

The Psychology of the Socratic Soul and the Paradox that No One Knowingly Does Evil

MELINDA MUSE

IN the *Apology*, Socrates attempts to explain to the Athenian people sitting in judgment over his life that he is most concerned not with taking money to teach the youth nor with changing the gods of the state, but rather with the welfare of the soul of each individual. He states, "I spend all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls" (30a-b). What impact did Socrates believe his philosophical life would have on the souls of the Athenian people? To answer this question we must discover what Socrates understood about the soul. In this essay I will argue that Socrates views the soul as a psychological entity intimately tied to questions of goodness and virtue. Rather than examining virtue to understand the essence of virtuous behavior, Socrates inquires into the state of soul from which virtue springs. I will show that for Socrates it is this state of soul that causes men always to seek the good and always to act in accordance with knowledge.

By looking at the literary uses of the word "soul" before and leading up to the time of Socrates, David Claus has traced the evolution of the concept of soul in the ancient world. He finds that in Homer's works the soul is often identified as a "shade." The exact nature of the soul is not explained, but it is considered to survive death (61, 98). The

Melinda is a junior majoring in philosophy and psychology at Brigham Young University. She intends to pursue graduate work in theoretical psychology. This essay was awarded second place in the 1996 David H. Yarn Philosophical Essay Competition. This essay also won the 1996 Phi Kappa Phi Essay Competition for the College of Humanities.

Homeric shade lacks the personal quality that we usually associate with one's soul. After Homer, words for soul begin to take on the connotation of "life-force" or the animating portion of the individual. It is in the idea of soul as life-force that we find potential for the soul to be considered a psychological agent (Claus 181). However, the earliest uses of "soul" as life-force are connected specifically to "material and erotic contexts" (Claus 98). The soul here is involved with violent passion and emotional display. For instance, the poet Pindar uses "soul" as something erotic and bold (Claus 99).

Some pre-Socratic philosophers developed more specific theories of soul. Democritus presents a material view of the soul with emotional states resulting from order or disorder of the soul's material composition. Democritus holds to the idea that soul is a life-force but thinks that as a life-force the soul affects the physical body. Proper order of the soul leads to both emotional and physical health. Moral implications of a healthy soul are definitely introduced by Democritus' theory, yet soul therapy is still primarily aimed at physical health. Where the soul is considered to be emotional, Democritus uses characteristics such as anger, greed, and passion.

Gorgias fine-tunes Democritus' notion of soul. Although the date of *The Encomium of Helen* is unsure, Claus observes that the frequent references by Gorgias in this work to "soul" follow the line of thinking of Democritus (148). Here Gorgias seems to consider the soul the chief psychological entity in human beings. Gorgias is more interested in emotions than Democritus, but he still adopts many of Democritus' ideas. Unlike Democritus, however, Gorgias emphasizes the soul as a passive entity which has rationality imposed on it. This act of imposition removes all responsibility from the soul. The soul is considered vulnerable to sensory data and thus we glean the idea that pleasure might overcome the person and cause one to act immorally (Claus 148–50).

This brief survey of the evolution of the use of the word "soul" illustrates that "by the late fifth century an important confluence was beginning to be formed between [soul] as the archaic 'life-force' . . . and [soul] as a naturalistic 'life-force' whose psychological behavior could be rationally predicted and controlled" (Claus 183). As evidenced through the writings of poets and playwrights, these ideas were not entrenched in Athenian society during Socrates' life. However, this shift

in the notion of soul must have been part of Athenian conversation and thus must have influenced Socrates. By establishing deliberate moral responsibility in the soul as a psychological agent, Socrates brings the concept of "soul" to a new level—a natural outgrowth of changes already occurring. This new stage of development in the idea of soul is evident in Socrates' dialogues, notably in the *Laches* and the *Charmides*.

