

Université de Montréal

Virtue, The Fruit of Philosophy

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Mémoire présenté à la Faculté des études supérieures

en vue de l'obtention du grade de maîtrise
en philosophie
option « recherche »

Août, 2005

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Université de Montréal
Faculté des études supérieures

Ce mémoire intitulé
Virtue, The Fruit of Philosophy

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SOMMAIRE

Ce mémoire développe l'argument suivant lequel la véritable vertu est réalisable et durable en dépit d'importants exemples historiques et expérimentaux qui remettent en question la fiabilité du caractère moral face à des situations difficiles sur le plan éthique. L'exégèse commence par donner un aperçu de plusieurs exemples contemporains courants qui sembleraient miner la fiabilité et la stabilité du caractère éthique. Il s'agit, notamment, du reportage éclairé de Hannah Arendt sur le procès d'Adolf Eichmann, des expériences sociologiques menées par Stanley Milgram et Philip Zimbardo, et enfin, des actes méprisables du personnel militaire à Abu Ghraib. Le mémoire traite ensuite de l'argument situationniste qui, fondé sur des expériences comme celles mentionnées plus haut, arrive à la conclusion philosophique que la situation, et non le caractère, détermine invariablement le comportement. En réponse à cette approche *défaitiste*, le mémoire fait appel à la sagesse intemporelle de Platon, notamment dans *La République*, pour ce que l'on considère ici comme étant une explication supérieure de la vertu chancelante observée, et surtout, de la possibilité pour l'homme d'avoir accès à la vertu. Platon soutient que la véritable vertu ne vacille jamais et que la faiblesse éthique trahit ce qui est essentiellement une moindre apparence de vertu résultant non pas de la réflexion et de la connaissance approfondie *du bien*, mais des us et coutumes qui reflètent souvent les fausses perceptions quant à la bonne mesure. Il résume le message optimiste que la *vertu* est le *fruit de la philosophie* quand il écrit que « l'excellence n'a pas de maître; selon qu'il [l'homme] lui accordera du prix ou ne lui en accordera pas, chacun en aura beaucoup ou peu. » (617e)

Mots Clés

Platon, situationniste, éthique, caractère, vertu-science, *République*, mythe d'Er, Milgram, Zimbardo, Hannah Arendt

SUMMARY

This essay will argue that true virtue is attainable and sustainable in spite of the significant historical and experimental examples that call into question the reliability of moral character in the face of ethically challenging situations. The exegesis begins by providing insight into several prevalent contemporary examples that seemingly undermine the reliability and stability of ethical character. These include, Hannah Arendt's discerning account of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the sociological experiments conducted by Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo, and finally, the despicable display of the military personal in Abu Ghraib. The essay then turns to the Situationist argument which, based on experiences and experiments such as the ones mentioned above, arrives at the philosophical conclusion that situation, not character, will consistently determine behavior. In answer to this *defeatist* approach the essay appeals to the timeless wisdom of Plato, notably in *The Republic*, for, what is considered here to be, a superior explanation of the faltering virtue observed and more importantly the human capacity for virtue. Plato contends that true virtue does not waver under any circumstances and that ethical weakness betrays what is, essentially, the mere appearance of virtue resulting, not from profound reflection and knowledge of *the good* but, from habit and custom often reflecting mistaken beliefs as to right action. Plato summarizes the optimistic message that *virtue is the fruit of philosophy* where he writes, "excellence knows no master; a man shall have more or less of her according to the value he sets on her."(617e)

Key Words

Plato, situationist, ethics, character, virtue-science, *The Republic*, myth of Er, Milgram, Zimbardo, Hannah Arendt

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the director of my thesis, professor Louis-André Dorion, to whom I am indebted for his contribution to greatly improving the quality of this essay. Without his invaluable insight, the dedication of his, much sought after, time and his gracious support this project would not have come to fruition. I would also like to thank Jocelyne Doyon, the spirit of the philosophy department, for her professional and personal contributions to this effort. Finally, I would like to thank my family for their patience and support throughout.

Introduction

This essay seeks to contribute, albeit humbly, to the age-old ethical question of whether or not individuals can be relied upon to consistently behave virtuously even when confronted with highly challenging ethical dilemmas. It aspires to further our understanding as to the factors that motivate individuals to either reliably remain true to their moral convictions or to deviate from their alleged ethical principles, sometimes with terrifying consequences, in the face of the pressures inherent to certain ethically charged situations. Underlying this quest is the optimistic conviction, inspired and substantiated by the timeless wisdom of Platonic ethics, that the moral conduct of a *truly* virtuous person will not waver even under the most challenging of circumstances. The essay will argue, not only the plausibility but ultimately, the necessity of such a hypothesis in answer to the worrisome instances of lack of virtue to which we bear witness.

Historical experiences and sociological experiments attesting to the weakness of human character when put to the test are, unfortunately, plentiful. Several amongst these will be examined in the hope of gaining greater insight into the intricacies of ethical or non-ethical conduct in morally problematic situations. Towards this end, Hannah Arendt's illuminating work, *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1964), will be explored as an introduction to the disturbing hypothesis that grave moral misconduct is not necessarily the result of an aberrant evil minority, as is commonly held. Instead, Hannah Arendt looks to the case of Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi war criminal whose trial she chronicles, as representative of the often prosaic nature of contemptuous behaviour. This argument is corroborated by the pivotal sociological studies on

obedience conducted by Stanley Milgram, as documented in *Obedience to Authority* (1974). Milgram's findings, which shocked both academic and lay persons alike, will be discussed as they reveal the overwhelming propensity of ordinarily *good* individuals, motivated principally by the desire to obey authority, to induce what they believed to be painful and potentially life threatening electrical shocks to innocent victims. Similarly, Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment (1971) will be examined so as to show the potentially negative influence of rules, symbols, group identity and situational validation on the moral behaviour of typically upstanding individuals. Finally, an analysis of the recent shocking occurrences at Abu Ghraib prison (2003) provides yet another glimpse at the seemingly precarious nature of evil by unmasking the apparent facility with which the common man relinquishes his previously held values and moral principles. The *banal* face of ethical weakness to which these examples attest has the destabilising effect of democratising the capacity for immorality, even profound *evil*, and, as a result, putting into question our traditional perception of character as generally reliable and stable. It begs the crucial question as to whether or not there is an Adolf Eichmann in every man.

