

3rd topic: Freedom, evil and human nature

In ancient Greece, most philosophers gazed upon the world and wondered what they were looking at. Thus, metaphysics was the main area of interest. That is, until someone first turned their gaze upon themselves, and realized that the beholder was far more interesting than that which he beheld. One of the first to turn his gaze, was Socrates, who dived into the unexplored depths of human nature with the curiosity of a child. And as such, he came to the seemingly childlike, innocent view that “no man voluntarily pursues evil, or that which he thinks to be evil, whatever it may be” and that “to prefer evil to good is not in human nature”.

Immediately, the statement seems absurd. Terrorism and crimes seem to contradict it. But before one attacks a statement, one must first understand it. We must do as Socrates himself advised, and make sure we discuss the core of the matter at hand, and not semantics. What is a *voluntary* action? Is there *good* and *evil*? And what is *human nature*?

The key word in this quote is *voluntarily*. I take this to mean that the man in question is *free*. Notice that we in this case can understand the quote as a definition of freedom: *being free means pursuing that which is good, or at least not pursuing that which is evil*. In this case, we are only free when we are not lead astray from what is good. If we consider other definitions of freedom, we might get a deeper understanding of what such distractions may be. Kant, for example, believed that freedom, in practice, was to be free of one’s senses and feelings, so that one could act purely rationally. When one considers that he believed that his categorical imperative was rational in nature, one begins to realise that what he is proposing is not different to what Socrates said about 2000 years earlier. If all free men are reasonable, and all reasonable men are good, it follows that all free men are good.

When faced with this quote, I immediately begin to reflect on my own life and experience. When I consider the times I have personally seen people act unethically, or acted thusly myself, the guilty party never seems to be completely free. To make a commonplace example: imagine how you act when you are ravenous, or exhausted, or fuming; that is, imagine sometime when you were totally engulfed by some emotion or sensation. Are you not, in these moments, more prone to acting dishonourably or unethically? Are you not, in these moments, less yourself, less reasonable, than when you are well rested, fed and happy? Are you not, in these moments, less free?

In my opinion, most wrongdoings have their cause in ignorance, rather than passions, but of course, ignorance is not freedom. Aristotle stated that if one is to be held fully responsible for an action, one must both have been able to act otherwise, and must have known the consequences. This raises the question of intention versus consequence, and it

should be obvious that an action behind which there are good intentions, still may have horrible consequences. Responsibility is closely tied to freedom, for without freedom there can be no responsibility, and I would even go so far as to equate the two: thus, an action cannot be free if it was made in ignorance; that is to say, even a fully rational agent acting on misinformation is not free. This is in accordance with the existentialist philosophy, where freedom is perhaps the main point of discussion. Being free means being in control of your life, and if your actions are based on misinformation, you do not have control.

Indeed, also existentialists such as Sartre would probably agree with Socrates that any decision made by someone who were fully aware of the consequences of their decision, and thus someone who are free, almost by definition becomes good, because *good* is subjective. If this individual really is free, he must act in accordance with himself, and as such, he must follow his own, self-written moral code, and since there is no objective standard by which we can declare this code to be wrong, it is as right as any other. However, it is still possible to act immorally, but you cannot act authentically and immorally simultaneously; but as it turns out, living completely authentically is – just like absolute freedom - an ideal which seems unreachable.

By using the concepts of *good* and *evil*, the quote opens a debate of absolutism and relativism. First, we will take a relativistic perspective, by once again imagining the words of Socrates as a line of algebra and rearranging to define the relative term: *good*, or at least *what is not evil: That which a free man pursues, cannot be evil*. As such, Sartre's view is in accordance with the quote; to an existentialist who believes that ethics have no objective answers, but only subjective ones, a good action must be one that is in accordance with the ethics of the subject doing the action.

When we instead take the absolutists perspective, we might instead seek to define human nature. This is what I believe Socrates intended, for no rearranging is required: "To prefer evil to good is not in human nature", plainly: *human nature is to pursue that which is good*. What is evident is that Socrates has a positive view on human nature. And while a relativist may say that good and evil is up to the individual, they could both agree on this quote, because to an absolutist with such a positive view on humanity, all humans have *the same* morality encoded in their nature. The only reason evil exists, then, is because all people are not free. And as such, the statement holds when viewed from an absolutistic deterministic lens - if we are not free, it is indeed the case that no free man can pursue evil - though Socrates himself likely did not intend for such a conclusion to be drawn from his statement.

Socrates' words can be accepted rationally – as Kant did – empirically – as I have done when reflecting upon my own experiences – and from both a relativistic and absolutistic moral viewpoint. I find myself agreeing with Socrates, that human nature really is good, and that a free man is too. Unfortunately, we are so easily distracted. Dostoevsky writes in *The Brothers Karamazov* that human beings do not wish for freedom, and while I disagree – for I believe that we all wish deep inside to be authentic and free – I can relate to his observation. There are so many temptations and distractions to fall prey to. If only people would make a greater effort to be free and live authentically, the world might be a better place. Or perhaps we must make a world where the distractions are not so destructive.