In the *Laches*, Socrates attempts to elevate the traditional notion of bravery from the essence of honorable military behavior to a level of understanding and wisdom in the soul. As the dialogue opens, Socrates finds a group of Athenian men discussing the best way to educate their sons. To make their sons brave, in what manner should they be trained? Socrates asserts that a concern for the training of youth is really a concern for the soul of the youth: "And at present we have in view some knowledge, of which the end is the soul of youth" (185e). Socrates then proposes that the group search for a teacher of virtue (186a–c). From this we see that the end of education is the soul and that both knowledge and virtue are connected to the improvement of the soul. Thus, in order to train their sons, these men must inquire into the nature of virtue, for, "can we advise anyone about the best mode of attaining something of whose nature we are wholly ignorant?" (190b). Laches and Nicias become Socrates' interlocutors for the ensuing discussion of courage.

Laches, in his struggle to define what courage is, is hindered by his traditional identification of courage with military action. Socrates tries to show Laches that courage is much more than specific instances of brave behavior by refuting each definition proposed by Laches. Nicias observes this and attempts to extend the understanding of courage beyond the battlefield: "courage is the knowledge of that which inspires fear or confidence in war, or in anything" (195a). Once Nicias has linked courage with knowledge, Socrates leads the discussion toward the final conclusion that courage pertains to a knowledge of good and evil (199c–d). From this conclusion, Socrates infers that courage must then be all of virtue (199e), and as we have already seen, Socrates believes virtue to be connected to the soul. Claus concludes that "the dialogue poses a clear and deliberate reevaluation of [soul] by juxtaposing one speaker, Laches, who is portrayed as incapable of understanding . . . [soul], to others, Socrates and Nicias, who divert . . . traditional meanings to ones charged with innovative moral value" (167). Knowledge is

a matter of soul, and therefore virtue is also a matter of soul. Thus courage in action reflects virtue in the soul.

The *Charmides* illustrates that, like courage in the *Laches*, temperance and wisdom are concerned with the knowledge of good and evil. However, if the moral soul is not understood, neither will the science of good and evil be understood. Thus the moral soul is crucial to Socrates' understanding of virtue. In fact, Socrates begins the dialogue with an attempt to connect the life-force view of the soul with the moral and psychological soul (Claus 171). Socrates tells Charmides that he will attempt to cure his headache, but in curing the body he must also administer to the soul. This idea clearly harkens back to the idea of the soul as a life-force as presented by Democritus and Gorgias. Socrates says, "Neither ought you to attempt to cure the body without the soul" (156e).

However, unlike Gorgias, Socrates explicitly infuses the soul with moral value: "For all good and evil, whether in the body or in the whole man, originates . . . in the soul, and overflows from thence" (156e). Socrates is here explaining the medical theory of a supposed Zalmoxis, king of the Thracians. This does not seem to be a historical character, and Socrates uses these doctrines as a means of beginning a discussion about virtue with Charmides, that he might discover whether he has a "noble soul" (154e). Claus concludes that "Socrates has assumed the mantle of pragmatic soul science . . . not to advocate such things but to transform them by revising the notion of [soul] on which they depend" (172). So although we should not conclude that Socrates believes a headache can be cured by administering to the soul, we can conclude that what Socrates says about the moral soul and its connection to virtue are his own ideas.

Socrates inquires about virtue by examining temperance first with Charmides and then with Critias. All of the definitions offered by Charmides and the first offered by Critias link temperance to a quality of action. Charmides says, and Critias accepts, that "temperance is doing our own business" (161b). Socrates attempts to give this definition a moral connotation by making the distinction between doing good and doing evil actions (163e). Only those who do good, and have a knowledge of that good, can be called temperate (164c). We seem to be looking again at virtue as a knowledge of good and evil. Yet Critias misses this moral distinction and tells Socrates that the injunction to "Know Thyself" found at Delphi is a matter of salutation rather than

moral imperative (164e–65b). Critias tells Socrates that temperance is self-knowledge, but he removes moral content from self-knowledge and thus from the psychological self. Although the dialogue ends with self-knowledge being a science of the knowledge of good and evil (174b), because Critias has removed the moral application of virtue (and thus removed the soul) the misguided conclusion is that wisdom produces no advantage or benefit (175a). Socrates illustrates through this dialogue that if we do not understand the soul as having inherent moral value, then our quest to understand virtue will be inherently misguided.