Questions such as these have led contemporary theorists, namely Situationists, to concede to the inevitability of poor ethical conduct and consequently incorporate it into their ethical philosophy. Situationist theorists claim that our traditional, supposedly misguided, conception of *good character* must be replaced by an empirically justified alternative. In response, they put forth a theory of social psychology based upon three fundamental principles. First, that behaviour is not determined by individual character but by situational constraints. Second, that a traditional conception of stable character traits is inaccurate and finally that virtues are not interrelated rendering them powerless in

predicting future behaviour. This somewhat dismal depiction of human character leads these theorists to the cumbersome conclusion that the only morally prescriptive recourse available is the avoidance of ethically compromising situations. As the analysis that follows will show, the problems associated with this approach are plentiful as they result in a precarious situational relativism that expects morally unreliable agents to, not only, successfully predict ethical pitfalls but to possess the will and strength required in order to side-step them.

This situationist perspective is by no means novel and can be traced as far back as Plato's *The Republic*. Herein Socrates' interlocutor, Glaucon, presents the argument that the purpose of justice is to maintain social order and that people stifle their true desire towards unjust behaviour out of fear of suffering injustice themselves. In order to illustrate these points Glaucon recounts the story of a man, Gyges, who steals a ring from a corpse found in a bronze hollow horse in a chasm below the earth. He soon discovers that the ring has magical powers rendering him invisible at will. Gyges uses this mystical force to gain wealth and power through deception and murder. Glaucon goes so far as to say that if there were two such rings one in the hands of an apparently just man and the other an unjust man the outcome would be identical in both cases. For Glaucon, Gyges represents *the common man*, his actions reflect the willingness in all of us to commit injustice so as to satisfy our self-interest if the fear of consequences is eliminated.

The remainder of *The Republic* represents, in large part, Socrates' answer to the question underlying Glaucon's argument as well as that of the situationists, namely, why justice, or right conduct as understood by the ancients, is desirable as an end in itself and how can its consistent realisation be assured? Socrates' compelling argument, explaining

the apparent contradiction between the commonly held view of virtuous character as attainable and sustainable and the practical examples that seem to undermine it, culminates in and is encapsulated within the myth of Er, which concludes *The Republic*. Plato argues that disappointing ethical performance results not from a lack of human potential for virtue but from deficient knowledge as to what constitutes right behavior. He contends that much of the apparent ethical conduct perceived under ordinary circumstances falls short when presented with morally problematic situations because it results not from profound knowledge of right action but from habit. True virtue is achieved only when false knowledge, such as commonly held opinions, often at the root of habituated practices, the validity of which has never been meaningfully tested, is exposed and replaced with true knowledge. *Virtue* is therefore, according to Plato, *the fruit of philosophy*, or the acquisition of pure knowledge accomplished through the continuous self, and other, examination known as the *dialectic*. Plato eloquently summarizes, what is considered here to be, the key to the realization of true virtue where he writes that “excellence knows no master; a man shall have more or less of her according to the value he sets on her.”(617e)

The above exegesis is followed by a summary of the Platonically inspired answer to the situationists’ empirical observations of lack of virtuous character as representing a theoretical point of departure as opposed to a philosophical conclusion. More clearly, while Plato acknowledges the occurrence of imperfect ethical conduct, as testified to by the fact that *The Republic* constitutes his response to the inadequate ethical behaviour he observed in Greek society, he understands it to be a departure from, not a confirmation of the lack of, human excellence. It is due to this fundamental difference that Socratic

ethics help to shed, what is considered here to be, a more meaningful light than do the situationists on the nature of human virtue. As mentioned above, situationists view the examples of Eichmann, the subjects of the Milgram and Zimbardo experiments and the Abu Ghraib aggressors as conclusive evidence that ordinarily good people will behave unethically in morally problematic situations. Unfortunately they fail to answer the all-encompassing question as to *why* this phenomenon occurs. Socrates, motivated by the desire to know, not simply describe, succeeds in explaining that seemingly good people who behave badly are just that *seemingly good* but not *truly good*. From this Socratic perspective, the subjects discussed throughout the essay behaved unethically because they were ignorant as to the good. A perspective that, as a detailed analysis of each case will demonstrate, is corroborated by the conclusions depicting the *banality of evil* arrived at by the contemporary authors in question; Hannah Arendt, Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo. The confirmation, provided by these authors, of the benign nature of the forces undermining virtuous character contributes to the conclusion that the ethical foundation with which these forces met was fundamentally lacking in structural fortitude. Their analyses support the Platonic theory, espoused throughout, that lack of virtue is not simply the result of ethical weakness in the face of moral challenge but is, in fact, the cause of the ensuing weakness observed. As a result, the focus, rightfully, shifts from the power of the situation over character to the power of character over the situation if and only if virtue is the result of philosophy and not simply the illusion of virtue, which is the product of habituated, unreflected and often unsubstantiated, societal norms.

Further evidence supporting this conclusion will be shown to lie in the testimonies of the agents of the historical and experimental examples in question wherever this is

available, namely in the case of Eichmann and the Milgram subjects. First, as will be seen, these individuals can be said to have held erroneous conceptions of what it means to be a *good person*. Evidence of this can be found in their continued self-perception, in spite of clearly unethical behaviour, as possessing fundamentally good characters. Such distortions point to underlying misconceptions as regards the very nature of virtue and the ethical principles it entails. Moreover, and perhaps most convincing, testimony as to the validity of Plato's understanding of philosophy as the unequivocal road to virtue is provided by the post experimental interviews conducted by the Stanley Milgram wherein the subjects who resisted situational pressures attribute their ethical fortitude to philosophical reflection of ethical questions on a variety of different levels.

Finally, as the essay has attempted to render abundantly clear, the true optimism underlying Platonic and Socratic philosophy is the edifying power of knowledge and consequently the necessity of rigorous and profound ethical reflection in the form of institutional and private instruction. An optimistic message that rings as true today, if not more so, as it did over two thousand years ago. Interestingly enough, the situationist perspective serves to, albeit inadvertently, illuminate the imperative first step towards the actualisation of the ethical road map provided in *The Republic*; the danger of moral complacency. Upon examination, the situationists' shortcomings expose the concealed peril associated with superficially acquired illusions of virtue, that is, the false sense of security that lulls us into believing that we are morally equipped thus detracting us from the pursuit of true virtue. The consequence of which is the failure to identify and prevail in the face of life altering ethical choices. In this regard, situationists contribute to the

fundamental Socratic principle that at the root of knowledge is the acknowledgement of its absence.

