best without the body and death is a separation of the soul from the body, death is good for the soul. The soul is the part that lasts and carries over through the afterlife, so when the desires of the soul and the body conflict, a philosopher should support the soul rather than the body. Also, a philosopher should not do wrong, because doing wrong harms the soul (51).

I agree with some of these arguments Plato makes for the value of philosophy. I think philosophy does help contribute to a meaningful life. Humans have an innate moral sense, and philosophy helps us further develop that sense and determine how it should affect our actions. Having a working understanding of morality and acting in line with that understanding gives us a sense of purpose and improves our wellbeing. I think philosophy can decrease or mitigate the harm a person suffers on earth. Acting unjustly harms us both in the consequences of our actions and in the cognitive dissonance experienced by acting out of line with our beliefs. Acting justly when possible can help avoid these problems. I agree with Plato’s claim that philosophy is practice for death, but for different reasons, and I’m not sure I would state this claim as one of the most important values in philosophy. As a Christian, I believe that I am saved through my faith in Christ and after I die I will go to heaven. I cannot get to heaven through my good works, but because heaven is a place that is fully and completely good, by practicing good actions in life I am preparing for the life I will have in heaven. I also think there are a few important values of philosophy that Plato neglects. Learning about the truth (and acting in accordance with this truth) helps us build and maintain relationships with other people and with God; it’s much easier to have a relationship with someone you understand at least partially. Philosophy is also a way of expressing gratitude toward God for Him and His creation by learning what He does and makes and acting in ways He desires.

I agree with some of the arguments Plato makes for how philosophy should change our actions. I agree that it is important to question our assumptions and continue to search for truth. Related to this is the importance of listening to other people. Socrates talks in the Crito about the importance of listening to the wise instead of the majority. This is good advice, but I think it’s important to note that our standards of who is wise are influenced by our biases. Therefore, it is important to listen to a person’s argument on its own terms and understand it before evaluating it, rather than assuming who is wise before we even let them speak. I agree that sticking to beliefs even in the face of danger is important. However, there may be circumstances in which this becomes more complicated. I agree that we should face death willingly. I disagree that we shouldn’t care about bodily pleasures. God created me, and that includes my body. I ought to take care of God’s creation. It’s important to take care of myself in order to be able to do good, and taking care of myself includes taking care of my body. There may be situations in which I choose what is right over what my body wants. That being said, I think it is right to live in my body and not try to escape from it. I agree with Plato that we shouldn’t do wrong, but I think it’s important to note that this is complicated. Our observation and understanding of morality is fallible, so we may do wrong even when we think we do right. Additionally, there may be circumstances in which the only choices we have are between multiple wrong options. Indecision is also a choice, and may be included in this set of wrong choices. In this case, it is not possible to not do wrong, so it is best to simply choose what seems to be the least wrong.

In conclusion, Plato makes some good arguments for the value and result of practicing philosophy, but he also makes some arguments I disagree with.