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EGOISM AND OTHER-REGARDING BEHAVIOR IN SOCRATES' FINAL DAYS

Table of Contents: *1. Introduction; 2 . Why not escape?; 3. What about Socrates' friends and family?*

1. Introduction

Our sources seem to agree that Socrates' both accepted eudaimonism and also promoted other-regarding behavior. But can't these come apart? Surely some other-regarding behavior might involve real personal sacrifice for the agent. Does eudaimonism have a different economy than, for example, personal finance? If I donate a certain amount of money to a worthy charity, then it automatically follows that my own personal wealth is diminished by the same amount. Scholars have reasonably avoided attributing to Socrates such a simplistic, zero-sum-game conception of the economy for happiness, however. Why can't a good person gain in happiness precisely because she has done something that makes someone else happier? The problems come in, not from the idea that other-regarding action can actually advance an agent's own happiness, but from the sense that it doesn't *always* or *inevitably* work this way. In the present moment, for example, parents are taking up a great deal of their own time – time that they would prefer to spend on other things – assisting their children with remote learning while schools are closed. We may assume that good parents would never consider abandoning their children's education in order to pursue the other things they would normally prefer to be doing with their time. From that fact that they steadfastly oversee their children's learning in these difficult times, however, it does not at all follow that they are thereby happier for doing so. But here, too, such cases do not give clear cases of self-sacrifice: a loving parent who refused to sacrifice her time for her child's welfare might well find that the misery this caused her child led to much

greater misery for the parent, too. One does not fail in one's pursuit of happiness to choose the least of miserable options, in cases where there are no better options available.

Given that there is no *logical* or *metaphysical* incompatibility between pursuing one's own happiness and engaging in other-regarding behavior, it is perhaps not surprising to find scholars in disagreement about whether Socratic eudaimonism is egoistic. On one side of the debate, even if our texts seem to show – as I believe they do – that, for Socrates, it is at the very least a general rule that it is in one's personal self-interest to engage in the sorts of other-regarding behaviors he so often advocates in our texts, this fact in and of itself is insufficient to resolve the issue. The question would remain as to whether this fact was what motivated other-regarding behavior, or was simply a positive side-effect of other-regarding behavior, which might have been chosen without this fact as a part of the motivation for the behavior. On the other side of the debate, given that Socrates does seem to think that it is at least in general true that other-regarding behavior also serves the self-interest of the agent, any texts in which Socrates seems to be advocating other-regarding behavior without explicitly explaining that the reason to do so was the self-interest of the agent, in no way show that the self-interest of the agent is actually not the ultimate reason why Socrates would promote such behavior. We shouldn't expect Socrates to give a complete explanation of his reasons for prescribing some behavior in each instance that he offers an opinion on the matter. So it seems to me the challenge for scholars is to find some text or texts that plainly show that Socrates would promote other-regarding behavior *even when it required some degree of self-sacrifice for the agent.* If not, then the many texts in which Socrates seems to explain motivation by appeals to the self-interest of the agent (many of which are discussed by others in this collection) should be taken as sufficient reasons to accept the egoistic interpretation. Perhaps even these texts can be read in different ways, but an assessment of that issue is not my project herein. Instead, I want to look carefully at what Socrates and his defenders have to say about Socrates' own motivations when he acted in a way that might on its face seem to be the clearest case of supreme self-sacrifice, by deciding to remain in Athens and be executed rather than escaping and

thereby continuing to pursue his self-interests in the ways only the living can undertake. My questions, thus, are these: *a*) is there any decisive evidence in what Xenophon or Plato say about Socrates' last days for rejecting the egoistic understanding of Socrates' eudaimonism? Or *b*) is there evidence in the Xenophontic or Platonic reports, on the contrary, that demonstrates some example of a troubling kind of egoism – where Socrates does or says anything in pursuit of his own self-interest in a way that fails to attend adequately to the interests of others?