Chapter I: The Banality of Evil

Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on the Banality of Evil

In order to expose the utility and validity of Plato's ethical philosophy in contemporary society it is important to understand its explanatory force relative to the difficult moral issues of our times. To begin, how can an optimistic perspective of human virtue, upholding our capacity and natural tendency towards consistent virtuous behavior, be reconciled with the widespread examples unmistakably attesting to a predominant *lack* of human excellence. One of the most terrifying modern examples of the barbaric potential of human beings lies in the tragic accounts of Nazi Germany wherein seemingly ordinary citizens committed unimaginable atrocities. Hannah Arendt, in her moving and insightful book entitled, *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1964) asks and seeks to answer the very difficult question as to why individual's who had led descent, law abiding lives, perpetrated extraordinarily evil acts. Hannah Arendt approaches this exegesis by chronicling and analyzing the experiences of one man, Adolf Eichmann, as he transforms from a *common man* to the orchestrator of events leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent people.

In the beginning of the Nazi rule in occupied Germany Adolf Eichmann served to organise the deportation, driven by motivations of "ethnic cleansing", of all Jewish persons. With the implementation of Hitler's "final solution" representing the "extermination" of all non-Aryan persons Eichmann, due to his supposed knowledge of "The Jewish Question" and his experience in transport organization, was appointed the

job of transporting selected persons to the Nazi concentration camps. He did this knowing that most - hundreds of thousands - of the people whose transport he organised would, upon arrival to their destinations, meet with their deaths. Hannah Arendt, then a reporter for the *New York Times*, wrote a series of articles, upon which her book is based, chronicling and critically analysing the information emanating from Eichmann's court proceedings in Jerusalem wherein he was tried for his crimes and sentenced to death.

The prosecutor in the Eichmann case describes him as "the most abnormal monster that the world had ever seen".(p.253) If this depiction is accurate it serves to alleviate the burden from the shoulders of ethical philosophy to explain Eichmann's despicable moral performance. If he is ethically deviant, representing a rare abnormality in the spectrum of human virtue, then his behaviour does not threaten an optimistic perspective of virtuous character. Simply stated, is Eichmann the exception to the rule or the exception that proves the rule? The troubling truth is, as Hannah Arendt goes on to say, that there were many like Eichmann who "were neither perverted, nor sadistic, [who] were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal."(p.276) She writes that according to the Nazi party's own accounts the *murderers* were not killers by nature, in fact, party leaders describe how conscious efforts were made to "weed out" those who were sadistic.(p.105) Eichmann himself provided the puzzling testimony that he had never had any inclination to kill anybody and that he personally bore no animosity towards the Jewish people in relation to whom he claimed to have always behaved in a respectful manner. Proof of the validity of this statement, as well as to the fact that Eichmann was not a sociopathic killer devoid of conscience, can be gleaned from his one short lived attempt at mitigating the brutality of his actions. Early on in his career he had redirected a transport destined for

Minsk or Riga, concentration camps where the Jewish passengers would have surely been exterminated, to Łódź where the prisoners were spared death so as to serve as slave labourers. Even the trial judge, in his closing statements, corroborates Eichmann's claim to *normalcy* where he stipulates that "under more favourable circumstances it is highly unlikely that [Eichmann] would ever have come before [the present judge and jury] or before any other criminal court."(p.279) Further striking testimony to the sadly unexceptional nature of Eichmann's *evil* is the fact that he received "co-operation", not merely "compliance", from the Jewish people themselves in the execution of his responsibilities. For example, Hannah Arendt speaks of the gruesome, yet undeniable, accounts provided by Mr. H. G. Adler in his book entitled *Theresienstadt 1941-1945*. Herein he reveals that it was in fact the job of the Jewish administration, working within the Nazi guidelines, and not of Eichmann as the prosecution mistakenly alleged, to select and subsequently name the people who were to be executed.(p.106) In fact Eichmann himself had claimed to have lived his life, prior to "being charged with carrying out the final solution", in accordance with the Kantian categorical imperative as he understood it; "that the principle of my will must always be such that it can become the principle of general laws."(p.135-136)

If Eichmann's participation in mass murder did not result from his sadistic, pathological and monstrous nature then how is it to be explained? Hannah Arendt puts forth several intriguing and convincing arguments in an attempt to shed light onto the factors that contributed to Eichmann's ethical degeneration. Hannah Arendt begins this exposition by dispelling several very basic and important questions; were Eichmann's actions motivated by self-preservation or could he have acted differently without fear of

immediate death? Did he do his best to reduce the gravity of the crimes he committed? Finally, were his acts the direct enactment of superior orders? The answers to all of the above is an unequivocal *no*. To begin, Eichmann admitted to knowing that one could abstain from participating, effectively drop out of the organization, virtually unscathed. According to a certain von dem Bach-Zelewski, a witness for the defence, "It was possible to evade a commission by an application for transfer. To be sure, in individual cases, one had to be prepared for a certain disciplinary punishment. A danger to one's life, however, was not at all involved."(p.91) Finally The Nuremberg documents confirm that "not a single case could be traced in which an S.S. member had suffered the death penalty because of a refusal to take part in an execution."(p.91) In answer to the second question, as was mentioned above, Eichmann's jolt of conscience spurring an attempt to manipulate the factors under his control so as to mitigate their destructive force was short lived. Once his subversive activities had been discovered he participated in the redirection of the persons in question to their original, or worse, destinations. Finally, throughout the course of his defence, Eichmann never argued that his actions were the direct result of the imperative to follow the orders of his superiors. In fact, this line of defence was not available to Eichmann who towards the end of the war, as will be discussed later, disobeyed the direct orders of his superiors having deemed them to run contrary to the *final solution*.

According to Hannah Arendt the case of Eichmann provided insight into the question of "how long [it takes] an individual to overcome his innate repugnance towards crime and what exactly happens to him once he has reached that point?"(p.93) Hannah Arendt points out that the participants were motivated to behave unethically due to their

subscription to the simple notion that they were “involved in something historic, grandiose and unique which must therefore be difficult to bear.”(p.105) What is meant here by *difficult to bear* is the notion that the successful execution of the *grandiose* project of mass extermination required a substantial ethical readjustment. It necessitated the altering both of one’s conscience and one’s “animal pity by which”, as Ms Arendt points out, all moral men are affected in the presence of human suffering. Conscience, she writes, was apparently quite easily overcome, as will be discussed later, while more sophisticated trickery had to be employed so as to suppress “animal pity”. Towards this end, Himmler, a notorious Nazi leader, used the “simple and effective trick” of redirecting these instincts towards the perpetrator himself. As a result, instead of feeling pity for the victim the perpetrators would direct the pity towards themselves, in the form of, “what horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighted upon my shoulders.”(p.93) As regards conscience, the simple fact of war can be said to have brought about an altered personal attitude towards human life where suffering and death, which were ever-present, became almost commonplace. Nonetheless, as Hannah Arendt points out, while the devastation of war may have worked to ease the perpetrator’s consciences this was superfluous since the “extermination machinery” and its bureaucratic accomplice, already in place, had been perfectly and laboriously conceived prior to the outbreak of war and the horrors it entails.