It is traditionally held by scholars such as Vlastos, Santas, and perhaps Gulley, that in these dialogues Socrates is looking into the essence of virtue, not primarily connecting virtue to the soul (Penner 37). Thus, each virtue which Socrates examines is held to be equivalent to the other virtues, but not identical with them. Even though both courage and temperance are explained as knowledge of good and evil, scholars hold that these should not be read as identity statements. But then how does knowing the definition of virtue translate into improved “moral well-being” (*Apology* 36c), which Socrates tells us is his whole purpose in discussing virtue? Terry Penner examines Socrates’ questions about virtue and concludes it is probable that Socrates inquires into the nature of virtue, as found in the properly moral soul, thus seeking a psychological explanation rather than a definition of virtue or behavior.

When scholars such as Vlastos look at Socrates’ request to answer the question “What is virtue?” (often called the “What is X?” question) they hold that Socrates is searching for the meaning of virtue. The doctrine of the unity of virtues is considered to be what Penner terms a “disguised equivalence” (35):

- (1) Men are brave if and only if they are wise
 if and only if they are temperate
 if and only if they are just (36).

The “What is X?” question is phrased:

- (2) What is that one thing, the same in all cases, by virtue of which men are X?

If this is a request for meaning, then brave men are so by partaking in bravery, or partaking in the meaning of bravery:

- (3) In addition to brave men, there must be such a thing as bravery—that is the meaning of “bravery”—by virtue of which men are brave (Penner 38).

The meaning of "bravery" cannot be identical to the meaning of "wisdom." Thus when Socrates says in the *Protagoras* that the parts of virtue are indistinguishable from each other like parts of gold,¹ he must mean the equivalence in (1) (Penner 38).

A second way to look at the "What is X?" question is to view the virtues as dispositions toward behavior (Penner 44). There are dispositions toward brave behavior and dispositions toward wise behavior. Since bravery and wisdom are dispositions toward different kinds of behavior, they must be different dispositions. Socrates himself seems to support this line of thinking in the *Ion* when speaking about art. He says that different arts must deal with different kinds of knowledge, or else "why call them different, when both give us the same knowledge?" (537e). Similarly, why call the virtues different names when they all admit of the same virtue or the same kind of behavior? From this view it must again be concluded that Socrates means the equivalence notion of virtue found in (1).

But why disguise the equivalence? When Socrates argues for the position that the parts of virtue are like gold, each part does "not differ from one another or from the whole" (*Protagoras* 329d), why not assume he means it? The *Laches* concludes, under the definition given, that courage is the whole of virtue (199e). The only reason this conclusion is rejected is that the interlocutor assumed at the beginning of the dialogue that courage is only part of virtue. Socrates, not holding this view, would conclude that courage is indeed all of virtue, for

(4) Courage = Wisdom = Temperance = Virtue
just as parts of gold are all gold.

The identity of virtue will only escape the arguments of the equivalence school if Socrates is not looking for the meaning of specific types of virtue. Penner reinterprets the "What is X?" question as one which seeks an explanation of virtue through one's state of soul, with virtuous behavior being only a consequence of that state of soul. When Socrates asks about bravery, he is not asking about brave behavior, nor is he asking about the meaning of "bravery" which makes men and behavior

¹At 329d Socrates sets up the distinction between likeness being as to parts of the face or parts of gold and then argues against the thesis that the parts of virtue are like parts of a face, each having its own power and function.

brave. He is instead asking about the state of soul which explains all of virtue.

M. F. Burnyeat discusses why Socrates would necessarily look at the soul rather than the specific virtue. Burnyeat points out that today we consider character to be revealed through actions and thus the study of good behavior should cover the same ground as the study of good character (204). Anciently, however, what was considered important was not the value of action which makes up a way of life, but rather the quality of character a person possessed. A look at the way health is identified in the two societies clarifies this distinction. Today, a person is considered healthy if a person is not in a condition of being sick. But anciently, health was a quality a person possessed. Similarly, virtue was conceived of as "something which the soul both has and benefits from in much the same way as the body both has and benefits from health" (211).

This distinction is illustrated in the *Gorgias* where parallel arguments are drawn between the body and the soul to show the difference between art and flattery (464a–65e). There is a healthy condition for both the body and soul. Both are aimed at the good and thus flattery must be aimed at the good in order to be an art which cares for the soul. Art aims at virtue for both the body and soul, but it is the soul which makes moral distinctions and thus is the character of the person (465d). Virtue is a quality of the soul and is prior to action, suggesting that "being is in some way prior to doing" (Burnyeat 211). This is tied to the explanatory role virtue concepts play in the "being" of the person (Burnyeat 232).

