EXAMINING SOCRATES' DESIRE THEORY

In the *Meno* Socrates argues that no one desires what is bad. I will first explain and evaluate the argument, then examine its implications for Socrates' view of human desire and action (namely, the view that *akrasia* is not possible) and explore the troubling aspects of this view.

Socrates begins by categorizing the following types of people:

(A) People who desire what they believe to be good things, where the things are actually good.

(B) People who desire what they believe to be good things, where the things are actually bad.

(C) People who desire what they believe to be bad things, thinking the things will benefit them. The things can be either good or bad.

(D) People who desire what they believe to be bad things, where the things are actually bad. These people also believe the bad things will harm them. (77c-77d)

His aim is to show that this is a comprehensive description of peoples' beliefs and desires, and that in cases (A) through (C) it can be seen that people desire what they believe to be the good. In the case of (D), the goal is to prove that that sort of person does not exist. It seems that the above list includes all combinations of beliefs and desires, and that additional, more specific combinations of circumstances will fall under one of the categories. The task,

then, is to prove that these people desire only good things, or that those who do not cannot exist.

It is easy to see that (A) and (B) are not problematic cases. People who clearly desire what they believe to be good things *really do desire good things*, regardless of whether they happen to be mistaken about whether or not a thing is good, as in case (B). People in (C) and (D) require a bit more explanation. A person in category (C) is using the word "bad" incorrectly to describe the object of his desires. If a person believes a thing to benefit him, then that thing cannot be believed (by him) to be bad. To think a thing is beneficial *is* to think it is good. A person cannot correctly believe a thing to be both bad and beneficial. Therefore, the person in (C) *actually* desires what he believes to be good, again regardless of whether the thing is actually good or bad. The people in (D) are correctly using the word "bad" to apply to the object of their desires, since they believe the harmful to be bad. To deal with these people, Socrates elicits from Meno the following assumptions:

(1) No one wants to be miserable and unhappy.

(2) Harm to oneself makes one miserable and unhappy. (78)

Socrates then concludes that group (D) does not exist, since those people, by desiring what they believe to be harmful (bad) things are desiring to be miserable and unhappy. No one wants to be miserable and unhappy, so no one desires what he believes to be bad. (A)-(C) actually desire what they believe to be good, and group (D) does not exist, so no one desires what he believes to be bad. I

feel compelled to say here that although Socrates actually claims that "no one…wants what is bad" (78), what he means is that no one wants what he *believes* is bad. This is an important clarification to make, for otherwise (B) becomes a counterexample, which it is clearly not intended to be.

The argument seems to be valid if indeed the list of people covers all possible combinations of beliefs and desires, and it seems that it does. It also seems reasonable to say that bad things are not beneficial, that being beneficial automatically qualifies a thing as good. However, I am not so sure about assumption (1), "No one wants to be miserable and unhappy." It seems that there are some instances where people actually *do* want to be miserable and unhappy. Consider the following case. Grace's fiancée has recently told her that he no longer wishes to get married, and in fact no longer wishes to have anything to do with her. Grace is devastated, and finds it difficult to carry on with her daily life. She spends a good part of her day in tears and has stopped eating. She is constantly remembering their time together, which only makes her feel worse. Grace realizes that when she thinks about their relationship she feels worse, but she continues to do so. She knows that if she stopped reliving every day of their time together she would start to feel better, but she chooses not to. She wants to be miserable and unhappy right now. She also knows that going out with her friends would cheer her up, but she is choosing not to do so, and choosing to remain miserable and unhappy instead. A case like this is not so far-fetched; in fact most people have probably been in a position like Grace's. Perhaps due to

different circumstances, but it is not so hard to imagine a person wanting to be miserable and unhappy, at least for a time. This would mean, then, that there are people in group (D), who desire what they believe to be bad, knowing it will harm them, and that Socrates' conclusion is false.

Let us now turn to what the argument in the *Meno* tells us about Socrates' views of human action and desire. On his view, *akrasia* is not possible. This is because people only act to bring about what they desire, and so, since on Socrates' account people only desire what they believe to be good, it is not possible for a person not to do what he believes to be good. A person cannot believe that an action will be good for him, yet not do it. It seems also—although he does not explicitly argue for it—that he means to say people always not only do what they believe to be good, but what they believe to be *best*.

The first part of Socrates' view seems to be true. It is reasonable to say that a person's actions are always caused by his desires. It does not make sense to say that a person did something he did not want to do. Even if he did not perhaps desire to do this or that particular action, he desired for the state of affairs brought about by that action to obtain. What is troublesome about Socrates' view is that it does not seem to accurately describe the relationship between human actions and desires. There are many cases in which it seems that we do not do what we know to be best for us: dieters cheat on their diets, knowing it is best not to; students wait until the night before to study for exams, knowing it would be best to prepare in advance; smokers continue to light up,

knowing it would be best to quit. It seems that in these cases pleasure satisfaction wins out over what is actually in a person's best interest. The dieter who eats half a cake is immediately gaining physical pleasure (for a short time anyway), rather than gaining what he knows to be better, good health. At that moment he desires physical pleasure more than good health, although he knows health to be best. Also, many dieters speak of lacking self-control, causing their diets to fail. This implies that they do indeed know what is best for them, yet they are unable to do it. So, it is feasible that we do not indeed desire what it best for us, or that we do not always do what we believe to be best for us. Plato is aware that we are not always able to do what we know to be best for us, and he addresses this in the *Republic*, by dividing the soul into parts, with each part desiring separate things.

Socrates' claim that no one wants what he believes to be bad is probably true for most people in most circumstances, but it does not appear to be true of all people at all times, as it seems that some people really do want to be miserable and unhappy, however briefly. Additionally, his view that *akrasia* is impossible seems to be contradicted by our everyday experiences, and therefore his theory of human action and desire is an incomplete account.