Eichmann provides us with his own account of the factors contributing to the transformation of his conscience as it had served him under ordinary circumstances to its condition when he committed crimes that he would otherwise have considered abhorrent. He depicts this loss of conscience as coinciding with the events that took place at the

Wannsee Conference, a meeting amongst influential members of German government, judiciary, civil service and military, designed to align all groups in the implementation of the final solution. What Eichmann, present only as secretary since all guests far surpassed him in rank, witnessed at this conference, apparently, changed him irreparably. Eichmann testified that Heydrich, a senior official, had been worried about obtaining the necessary support of “non-party members” in the murder of hundreds of thousands of innocent people. Yet, as Eichmann pointed out, this did not turn out to be a valid concern at all. In fact Heydrich’s proposal was met not only with acceptance but with “extraordinary enthusiasm”(p. 113) to be involved and to participate in such an important initiative. It was upon witnessing this unanimous participation that Eichmann experienced, what he referred to as, a “Pontius Pilate” in that all his doubts, “about such a bloody solution through violence”, were now dispelled. “The popes of the third Reich”, as Eichmann referred to them, had pronounced themselves. “Now he could see with his own eyes and hear with his own ears that not only Hitler, not only Heydrich ‘sphinx’ Müller, not just the S.S. or the party, but the elite of the good old civil service were vying and fighting with each other for the honor of taking the lead in these *bloody matters*. Who was he to judge” he asks “who was he to have his own thoughts on the matter.¹ The rest went smoothly”, according to Eichmann, “and soon became routine.”(p.114) By his own admission, Eichmann describes having found *safety in numbers*. He appears to have felt justified in what he was doing because it was the norm, and not only the norm amongst the common man but the norm amongst the elite, the decision makers, the

¹It is interesting to note that in *Crito* Socrates argues against being influenced by the “opinion of the many” as opposed to the meaningful judgement of one “who understands justice and injustice...and the truth itself.”(48a) Eichmann would have been well served to heed Socrates’ advice.

knowledgeable ones. Moreover, one of the reasons why his attendance at the Wannsee conference stood out so clearly in his, usually unreliable, memory was because it represented one of the few incidents where he was actually included amongst such important persons, an inclusion that Eichmann admitted to having strongly desired. Clearly one of the most powerful factors in appeasing Eichmann's conscience was that he did not encounter anyone who actually opposed the Nazi genocidal agenda.

Hannah Arendt explains that the transformation that took place in Eichmann's case, as it undoubtedly did for many of the others criminals, was a necessary element in the success of the Nazi objective. She points out that "mere compliance" would have been insufficient in assuring the operational fluidity of such an elaborate malevolent system or the mass participation of "operators who had been brought up on the commandment thou shall not kill."(p.115) Probably the most powerful contributor to what amounted to the suspension of such deeply entrenched ethical principles on such a wide scale was the normative aspect of Hitler's directives. The führer's order of the final solution was followed by a tremendous production of legally drafted rules and regulations. Hannah Arendt distinguishes here between the directive force of a simple order as opposed to the virtually unquestionable power of the law that Hitler painstakingly assured would be attached to the final solution. The principle difference being that the validity of the law, unlike an order, "was not limited in space and time".(p.149) As alluded to earlier, throughout his defense, Eichmann acknowledges that it was the obedience to the law, and not to superior orders, that lent legitimacy to the illicit activities he perpetrated. Hannah Arendt accurately describes what amounts to *the world turned upside down* where she writes that "just as law in civilized countries says thou shall not kill even if sometimes we

have murderous urges, according to the law of the Nazi regime Hitler said thou shall kill even if ordinary desires are against murder.”(p.150)

It is precisely Eichmann’s respect for the law, combined with his boundless admiration for Hitler that led him to disrespect Himmler’s orders at the end of the war to save the Jewish people by terminating extermination at Auschwitz. Eichmann replied that he would “seek a new decision from the führer”.(p.147) This position, as Hannah Arendt explains, resulted not from his fanaticism but from his desire first to obey the *law according to Hitler* and second to do what he considered to be his duty, based on the distorted state of his conscience. With respect to the final solution the moral imperative guiding Eichmann’s behavior was a tragic distortion of the Kantian imperative that he claimed to have lived by. The moral maxim obligating each man, as legislator guided by practical reason, to conduct himself as though the principles guiding his actions could and should be principles of law, was distorted into the duty to “act as if the führer, were he to know of your action, would approve.”(p.136)

In sum, Hannah Arendt’s account reveals the *banality* of the elements contributing to Eichmann’s *evil* actions. As shown above the frightening truth is that Eichmann actively and devotedly contributed to the slaughtering of practically an entire ethnic entity not motivated by hatred, anger, mental illness, or profound ideological convictions but simply as the result of another day’s work. This conclusion raises tremendous ethical questions. How does his apparent *normalcy* and that of so many like him translate into our own ethical nature? Does Eichmann represent *any man* or consequently *all men* in their potential for evil under the right circumstances?

The Powerful Impetus of Obedience to Authority

Stanley Milgram in his classical psychological experiment, documented in *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental view* (1974) arrives at very similar conclusions, albeit under exceedingly different circumstances, and consequently further inspires reflection regarding these probing questions. Stanley Milgram conducted a fascinating experiment testing the dynamics of obedience in the face of authority. More specifically he questioned the degree to which ordinary individuals would obey orders emanating from an authority figure directing them to induce pain on a protesting victim. Participants were recruited under the guise of participating in a “study of memory and learning” at Yale. The subjects, as the participants will be referred to, were selected and screened so as to assure, to the extent possible, their psychological and emotional stability.² The original experiments were conducted in a university setting and the experimenters were dressed in official lab coats, both of which were factors contributing to the legitimacy of the experiment and the authority of the experimenter. The experiments began with a staged role attribution supposedly determining whom among the volunteers would take on the role of the questioner and who would be attributed the role of the student to be tested. The subjects, unbeknownst to them, were always designated the role of questioner and a fellow volunteer, as far as they were concerned, randomly received the role of student. In fact the *student* was not a volunteer at all but an actor who had been hired to pose as a fellow volunteer. The experimenter then explains that the study is concerned

² Attempts to explain the behaviour of the Milgram subjects as resulting from a lack of appropriate moral sensitivities on the part of the subjects have fallen short (Elms 1972: 135-6; Milgram 1974: 205; Miller 1986: 241). The consensus seems to be that the majority of subjects did possess appropriate ethical sensitivities (see Gibbard 1990: 58-61).