It is this "being" that Penner refers to as a "state of soul."² The "What is X?" question then becomes the question of the general rather than of the philosopher. "What is bravery?" asks, "What is that psychological state which explains the fact that certain men do brave acts?" (Penner 41). The general asks this question not to learn about concepts or meaning, but to learn how to impart bravery to his soldiers. The state of soul which admits of virtue is the healthy soul spoken of in

²He also uses the term "motive-force," but because this term may be difficult to distinguish from a tendency, I will use only the term state of soul to refer to Penner's view.

the *Gorgias* as having proper order (504b–e). This is because both soul and state of soul refer to a way of being. Further, the unity of virtues can be read as an identity because “bravery, the psychological state which makes men brave, will be identical with wisdom, the psychological state which makes men wise” (Penner 41). One psychological state, or state of soul, being a quality of the person and not a quality of the person’s behavior, can admit of many behaviors.

Does this really make the virtues an identity as argued in (4)? Protagoras protested that “it is not right to call things similar because they have some one point of similarity” (*Protagoras* 331e). How is the state of soul different from the disposition or tendency view, which we saw earlier still considers the virtues to be only properly equivalent as argued in (1)? Penner quotes from G. C. Field, who says that although dispositions or tendencies are distinct because they lead to distinct actions, Socrates may have thought that distinct tendencies “sprang from the same . . . state of soul (e.g. a certain kind of knowledge)” (45). One’s state of soul is more basic than one’s tendencies toward certain actions, and it is this most basic principle which Socrates is trying to explain.

The argument in the *Laches* has already been shown to be dealing with the soul. Does the picture of virtue painted by Socrates in this dialogue match that of Penner’s state of soul? Socrates asks Laches, “What is courage?” and Laches answers with a specific instance of behavior: “A man of courage does not run away, but remains at his post and fights against the enemy” (190e). Socrates explains that he is not looking for a specific instance of courage, but rather “that common quality which is called courage” (192b). Laches then answers with the meaning or equivalent of courage: “endurance of the soul” (192b–c). Socrates then gives counter examples to show Laches he has yet to grasp Socrates’ request (192d). Nicias applies knowledge to courage which reformulates the concept of courage. Section 197a–b reevaluates the notion of courage, defining it not as a behavior but as the understanding of a psychological agent. Laches replies that if wisdom is a part of courage then all the animals traditionally thought to be courageous must be wiser than humans. Nicias responds that he “does not describe [animals] as courageous . . . because they are devoid of understanding. . . . There is a difference . . . between fearlessness and courage” (197a–b). “Fearless” describes a person who performs a particular type of action,

such as someone who performs a dangerous feat. On the other hand, "courageous" describes a person whose actions are derived from a virtuous soul. Knowledge and understanding are properties of the virtuous soul.³ Knowledge and understanding define courage. Thus courage is found in the soul, not the actions of the man. But Nicias does not quite understand this distinction and thus says at the end of this speech, "My courageous actions are wise actions" (197c). Socrates thus continues to push Nicias through the dialogue until he admits that courage is more properly the knowledge of good and evil, which is not a behavior at all but rather a property of the soul.

Socrates further points out that this one property of the soul results in a state which leads to all virtuous action: "If a man knew all good and evil, and how they are and have been and will be produced, would he not be perfect, and wanting in no virtue, whether justice or temperance or holiness?" (199d). The clause "how they are and have been and will be produced" clearly denotes knowledge of the *explanation* of a virtue, not merely knowledge of the meaning of the virtue. Socrates is explaining to Nicias that this property of the soul is not bound to past, present, or future action; rather it encompasses the whole of virtue. Thus this one state of soul can result in all virtue, and all virtuous action.

The *Protagoras* deals specifically, in several arguments, with the thesis of the unity of virtues. For the sake of space I will only examine one here: the argument from confidence (349d–51b). Penner lays out Protagoras' theses of the dialogue:

(P1) Wisdom, temperance, bravery, and so forth are parts of virtue—just as the mouth, nose, and ears are parts of the face.