Plato and Xenophon obviously account for Socrates' willingness to die at the hands of the state in very different ways. In Xenophon's account, Socrates not just allowed but actively encouraged his jurors to condemn him to death, as an easiest possible way (see *Ap.* 7; and [Bloch 2002]) for him to end his life at a time when he could no longer look forward to living well (*Mem.* IV 8, 1; *Ap.* 6). Accordingly, it seems clear that the Xenophontic account of Socrates' motives for drinking the poison give no indication of self-sacrifice. In Plato's account, however, Socrates is given the option of escaping from prison and going off to be taken care of by friends in Thessaly. Socrates refuses to escape, claiming that to do so would be to do damage to the city and commit injustice, which he must never do. One might wonder, however, if the commitment never to do injustice is one that Socrates was willing to follow by paying the highest possible price in terms of his own self-interest. My project herein is to see whether there is any evidence in the Platonic account that would indicate knowing self-sacrifice in Socrates' decision to stay in prison and suffer execution by the state. Once I have answered this question, I will then turn to considering what Xenophon and Plato had to say about others who were impacted by Socrates' decision. Was his decision or was it not other-regarding with regard to them in a way that might shed light on the question of eudaimonism and egoism?

2. Why not escape?

The arguments of Plato's *Crito* are surely familiar enough to those reading this volume not to need any careful review by me herein. But just as a reminder, I think it is enough to recall that the dialogue begins with Crito urging Socrates to escape from the prison. Crito believes that it

would be easy and no great expense to get Socrates out of prison and away from Athens where he might go to any number of places safely, including going to stay with Crito's friends in Thessaly (*Cri.* 44b6-45c5). Crito gives a number of arguments that seem to invoke other-regarding reasons for Socrates to agree to this escape, involving the damage that Crito himself, Socrates' other friends, and also Socrates' own family will suffer if he should stay and be executed. Socrates makes no concession to Crito's arguments, but instead invites Crito to examine whether what he wants Socrates to do is the right thing, or not, insisting that he (Socrates) will act, as he always does, on the basis of whatever reasons seem best to him as he considers it (*Cri.* 46b4-6).

Socrates then reminds Crito that his earlier appeals to what most people would think of Socrates not escaping violated an agreement that he and Crito had accepted for a long time: it is not the opinions of the many, but only the opinions of experts that should matter to them. Socrates uses the example of advice from physicians and physical trainers, as opposed to advice on the good of the body by those ignorant of it, and then gets Crito to agree that just as following bad advice about the good of the body will lead to bodily harm, so will bad advice about the good of the soul lead to psychic harm (47a12-48a1). Socrates and Crito then agree that justice benefits the soul whereas injustice harms it (*Cri.* 47a-48a).[1] That prohibition of injustice mandates that one must never do wrong, even in retaliation for wrongs that have been done to oneself (*Cri.* 49a4-e1), and Crito agrees that he and Socrates have agreed to these principles for a long time and should not abandon them now. This agreement seems to me to govern the rest of the discussion that Socrates

[1] The way Socrates first puts the point might seem puzzling: he says that one should never *voluntarily* do wrong (οὐδενὶ τρόπῳ φαμὲν ἑκόντας ἀδικητέον εἶναι, *Cri.* 49a4). But is it not Socrates' view (in Plato, at least) that no one ever does wrong voluntarily? This puzzle has a simple solution, however: wrongdoing is involuntary insofar as it causes harm to oneself, under the principle announced here in the *Crito* (47a12-48a4) and elsewhere; but that does not entail that agents cannot intentionally or voluntarily wrong or harm others (see Brickhouse & Smith 2018). At issue here in the *Crito* is whether or not what Crito wants Socrates to do would damage Socrates because it would be the result of a choice Socrates had made that would cause wrong or damage to others.

and Crito have on the matter:[2] Socrates contends, and Crito accepts that Socrates should by all means do nothing that will damage his soul, and if possible, do only what will benefit his soul.

Socrates then imagines the personified Laws of Athens addressing both of them and making several arguments to the effect that it would be wrong for Socrates to escape. In doing so, he would violate a just agreement he had made with the state of Athens (*Cri.* 49e9-53a8), he would commit a kind of filial impiety against the state (*Cri.* 50c10-51c4), and he would not actually gain any benefit for himself by escaping anyway, since he would have no remaining credibility in lawful places and could only live, instead, in lawless ones (*Cri.* 53a9-d3). The dialogue thus concludes with Socrates affirming that the reasons thus given seem so convincing to him that they effectively drown out every other consideration.