with the effects of punishment on learning and the student is lead into a room where he is strapped into what resembles a “miniature electric chair” and an electrode is attached to his wrist. The student is advised that he will be asked a series of memory testing questions and that if he answers incorrectly he will receive electrical shocks of increasing intensity. The subject, the real focus of the study, is then placed before an impressive control panel with a series of levers. The voltage level is clearly indicated for each lever, ranging from 14 to 450 volts. The panel also consists of blatant designations indicating the degree of intensity corresponding to the different levels of shock ranging from “Slight shock” to “Extreme intensity shock, Danger” for the higher voltages and ending with two switches simply marked “XXX”. Each subject then receives a “sample 45 volt shock” serving to strengthen the authenticity of the machine. The conflict arises when the student, after having answered incorrectly and received corresponding electrical shocks, begins, at 75 volts, to demonstrate his discomfort by “grunting”. If the subject continues to administer the shocks, the degree of the student’s manifestation of discomfort simultaneously increases in intensity. The student progresses from adamant verbalization, at 120 volts, to physical demonstrations of pain and pleas for cessation, at 150 volts, coupled later with cries of agony, at 285 volts, culminating with silence allowing for the possibility that the student was unconscious or worse. During the shocking process many of the subjects who expressed doubts as to their actions or the well being of the student were firmly and consistently ordered by the experimenter to continue. They were told that they “must continue”, that “the experiment necessitates that they continue” and that, while painful, “there were no long-term consequences to the health of the student.” As Stanley Milgram points out, in order “to extricate himself from

this plight, the subject must make a clear break with authority.” Quite astoundingly, the great majority of subjects did not live up to this challenge.³ Instead, sixty five percent of participants willingly administered what they believed to be painful, even excruciatingly painful and ultimately potentially lethal, electrical shocks of 450 volts to a fellow subject in compliance with the directives of a legitimate figure of authority for what they perceived to be an important endeavor.

It is abundantly clear that, while the psychological and emotional health of Adolf Eichmann can never be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, the subjects in the Milgram experiment had been carefully selected precisely because they had no history of sadistic, cruel, or psychopathic behavior. So why did these “normal”, by all accounts, individuals behave in such an abhorrent manner? In *Obedience to Authority* Stanley Milgram presents an explanatory analysis as to what he concluded to be the salient contributing factors. As will become evident there are a number of parallels between Hannah Arendt’s conclusions concerning the case of Adolf Eichmann and Stanley Milgram’s analysis regarding the obedience to authority experiments.

To begin, Stanley Milgram points to the fact that the subjects participating in the experiment were faced with a dilemma requiring them to choose between competing values, namely the imperative not to inflict injury onto innocent people and the duty to obey superior orders. He points out that the duty to obey, which turned out to be the

³ Prior to conducting the experiment Stanley Milgram describes, in an article appearing in Harper’s Magazine entitled “The Perils of Obedience”, polling a variety of different people on their predictions of the outcome of his study. Understandably they concluded overwhelmingly that the great majority of subjects would cease to obey the experimenter. Milgram notes particularly the comments of the psychiatrist who was convinced that the subjects would not exceed 150 volts, which coincides with the victim’s first demand to be freed. They anticipated that only 4% of the subjects would reach 300 volts and one out of a thousand, representing a pathological minority, would administer the maximum voltage of 450 volts.

salient virtue, is a deeply entrenched value in most societies as it is a necessary condition for the harmonious functioning of the hierarchically structured social systems in which we live.⁴ He points out that, for some, “societal systems” take on a life of their own elevating them beyond the “norms of conduct and sentiments of mortals. So when the experimenter demands that you continue this is considered an imperative transcending the simple domain of human authority”.(p. 24) Yet, as Milgram goes on to show, the degree of obedience correlates directly to the degree of legitimacy attached to the figure of authority. In a variation of the learning experiment, designed to evaluate precisely this phenomenon, Milgram changed the ratio of experimenter to subject to two to one. The interesting consequence was that when the experimenters disagreed amongst themselves the subjects ceased to shock the student. The subjects overwhelmingly sided with the experimenter espousing the more ethical viewpoint. Eichmann, as discussed above, also attributed his actions in part to his perception of the importance of obedience. Yet for Eichmann, as Hannah Arendt points out, the object of his obedience was not simply an order from an individual in a position of authority but *the law*. This comparison may help to lend perspective to the degree to which Eichmann’s challenge far outweighed that of the subjects in the Milgram experiments. The subjects succumbed to the pressure to obey the directives of one authoritative figure the basic legitimacy of which, while implied by the circumstances, was never directly or concretely known. Individuals such as Eichmann succumbed to the authority of, what had been decreed by the führer, the

⁴ It can, nonetheless, be argued that the need for non-aggressive behavior amongst citizens is of equal, if not greater, importance to our communal survival. One possible explanation for the discrepancy between the two virtues may be that there already exists an important normative infrastructure so efficient at regulating aggressive tendencies that the need for the practice of this virtue on an individual basis has greatly diminished. In other words, the insufficient use of the principle of non-aggression may have rendered individuals out of practice regarding its application.

most powerful man in all of Eastern Europe, and supported, seemingly unanimously, by the most influential intellectual, political, and military figures of the state to be, the irrefutable *law of the land*.

The act of obedience to authority in general, whether it takes the form of an experimenter or the law, has the added consequence, as discussed by Milgram, of bringing about transference of responsibility. Stanley Milgram suggests that upon submission to authority an individual enters into an “agentic state” wherein he/she relinquishes responsibility for his/her actions to an authority figure. The agent, who comes to perceive him or herself as merely an instrument, surrenders both control over the situation as well as a sense of responsibility, relative to the consequences of the orders they execute, to the decision-maker. In Eichmann’s case, as mentioned earlier, this occurred on two levels. First, Hannah Arendt speaks of his boundless admiration and respect for Adolf Hitler whose directives represented unquestionable dogma. Second, she describes his moment of Pontias Pilate when he relinquished his responsibility to question the ethical validity of his role in the Nazi agenda. He concluded that the German military, social and political elite whose knowledge, social and economic standing far outweighed his own were in a far superior position to judge the moral quality of his actions than he was. As Hannah Arendt so aptly concludes “he was neither the first nor the last to be ruined by modesty.”(p.114)

Milgram further argues that the ease with which one relinquishes responsibility for his/her actions correlates with the degree to which the subject is removed from the consequences of his actions. This phenomenon became quite evident in the course of another variation of the experiment where the ratio of subject to student was increased to

two to one. One subject was responsible for testing while the other administered the electrical shocks. Thirty-seven of the forty subjects in the testing role continued shocking the student to the maximum voltage level. They were convinced that the real responsibility for the infliction of pain resided with the person actually pushing the button. Milgram interpreted these results as testimony to the fact that our conscious is more easily appeased when we perceive ourselves as intermediaries and when the consequence of our actions is far enough away so as to be easily ignored. This factor must have played an important role in easing Eichmann's conscience because Eichmann's participation in mass murder was conducted at a distance. While Eichmann knowingly organized, orchestrated, directed and assured the execution of diabolical plans resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths he never physically hurt anyone. Finally the Nazi regime, fully aware of the efficiency of the distancing phenomenon, assured the implementation of an elaborate bureaucratic machine intricately layered with endless echelons of command serving to remove as many as possible from the end results of their actions.