(P2) Wisdom = Temperance = Bravery, and so forth.

(P3) The parts of virtue, like parts of a face, each have their own powers and functions, some being like others and some unlike them.

(P4) It is possible to partake of some parts of virtue without partaking of all parts of virtue (50).

In the argument from confidence Socrates is attacking (P4) by arguing that courage = wisdom. Socrates says that one cannot be courageous and not also be wise because knowledge is what explains courageousness.

³See the discussion of the *Laches* at the beginning of the paper.

More specifically, Socrates will show that “what it is that makes a man brave is identical with what it is that makes him wise” (Penner 53). This is precisely what Protagoras takes him to be arguing when he objects to Socrates’ conclusion that “courage and wisdom are the same thing” (350d).

Socrates’ argument is laid out thus:

(5) Skilled men, for example divers, horsemen, and peltasts are confident in their skill *because* they know what they are doing (350a–b).

Notice that knowledge is used here as an explanation for action.

(6) Those who know what they are doing are more confident than those who do not.

(7) Those who know are more confident once they have knowledge than they were before gaining that knowledge (350b).

From (5), (6), and (7):

(8) The best explanation for the confidence exhibited by men who know what they are doing is their knowledge: knowledge makes men who know what they are doing confident (350c). (Penner 53–54).

Protagoras objects that this does not necessarily mean that courage = wisdom, although Penner points out that his objection continues to speak of knowledge as “an explanatory entity (motive-force or state of soul)” (55). Protagoras concludes that “bravery comes from the natural constitution and good conditioning [the state, not process] of souls” (Penner 55, from *Protagoras* 351a–b). Protagoras’ objection is that Socrates explained a kind of courage in the confidence of men, but the best explanation of the actions of brave men must include “the natural constitution and good conditioning of their souls,” just as the strength of wrestlers must include these properties of their bodies (Penner 56). Again we are confronted with the old notions of soul as connected to the health of the body. However, Protagoras seems more clear on the moral implications this theory holds than do many of Socrates’ other interlocutors. Thus Protagoras recognizes the connection of courage to the soul.

If virtuous action stems from the state of soul of an individual and a moral state of soul is dependent on knowledge (of good and evil), then we have a clearer idea of what Socrates means in what is considered the paradox that no one knowingly does evil. The paradox is laid out by

Socrates in both the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias*. For the sake of space I will closely explicate only its formulation in the *Protagoras*, but in my interpretation I will draw from the *Gorgias* where the paradox is linked to the argument that tyrants do not have power because they do not do what they will (466b–68e).

In the argument at the end of the *Protagoras*, Socrates claims that it is in human nature to seek the good (358c) and that to choose evil is the result of ignorance. He begins with Protagoras' hypothesis that it is possible for individuals to do wrong knowingly, perhaps if they are overcome by pleasure (352e–53a), but then concludes that this is not possible.

(9) It is possible for someone to do wrong knowingly.

(10) Things are good or evil due to their future consequences (353d–54b).

(11) These future consequences are pain and pleasure, which are evil and good respectively (354c).

This may not be Socrates' actual view. Notice that he speaks to Protagoras saying, "Can you say that you have any other end in mind, when you call them good, than pleasures . . . ?" and "Then your idea of evil is pain, and of good is pleasure" (emphasis added). Socrates does not necessarily claim these as his own views.

(12) A thing is good or evil according to the degree of pleasure or pain it produces (354c–e).

(13) We need an art of measurement to discern what is most pleasurable (good) and most painful (evil) in its overall consequence (356a–e).

(14) An art of measurement is knowledge (357b–c).

(15) If we choose wrongly it is because of a lack of knowledge or because of the presence of ignorance (357e; 358b–c).

(16) It is therefore not possible to choose evil knowingly.

Similarly, the argument in the *Gorgias* concludes that because we always seek or will the good, people who do that which is not good do not do what they will. Therefore no one willingly does evil.

The paradox has often been interpreted as an affirmation of people's inclination to pursue their own happiness. What is often forgotten, however, is that the happiness which Socrates is concerned with is a moral happiness. Happiness is intrinsically connected with virtue and specifically concerned with the state of soul.