Unless this quick review has gone very wrong, then, the basic premise of all of the arguments in the *Crito* about obedience to law and thus staying in prison are supposed to fall under the principle that one should never do injustice and that doing injustice is inevitably damaging to the soul of the agent. The principles that Socrates gets Crito to recall at the beginning of the argument seem clearly and quite explicitly to make the connection between other-regarding behavior (doing right and avoiding doing wrong to others) and one's own self-interest one of necessity and without exception. If so, the *Crito* and Socrates' decision to remain in prison and drink the poison, since they follow justice, could not be counterexamples to the (apparently necessary) rule that other-regarding

[2] Here, I acknowledge that, for the sake of brevity and not wanting to be taken off on a tangent from my present project, I simply stipulate an interpretation of the dialogue that others have argued against. My own view, for which I have argued at length elsewhere, is that the rest of the dialogue articulates a position according to which disobedience to law would always be unjust, and thus damaging to the soul of the one who disobeys. Others have argued that Socrates does not really accept such a view, and only presents the argument he puts into the mouth of the personified Laws of Athens because Crito is either too dim or too distraught to follow better arguments (one that would allow a conscientious agent to disobey some laws). For examples of the interpretation I am simply setting aside here, see Colaiaco 2001; Kostman 1984; Weiss 1998; and Harte 1999. For the reasons why I reject this alternative interpretation and take the argument given to the Laws by Socrates as reflecting Socrates' own views, see Brickhouse & Smith 2013.

behavior (at least insofar as it follows justice) can never involve genuine self-sacrifice. As I said in the introduction, however, this does not conclusively show that the pursuit of one's own self-interest – rather than regard for others and their welfare – is always what motivates human action. But it does mean that the kind of case needed to deny that Socrates was an egoistic eudaimonist is not to be found in the *Crito* and, if it can be found elsewhere, would actually violate the philosophical principles on which Plato has Crito and Socrates agree in that dialogue.

3. What about Socrates' friends and family?

My argument in the last section was that Socrates' decision to be executed by the state in no way involved any loss of happiness to himself, given the options available to him. The Xenophontic Socrates actually preferred to die because the prospect of continued life seemed to him to assure more misery than happiness. In Plato's account, Socrates might well have wanted to win acquittal at the trial and thus continued to live; but that option was not available to him. Instead, his choices were continuing to live, but only by committing an injustice, or suffering an injustice and being executed by the state but not damaging his own soul by doing anything unjust.

But both Xenophon and Plato make clear that Socrates' death would have heavy impact on his friends and family. Given the sort of man that Socrates was and the fact that he was treated as an exemplary human being by both of his most famous defenders is evidence enough that his death would be a grievous loss to those who loved and admired him. As such, it might be that Socrates' decision, at the end, actually showed a certain *lack* of other-regarding concern: might it not have been true that Socrates' family and associates were *themselves* damaged by his decision to die – in which case that decision would actually qualify as grounds for accepting the judgment that Socrates was – first and foremost – an egoist. Might his decision to die have been best *for him*, but not best for others who deserved more consideration? So let's now take up that question.

In Xenophon's account, Socrates was well aware that his passing would cause the greatest longing (πόθος) among his friends (*Ap.* 7). On the other hand, he is clear that had he chosen to continue to live, they

would bear witness to his decline in ways that would be troublesome to them, such that, when he eventually did die, their memories of Socrates would be marred by recalling his decline (*Ap.* 7). Xenophon does not explicitly make the assessment that the timing of Socrates' death will actually bring greater benefit to his friends, but it is difficult to see how they would be better off in the long run from watching the man they had so admired choosing to continue living when he knew well that in doing so, he would condemn himself to a life that was wretched and unlivable (*Mem.* IV 8, 8; *Ap.* 8). I think it is more reasonable to suppose that Socrates thought that grief for the beloved dead was a natural part of human life, and such grief would be nobler and better for the one grieving if it is not stained by ugly memories of the one who has passed away. Accordingly, we should not assume that Socrates' decision actually damaged his friends; instead, it seems as if what was best for Socrates himself was also best for those who loved and admired him. As such, even if Xenophon's Socrates was an egoist, there is no evidence of it in any lack of concern for his friends with regard to his execution by the state.