Another very important factor discussed by Milgram as contributing to the subject's diminished ethical behavior is the legitimacy of the context within which these acts were performed. As was the case with Eichmann, the subjects gained confidence from the fact that they deemed the experiment in which they were participating to be "important, beneficial and useful to humanity." Somehow what would otherwise be, by their own admission, a despicable act becomes acceptable within the context of an important psychological experiment or, in Eichmann's case, the venerated goal of purifying the world's population so as to enable the Arian race to take its rightful place. The human

ability to redefine our perception of an act relative to the apparent legitimacy of its context is typified by the example of a soldier at war who is convinced not only of the necessity of his actions but also, and perhaps more importantly, of their moral quality. Nonetheless, as Milgram points out, the subordination of the human consequences of one's acts to the allegedly legitimate nature of their context may engender, as we have seen, exceedingly dangerous penalties. Perhaps, as will be discussed later, examples such as those of Eichmann and the Milgram experiment must serve to remind us that the unacceptability of human suffering is not a principle that is open to negotiation.

Finally, the Milgram subjects, similarly to Eichmann, once they accepted the legitimacy of the authority figure as well as that of the context, shifted their focus from the conventional moral values that they claimed to espouse to the effective execution of the task at hand. As did Eichmann, once the Milgram subjects entered the "agentic" state they focused principally on fulfilling the sense of duty that they felt towards both the experiment and the experimenter. It appears that the subjects, and clearly Eichmann, ceased to pass judgment on their own actions and concentrated on rendering themselves worthy of the authority's expectations. From then on they became lost in the details of their endeavor. As Stanley Milgram expresses so concisely, "herein lies the essential lesson of our study: ordinary people deprived of all hostility, may in the simple execution of their tasks, become agents of an atrocious process of destruction."(p.22)

Behavioral Deviation in the Stanford Prison Experiment and in Abu Ghraib Prison

Philip Zimbardo conducted an experiment entitled the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) (1971) which demonstrated that under the right circumstances individuals can be seduced into behaving in an atypically unethical manner even in the absence of an authority figure demanding compliance. The SPE focussed on the power of role attribution, rule implementation, group identity, symbols and situational validation to negatively influence ethical conduct. The experiment, conducted in the basement of the Stanford University psychology department, sought to reenact a prison setting wherein subjects, fully aware of the artificial nature of the experiment unlike the Milgram subjects, were randomly attributed either the roles of prisoners or guards.⁵ Zimbardo took on the role of “superintendent” and a student was given the role of “warden”. Rules were then implemented delineating guidelines appropriate to each role attributed with the aim of promoting “disorientation”, “depersonalization” and “deindividuation”. As a result the prisoners were dressed in smocks without underwear the discomfort of which was designed to contribute to their disorientation. They wore stocking caps on their heads mimicking the shaven head of a military boot camp. The participants were then assigned numbers, attached to their uniforms, instead of names the objective of which was the deindividuation of the prisoners. Moreover they wore a small chain around their

⁵ Zimbardo selected 24 out of the 70 applicants who replied to his newspaper ad, offering \$15 a day to participate in a two week “prison simulation”, based on their psychological stability and health. These participants were predominantly young Caucasian, middle class males.

ankles assuring the continuous awareness of their status. Their movements were confined and their activities restricted accordingly. The guards, equipped with wooden batons, mirrored sunglasses and a self chosen khaki military style uniform, worked in shifts and were allowed to return home during off-hours. They were instructed to take on the role of ensuring prisoner compliance in any way that they saw fit, barring the use of physical violence. The incredible outcome, within an astonishingly short period of time, was the degree to which the subjects became immersed in their respective roles. The guards embraced their authoritative roles and became increasingly abusive, the emergent norm was the dehumanization of the prisoners in various ways. Prisoners were tormented and given physical punishments including excessively grueling forced exercise. Guards used bathroom rights and food portions as punishment and frequently denied these basic necessities to the prisoners. They were forced to clean toilets with their bare hands and there were cases where mattresses were removed and the prisoners were stripped naked and made to sleep on the floor. Several of the guards became increasingly sadistic going so far as to impose nudity and forced simulated sexual acts of humiliation. The prisoners, in turn, as a group were driven to the point of attempting a prison breakout while individuals experienced very real physical, emotional and psychological deterioration. One prisoner developed a psychosomatic rash, others resorted to uncontrollable crying and many experienced disorganized thinking. Two of the prisoners experienced such severe trauma that they could no longer participate and were replaced early in the experiment. The experiment was terminated ahead of schedule yet surprisingly it was not Zimbardo who initially determined this to be necessary. It was a fellow researcher and

friend of Zimbardo's who, not having been involved in the experiment from its inception, was horrified with the conditions she witnessed when asked at a later stage to assist the researches. Zimbardo notes that out of over fifty partial witnesses to the prison only one protested its moral acceptability.

The important lesson to be learnt from the SPE is that some situations seemingly exert a very powerful influence over individuals causing them to deviate greatly and unexpectedly from their usual behavior. In the Prison Experiment several very specific factors were identified as contributing to the behavioral transformations that resulted. To begin, as Zimbardo explains, the novelty of the situation rendered the subjects devoid of any guidelines in the form of historical references or habituated behaviors and coping mechanisms. As a result, supposedly stable personality traits previously considered to be dependable proved to be unreliable in predicting future behavior. The novelty of the situation further resulted in "ambiguous role delineation". That is to say, in a thoroughly unprecedented situation the previously accepted societal and institutional rules and regulations guiding appropriate or inappropriate conduct within a given role become blurred. As a result the subjects look towards "situational validation", or salient principles upheld within the situation and cloaked in "ideology" to define role content.

The SPE also demonstrated the influential force of "role playing" on behavior even when the role attributions are clearly contrived. The participants in the SPE quickly internalized their roles and as a result many of them, as was the case with Eichmann and the Milgram subjects, *transformed* their values, attitudes and beliefs so as to align them to the demands of the morally problematic situation in which they found themselves. In the

prison simulation the majority of the guards succumbed to group pressure to participate in or at least not challenge what amounted to cruel and dehumanizing behavior.