George Nakhnikian reads the paradox as being contingent on a psychological egoism. Such a theory maintains that "all voluntary action is aimed . . . at the presumed good of the agent" (Nakhnikian 15). He holds that there are two assumptions which underlie Socrates' formulation of the paradox. The first is that "evil being what it is, a thing's being evil conceptually necessitates that the thing will harm the one who possesses it" (8). The second is that "it is *psychologically* impossible for a man to know that a thing will harm those who possess it yet to desire that thing for himself" (3). He tries to show this is false by presenting counterexamples to the two assumptions.

Nakhnikian argues against the first assumption by appealing to the incurably wicked man spoken of by Socrates at the end of the *Gorgias* (524e–26d). Earlier in the *Gorgias* Socrates says that discipline and just punishment improve the soul (477a; 505b). But just punishment does not improve the incurably wicked man; it serves only to be an example to others. Thus, if such a man were unjustly to escape punishment, it would indeed benefit him. He would then be in possession of an evil but benefited by that evil (Nakhnikian 9). The second assumption is falsified by watching a smoker who is well-educated in the harmfulness of smoking and yet compulsively desires to smoke (Nakhnikian 10). Also, Alcibiades seems to be the living refutation of Socrates' claim (Nakhnikian 17). Alcibiades lived well when in the company of Socrates, but became a wretch when left to his own living. Clearly then it is possible for people to desire what is not good for them and to do so knowingly.

Norman Gulley, on the other hand, defends the truthfulness of the paradox but strips any moral significance from Socrates' formulation of it. He claims that the distinction of moral behavior as voluntary or involuntary as found in the *Gorgias* is a Platonic concept contingent on the capability (or art) necessary to achieve moral desires. In the *Protagoras*, which Gulley does take to be Socratic, a voluntary action is one "chosen as a *possible* course of action and *either* known *or* believed to be good" (94). Thus, one may voluntarily choose evil by the mistaken belief that something is good when it is not. People desire to be happy and so, barring any external circumstances, people will never do what they think will make them unhappy (94, 96). This is all that the paradox amounts to: "no one willingly does wrong (what he knows or believes not to be conducive to his happiness)" (96). Gulley admits that the

paradox as formulated in the *Gorgias* has more strict moral implications, but claims that this moral formulation moves it away from the Socratic position (96).

Both of the preceding interpretations are inadequate because the Socratic emphasis on the moral soul is left out of the account of the paradox. Like those of Critias in the *Charmides*, who left the moral soul out of courage, the conclusions reached by Nakhnikian and Gulley must be inherently flawed. The Socratic paradox that no one knowingly does evil must be intrinsically connected to the moral soul. Moral knowledge shapes the soul and ends in virtuous action.

The virtues are connected by Socrates to the knowledge of good and evil (see *Laches* 199c–d; *Charmides*, earlier discussion). This type of knowledge I will call moral knowledge. Socrates says in the *Gorgias* that the proper soul is an ordered soul (504b–c). In the beginning of the *Protagoras*, when Socrates discusses with Hippocrates the foolishness of going to the Sophists, Socrates tells him that what nourishes the soul is knowledge, and that one should attend only those who know good and evil because otherwise one places one's soul in jeopardy (313c–14c). Thus it seems that moral knowledge is a property of the healthy soul.

The ordered soul does not become so by accident, but rather by the art associated with its care (*Gorgias* 506d–e). The elenchus is the art of caring for the soul. Callicles tells Socrates to “cease your questioning,” which is a plain allusion to Socrates' elenchus, but Socrates explains that philosophy tests the soul (*Gorgias* 486c–d). Philosophy tests the soul to ensure that the soul is not a “stranger to truth,” or lacking in moral knowledge, which is the mark of an evil soul (*Gorgias* 525a).

Moral knowledge, being the knowledge of good and evil, always points toward the good. The moral soul, possessing moral knowledge, will always act for the good because actions stem from the soul. A moral soul produces moral actions. Socrates makes this connection in the *Gorgias* where he tells Callicles that the temperate (well-ordered) soul is good and that the person with such a soul will naturally do virtuous actions (507a–c). Thus, the paradox that no one knowingly does evil means that no one possessing moral knowledge will do evil because a virtuous soul will always result in virtuous action.