In Plato's testimony, however, we are actually encouraged to consider this very question, since when Crito appeals to Socrates to escape from prison, his arguments explicitly rely on the damage to Socrates' friends and family members if he does not escape. Socrates' execution would be a disaster (συμφορά) for Crito, and for at least two reasons: he would be «robbed of a companion such as I'll never find again» (44b8-9),[3] and he will be tarred by others with the reputation of caring more for money than for friends, since people will know well that Crito might easily have saved Socrates just by spending a little (44c1). Socrates turns Crito's appeal aside by insisting that the only people whose opinions should matter to them are the sensible people, and not just the many. But Crito persists: the many can do the greatest evils to others who hear others slandered (44d1-5). Socrates denies that claim – the many can neither do the greatest goods nor the greatest evils, for they can neither make others wise nor ignorant, but only act on whims (44d6-10).

At this juncture, readers might wish that Crito objected that the many most certainly could infect others with their own ignorance, but

[3] All translations of Plato herein are those of Brickhouse & Smith 2002.

instead he grants Socrates' (dubious) claim, and makes more specific what concerns him: Socrates shouldn't be concerned that if he does leave, his friends will be hounded by οἱ συκοφάνται and could be forced to «forfeit either all our property, or quite a bit of money, or suffer something else in addition to these things» (44e3-6). Crito insists that Socrates should ignore all of that because by helping Socrates to escape «we're doing the right thing» (45a1). But Socrates remains unconvinced, and responds that he is, indeed, worried about such things, and many others, as well (44a4-5). Crito brushes Socrates' response aside: the συκοφάνται are easily paid off, he claims (45a8-b1), and besides, the money wouldn't just be coming from Crito, but several others would also contribute (45b1-6). This is the last we hear about the threat of οἱ συκοφάνται, and Crito now also changes his argument.

Socrates should escape, he now claims, because by staying, he would not only betray himself, but also act as an accomplice and enabler for the evil being done to him by his enemies (45c6-9). Crito then shifts the focus to Socrates' sons: by accepting the death penalty, Socrates will betray them and condemn them to what usually happens to orphans. «Either you shouldn't have children, or you should share in their lives by nurturing and educating completely» (45d4-6). Both Socrates and his friends would be disgraced as acting from «some fault and cowardice» (κακίᾳ τινὶ καὶ ἀνανδρίᾳ, 45e6) if they do not ensure that Socrates leaves.

Each of these arguments, it is plain, are direct appeals to what Crito takes to be the appropriate other-regarding concerns that Socrates should acknowledge as sufficient grounds for his escape. If he refuses, it will only be out of what Crito regards as the faulty sort of egoism: instead of doing what's right for those who rely on him, Socrates would just be talking the «laziest way out» (τὰ ῥᾳθυμότατα, 45d6). As such, Crito's complaints here go directly to my topic: in remaining in prison and refusing to escape, does Socrates actually confirm the complaint that he is an egoist – selecting the course of action that he regards as best for himself, but only at a significant cost to others, whose interests he really should regard as more important than his own?

Initially, Socrates does not take up Crito's specific appeals to the welfare of others, but instead insists that the question they must answer

is whether staying or escaping is the right thing to do (46b1-2). But this is precisely the issue that Crito was insisting upon: he was giving reasons – reasons that would seem both credible and important to most people – for why Socrates' leaving would be the right thing to do, and staying, the wrong thing to do. The rules of philosophical discourse would seem to require that Socrates must *refute* Crito's reasons, if his decision to stay is the right one after all. But rather than meet Crito's objections directly and explicitly, Socrates instead elects to insist that he will continue his customary practice of «being persuaded by nothing but the reason that appears best to me when I've considered it» (46b4-6). What then follows is the argument I sketched earlier, which seems to satisfy Crito, too, as showing that it would be wrong for Socrates to escape – and thus, by implication, also wrong for Crito and his friends to enable such an action (48c7-d3). Socrates claims that if this really is the result of the best reasoning available to them, then all of the considerations that Crito had brought up earlier – about the risks to his friends' finances and reputations, and about raising children – are really no better than the sorts of popular appeals that good people should not take seriously (48c2-6).