The SPE has been criticized for, amongst other things, being highly anecdotal and subjective due in large part to the direct involvement of Philip Zimbardo in his role as superintendent, which, critics argue, may have potentially influenced the direction of the experiment. Nonetheless, the human rights abuses that occurred in 2003 in Iraq and Afghanistan have, regrettably, renewed interest in and strengthened the reliability of Zimbardo's findings. Moreover, the relevance of the SPE to actual military life should not surprise when considering that the study was originally funded by the US Navy in an attempt to explain conflict within the Navy and marine corps' prison systems. In an article written in May of 2004 in *The Boston Globe* Zimbardo contends that many of the specific sadistic and humiliating acts perpetrated in the aftermath of the Iraq war resembled those that occurred during the SPE and which are cited above. In an article published in the *New Yorker* entitled "Torture at Abu Ghraib"(2004) Seymour Hersh discusses Major General Antonio M. Taguba's report, inquiring into the accusations of wrongdoings at Abu Gharib, exposing the widespread institutional failure that took place at all levels. Such failures, according to the report lead to "sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses" at Abu Ghraib that included "breaking chemical lights and pouring the phosphoric liquid on detainees; pouring cold water on naked detainees; beating detainees with a broom handle and chair; threatening male detainees with rape; allowing a military police guard to stitch the wound of a detainee who was injured after being slammed against the wall in his cell; sodomizing a detainee with a chemical light and perhaps a

broom stick, and using military working dogs to frighten and intimidate detainees with threats of attack, and in one instance actually biting a detainee.”

The question, of course, that both Zimbardo and Hersh attempt to answer is *why* the apparently civilized soldiers who are responsible for the perpetration of these criminal acts behaved in the monstrous way that they did? What motivated them to commit acts that violated not only profoundly entrenched ethical principle, but also the legal norms of the Geneva Convention, and the institutional obligations of Army regulations? Zimbardo and Hersh present two very convincing and somewhat overlapping arguments. In his article “Power turns good soldiers into ‘bad apples’”(2004) Zimbardo maintains his classic argument that the soldiers’ behavior can not be explained away by painting them as sadistic and abhorrent monsters. Instead, he argues, they are ordinary soldiers who were swallowed up by the situation in which they found themselves. As was the case in the SPE the soldiers’ roles of power and authority in a novel, morally ambiguous, environment with very loose behavioral guidelines created a vacuum of degeneration to which almost everyone succumbed. According to Zimbardo under the right circumstances human nature can be deviated towards evil; “some of the necessary ingredients are: diffusion of responsibility, anonymity, dehumanization, peers who model harmful behavior, bystanders who do not intervene, and a setting of power differentials.”⁶

Seymour Hersh on the other hand believes that the evidence uncovered in General Taguba’s report points clearly to the fact that the soldiers were not acting independently. In his much-discussed article, Mr. Hersh contends, and Mr. Zimbardo agrees, that the prison guards, consisting predominately of inexperienced military police, were obeying

⁶ Excerpted from *The Boston Globe* edition of May 9, 2004.

the orders of the military intelligence teams present at Abu Ghraib, which included C.I.A. officers, linguists and interrogation specialists, to “break the will of the prisoners”⁷. Mr. Hersh’s point of view is supported by testimony documented in the Taguba report. For example, during the hearing of Staff Sergeant Ivan L. Frederick II letters to his family, wherein he questions the moral acceptability of the practices within the prison, were presented as evidence. In these letters, dating prior to the public exposure of the abuses, Frederick writes that when he addressed his concerns of ethical impropriety with military intelligence he was given the following answer; “this is how military intelligence wants it done”. His lawyers further argued that the nature of the crimes committed were culturally specific and consequently required a degree of knowledge regarding the Islamic culture that went beyond the scope of the guards’ training. To highlight this point Mr. Myers, one of the civilian defense attorneys, asked the following question; “do you really think a group of kids from rural Virginia decided to do this on their own? Decided that the best way to embarrass Arabs and to make them talk was to have them walk around nude?” Another witness, also accused of participating in the abuses, Sergeant Javal Davis, describes being told that the military intelligence had “different rules” when he expressed doubts as to the ethical decency of the prison practices. According to Hersh, when Davis was asked why he did not report the questionable behavior to the proper authorities he answered that he “assumed that if they were doing things out of the ordinary or outside the guidelines, someone would have said something. Also the wing”- where the abuses took place-“belongs to the MI and it appeared MI personnel approved of the abuses.” Hersh concludes his article by saying that, contrary to the claims made by

⁷ All of the quotations in this paragraph have been excerpted from Seymour Hersh’s article “Torture at Abu Ghraib” that appeared in the May 10th 2004 edition of the *New Yorker*.

senior military officers and President Bush that this behavior, while despicable, must be seen as exceptional, “Taguba’s report amounts to an unsparing study of collective wrongdoing and the failure of Army leadership at the highest level.”

Judging from the arguments put forth by Both Zimbardo and Hersh the abuses that took place at Abu Ghraib prison seem to provide an example of the destructive potential of the combined forces of negative situational pressure and obedience to corrupt authority. In the SPE the element of obedience to authority as responsible for the guards degenerative ethical behavior was not present, as the guards were free to structure their behavior as they saw fit. The Milgram experiments were focused, almost entirely, on the question of obedience to authority without any significant regard to the effects of role attribution and power differentials. It is only in the case of Eichmann that both factors were clearly present as Eichmann found himself immersed in a novel, morally challenging situation exacerbated by the enormous pressure to obey a thoroughly corrupt manipulative web of authority. Clearly the deeply entrenched imperative for unconditional obedience embedded within our military and legal systems rendered the ability of the individual’s implicated, in both the Eichmann case and the prison abuse scandal, to maintain their moral integrity even more arduous. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the very nature of the positions of importance that these people and many like them occupied, and continue to occupy, obliges them to possess the faculties required to decipher the situational traps with which they may potentially be faced. Power, a fundamental element of military efficacy, is entrusted to what we hope represents a responsible, not readily corruptible, faction of the population. Are we to conclude, as a result of the examples discussed above, that the power placed in the hands of those who

are expected to protect our nations' citizens is catastrophically misplaced because the ability to decipher right from wrong is beyond their capacity? Are we doomed to a life of inadequate virtue, especially when it counts most?

