

Socratic Virtue Through Thick and Thin

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Socrates' dictum that virtue is knowledge means that acquiring an ethically admirable disposition of character, if not simply acquiring a set of true beliefs about the way things are, is, at the very least, a matter of acquiring the capacity to attain such beliefs. However, a virtue is also—or I shall suppose it to be—a disposition to choose or reject actions because they are of a certain ethically relevant kind.¹ But if we accept a Socratic version of a virtue as a disposition to exercise a certain kind of cognitive capacity, how can it also engage an agent's will, as it must, if a virtue is equally a disposition to make choices about what to do?

On a prescriptivist interpretation, a judgement that an action is of a certain ethically relevant kind reflects the sort of moral principles an agent has chosen to live by. Adopting such principles is not a matter of coming to believe certain "moral facts" but of choosing actions of a certain descriptive kind because they accord with certain formal principles such as universalizability. The moral evaluation of an action is logically separable from its description. Accordingly, viewing the moral virtues in terms of a disposition to exercise a capacity to achieve a certain kind of true belief about our actions mistakenly conflates evaluation and description.

Such a conflation is understandable when we consider that many of the concepts employed in our judgements about actions being of a certain ethically relevant kind involve conjunctions of descriptive and evaluative elements such as murder, betrayal, indebtedness, cruelty, kindness, and rudeness. On a Socratic view, the elements are inseparable so that an agent, in believing that a given act is murder, necessarily takes himself to have reason to avoid doing that action. But, according to the prescriptivist approach, if the descriptive and evaluative elements were inseparable, it would be impossible to make a judgement such as "that is murder" while remaining indifferent to the reason giving force of such a judgement. Yet, such indifference is entirely possible. Such seems to be the case with Pinkie, the main protagonist in Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*:

The Boy said slowly, leaning out across the rail into the doubtful rain: "When people do one murder, I've read they sometimes have to do another—to tidy up." The word 'murder' conveyed no more to him than the word 'box,' 'collar,' 'giraffe'.²

Pinkie suffers from what Hare would call the "so what" syndrome.³

Prescriptivism's use of the "so what" syndrome constitutes a serious objection to the Socratic claim that acquiring an ethically admirable disposition of character is a matter of achieving a disposition to exercise a certain kind of cognitive capacity. As I shall try to show, the "so what" attitude does not require us to treat descriptive and evaluative elements as logically separable when we utilize what I shall call "thick" ethical concepts. Such a syndrome cannot be due to an agent's failure to make a commitment from a separable evaluative viewpoint but rather to a failure "to see situations in a specific light, as constituting reasons for acting."⁴ However, since my defence of "Socratic virtue" has more than its fair share of twists and turns, it might be useful at this point to erect a few signposts.