Plato's readers might find this response inadequate. From the fact that Socrates finds good reasons against escaping, it does not simply follow that the reasons for escaping that Crito had given are thereby proven false or unimportant. Instead, one might find the existence of apparently significant reasons for and also against a certain course of action to be best regarded as grounds for indecision about what course of action one should follow. But in making the argument that he does, Socrates does not wholly shrug off the considerations that Crito had proposed. For one thing, if what Crito were proposing – that Socrates leave Athens and go into exile – were really the right thing to do, rather than stay and be executed, then Socrates should have proposed that outcome as his counterpenalty, and his failure to do that at the trial must now be regarded as a fault that he should be ashamed of (52c4-9). Crito seemed to ignore this implication of what he is now proposing, and does not respond to Socrates having the personified laws of Athens making this complaint.

Crito has also complained that Socrates' own reputation would be sullied if he did not choose to leave, but Socrates also directly responds

to this claim by having the laws insist that by leaving, Socrates would make himself a «laughingstock» (καταγέλαστος, 53a7). This, too, has clear implications for what Crito and his friends were proposing to do. But Socrates takes the argument further and now addresses Crito's initial arguments quite directly. Socrates has the laws remind Crito that he and his friends are likely to be prosecuted themselves and either exiled or have their property taken (53a9-b3). Whereas Crito had earlier complained that if he stayed Socrates would actually be assisting those who sought to destroy him, Socrates has the laws say that, on the contrary, if he were to leave, by proving himself to be a lawbreaker, he would actually «confirm for the members of the jury their opinion, so they'll think they decided the case correctly» (53b8-c1). And finally, as for Crito's complaint that Socrates would be abandoning his children, the laws insist, on the contrary, that he would not do them any good by dragging them off to Thessaly as exiles. His friend would surely take good care of them if he left for Thessaly alone, so why should he expect his friend not to take the same care for them if he goes, instead, to Hades (54a2-b2)? Socrates has the Laws draw a conclusion that goes right to the claim Crito had sought to establish in his earlier arguments: Crito had claimed that both Socrates and also his companions would be better off if he escaped. But as the laws conclude their speech, they say the exact opposite of what Crito had said:

> Neither will it appear that it was better or more just or more pious for you or for any of your companions here that you did this, […] having mistreated those whom you ought least of all to harm – yourself, your friends, your country, and us (*Cri*. 54b6-c6).

Socrates' refutation of Crito's arguments may seem to have been somewhat indirect, but it is not, after all, that Socrates simply contrasted his own reasons to the ones Crito had given. Instead, Socrates gives reasons that are based on agreements that he and Crito had long held, and which Socrates takes to count not simply as reasons to reach the opposite conclusion than the one Crito was urging, but also as implying the rejection of each of the arguments that Crito initially made. It would not only not be in Socrates' own self-interest to escape, it would also not be in his friends' interest to promote such an injustice. Moreover, it would

not at all serve the interests of Socrates' sons to have his father and his father's friend perpetrate the injustice of escape. Modern readers may be less convinced by the arguments that Socrates puts into the mouths of the laws of Athens than Socrates claims to be (54d3-8).[4] But if my assessment of those arguments is correct, then nothing in what Xenophon or Plato have to say about Socrates' behavior at his trial or his acceptance of the sentence of death indicates either that he was willing to sacrifice self-interest for the sake of others' interests, nor that his last days showed any neglect for the welfare of others even as he pursued his own self-interest. To put it slightly differently, I have found no reason herein not to regard Socrates' eudaimonism as egoistic. But neither have I found in anything he said or did in his final days as evidence of a deplorable form of egoism – one that gladly or willingly sacrifices the interests of others in the pursuit of one's own. If there is evidence in our sources for either of these two conclusions, accordingly, it will have to be found elsewhere.

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[4] Indeed, some scholars have found these arguments actually un-Socratic and have insisted that Plato did not want us to be persuaded by them. See note 2, above.

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Keywords

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Abstract

In this paper, I consider how Xenophon and Plato characterize Socrates' words and actions in his final days, including especially his decision not to flee Athens, but rather to stay and be executed. It might appear that in accepting death in the way he does, Socrates' makes the greatest self-sacrifice possible for a human being. But did his decision amount to a sacrifice of his own personal self-interest, or was his drinking the poison entirely compatible with Socrates being an egoist? On the other hand, both Xenophon and Plato also talk about the negative effects of Socrates' willingness to die in such a way on his friends and family. In Plato, Socrates' decision is explicitly challenged as a selfish one that showed insufficient regard for the interests of others whose welfare should have been a concern to Socrates. Does his death, then, actually prove Socrates to have acted selfishly in the end?

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