The paradox in the *Protagoras* taken with Socrates' view of virtuous ends would run a little differently:

- (9) It is possible for someone to do wrong knowingly.

- (10) Things are good or evil due to their future consequences (353d–54b).
- (17) These future consequences are a virtuous soul and virtuous actions, or an immoral soul and wrong actions.
- (18) A thing is good or evil according to the degree of virtue or evil it produces in the soul.
- (19) We need an art of measurement to discern what is most good and evil in its overall consequence to the soul.
- (14) An art of measurement is knowledge (357b–c), specifically moral knowledge in the soul as tested through the elenchus.
- (15) If we choose wrongly it is because of a lack of knowledge or because of the presence of ignorance (357e; 358b–c).
- (16) It is therefore not possible to choose evil knowingly.

This formulation of the Socratic paradox is preferable to those of both Gulley and Nakhnikian. Gulley's claim that the *Protagoras* lacks moral implications is unjustifiable because, as we have seen, any discussion of action is intrinsically linked to the state of soul. To inquire into whether the agent can knowingly choose evil is to inquire into the agent's state of soul. Further, the happiness which agents seek is a moral happiness which comes from an ordered soul. For Socrates, happiness is moral. Gulley's hedonist interpretation is not Socratic.

What about Nakhnikian's incurably wicked person and compulsive smoker? First, one must recognize that evil is never beneficial because it harms the soul. The evil person who escapes punishment is benefited because he or she escapes torture, which escape benefits the body. Second, it is clear that the soul is more precious than the body, so it is the soul we should be most concerned about. To escape punishment is to be allowed to continue perpetrating evil actions, which actions further distort the soul. Ultimately the evil person is harmed by escaping punishment because ultimately it brings greater harm to his or her soul.

Both the smoker and Alcibiades have a notion of what is good, but they lack moral knowledge. They fail to recognize the importance of the soul over the body and therefore develop bodily desires rather than an ordered soul. Because the soul is neglected, it does not gain moral knowledge. The smoker may know that smoking is wrong but does not know that the addiction harms the soul, so the smoker continues to smoke. Alcibiades may know that loyalty is good, but fails to recognize that unjust power distorts the soul, and thus he becomes a traitor. His

virtuous living exhibited while in the company of Socrates is not the result of knowledge, but rather the result of a desire for praise and acceptance. Nakhnikian's psychological egoism might be more properly called a moral egoism. Although this is not Nakhnikian's intention, such a formulation could, in fact, be considered a true Socratic doctrine.

To reiterate Socrates' position, I will define exactly what I mean by "moral egoism." Recall that Nakhnikian's psychological egoism maintains that "all voluntary action is aimed . . . at the presumed good of the agent" (15). Taken at face value this amounts to little more than hedonism. Socrates would infuse this injunction with moral value stating something like "all voluntary action (to the extent that it stems from a moral soul) is aimed at the good of the agent's soul." The good of the agent's soul is the moral good. Hence the moral agent will always pursue moral actions. The agent is in search of moral happiness. Nakhnikian's conceptual premise still stands: "evil being what it is, a thing's being evil conceptually necessitates that the thing will harm the one who possesses it" (8). The moral assumption would build on the original psychological assumption that "it is *psychologically* impossible for a man to know that a thing will harm those who possess it and yet desire that thing for himself" (3). The added moral assumption would be that if one has a moral soul, one will always seek the good of one's own soul, which good will be evidenced by moral and virtuous action.⁴ Moral egoism holds that one acts in one's own best interest, but in one's own moral best interest. Such a revision radically alters the argument.

Socrates' quest was to show the Athenian people that their souls were in need of order and testing. He hoped that his philosophizing would help them to improve their souls. While not possessing as elaborate a theory of the soul as Plato later did, Socrates understood the soul to be the morally accountable portion of the individual. Hence, the soul deserved the individual's greatest concern. Socrates' inquiry into virtue and motivation reflects this understanding of the moral soul. He questioned the Athenian people about virtue in order to lead them to seek moral knowledge and a proper state of soul. In directing behavior, the properly moral soul will always seek the good and do what it knows to be right.

⁴See my revised steps 17–19 in the formulation of the *Protagoras* paradox.

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