Chapter II: The Consequences of the Banality of Evil on Traditional Ethical Theory

The Situationist Perspective Examined

In sum the type of “immersion into total situations” which took place in the examples discussed thus far served to transform human behavior so potently so as to put into question our traditional perceptions of the stability and reliability of individual morality and virtue. It is precisely in response to these unquestionably disappointing examples of human ethical potential that the situationists conclude that individual character *does not* determine behavior, *situation* does.

The goal of situationists, such as John Doris and Harman is to bring into question, what they esteem to be, the traditionally widely held view of character and virtue. In his article “Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics” (1998) Doris suggests that in general “we believe the person of good character is not easily swayed by circumstance” and we commonly utilize “normative vocabulary reflecting this ideal (such as) steady, dependable, steadfast, unwavering, unflinching etc.” Similarly Doris points out that “when behavior disappoints us we use terms such as weak, fickle, disloyal, unfaithful, irresolute etc.”(505) It can be argued that the ethically laden terms that Doris identifies as deeply entrenched into our vocabulary seem in fact to reflect our, western society’s, default understanding of virtue. Testimony to the verity of this statement is the unanimous shock and disgust that has been expressed relative to the Milgram and Stanford Prison experiments and predominantly the atrocities of Nazi Germany. Scholars, professionals and lay persons alike have joined voices in proclaiming the

abhorrent nature of these events considered unnatural blemishes in the history of humanity. The intuitive response to such events seems to be one of blaming the individual characters responsible for the despicable acts. In both the Milgram experiment and the Stanford Prison Experiment pre study polling, asking a wide range of individuals to predict the study's outcome, demonstrated that virtually all the respondents held an optimistic view of the human tendency to behave ethically. Their overwhelmingly congruent predictions contended that only the rare, emotionally unhealthy, individuals would behave in a manner that they considered to run against the predominant ethical societal norms in which we live. In light of this John Doris seems justified in arguing that traditionally our "interpretive strategy presupposes that the attribution of a character trait allows us to predict an individual's behavior in novel circumstances."(p.505)

John Doris goes on to say that empirical studies problematize this traditional perception of character. In fact experimental evidence finds that "to put things crudely, people typically lack character."(506) This conclusion is not surprising as Doris draws from historical events and experimental studies such as those discussed earlier. Doris argues that underlying our traditional conception of virtue are two fundamental assumptions. First, that there is an association of virtues whereby an individual's demonstration of kindness allows us to deduce the existence of related traits such as consideration and compassion for others. Moreover it presumes the existence of virtues that are sufficiently resilient so as to resist contrary situational pressures. In order to show empirically the presence of both of these characteristics argues Doris, there must be "cross-situational consistency" whereby behavior demonstrating a particular virtuous trait is present throughout a wide variety of situations. In actual fact, argues Doris, studies

reveal a lack of “cross-situational stability” indicating that “behavior is very often surprisingly unreliable.”(p.507)

The poor ethical performance towards which empirical evidence points has led theorists such as Doris to argue the necessity of an alternative, empirically justified, view of social psychology; the situationist conception of social psychology. Situationist social psychology consists of three pivotal themes; “behavioral variation, nature of traits, and trait organization in personality structure.”(p. 507) The first theme contends that behavior is not determined by individual personality but by situational pressures. Apparently, individual ethical character does not serve to distinguish behavior, as Doris puts it, “to a surprising extent we are safest predicting, for a particular situation, that a person will behave pretty much as most others would.”(p. 507) Similarly, the second situationist theme speaks of the fact that evidence runs contrary to the traditional mainstream conception of character traits as being reliable and stable. According to Doris, any behavioral consistency observed is overridden by situational variation. The final theme put forth denies the validity of a conception of moral psychology representing virtues as interrelated.⁸ More clearly, evidence shows that an individual who demonstrates compassion in one situation may readily demonstrate cruelty in another.

The shift of focus effected by the situationists from the individual character to the situation as central to moral psychology extends, naturally, into the prescriptive moral realm. If ethics is still concerned with virtuous behavior then, from a situationist point of view, the edification process also shifts focus from the individual to the situation. Quite

⁸The *unity of virtues*, against which the situationists argue, is a fundamental Socratic principle contending that a person who is in possession of one virtue will possess them all. The logic being that underlying virtue is the more fundamental knowledge of good and bad which, once attained, serves as the key to all virtue. (Protagoras, 330c, 351d)

logically, once we accept the inevitability of “lack of character” there is no where to turn but the situation. Contrary to a traditional ethical point of view, Situationists consider “our confidence in character” to be “what puts us at risk in morally dangerous situations.”(p.516) If we rely on our strength of character to assure virtuous behavior in ethically problematic contexts we are only setting ourselves up for failure. Doris contends that “ethical reflection is a substantially practical endeavor”(p.512) and concludes that “reflection on situationism...may serve to remind us that, for people like us, the world is a morally dangerous place.”(p.516) Simply stated, situationists suggest that in order to avoid unethical behavior we should seek to avoid morally problematic situations or as Doris puts it “near occasions for sin”.(p.517) Doris qualifies this moral imperative by suggesting that while it may not “offer guarantees” it serves to “focus our ethical attention where it may do the most good”.(p.517)

Clearly the examples of ethical degeneration examined thus far serve to validate the situationist approach. The individuals concerned unequivocally allowed the situation to determine their behavior, they distorted their previously held ethical principles, if any such values existed, so as to align them to the demands of the circumstances. Adolf Eichmann, the Milgram subjects who administered potentially lethal electrical shocks to innocent victims, the guards in the Stanford Prison Experiment and the military police and military intelligence in Iraq and Afghanistan did unquestionably display a tremendous *lack of character*. In this respect John Doris does succeed in constructing a theory that describes a sad and terrifying human shortcoming but does Doris paint the entire picture and if he does then what are the consequences of such a depiction of human ethical behavior?

Let us attempt to answer the latter portion of this question first because, as it turns out, the answer to the first portion of this question lies therein. Quite starkly stated, if Doris' theory is correct then our entire ethical system collapses. Gopal Sreenivasan, a critic of the situationist approach, in his article entitled "Errors about Errors" (2002) recognizes and questions the serious consequences of arguments such as the ones put forth by Doris. "If the empirical evidence marshaled by situationism is well-founded, and if its philosophical advocates are correct, [he writes] the revisions required in our theory of virtue are striking indeed – as they are doubtless meant to be. But are they warranted?"(p.48) More strongly stated, if situation truly dictates behavior then we are doomed to a sort of situational relativism where no one can be counted on to consistently do the right thing. If virtuous personality is a myth then there is no guarantee of virtuous action, not even a high probability allowing us to reasonably predict a certain degree of right action. Moreover, once the nucleus of moral behavior shifts from the individual to the situation the agent's understanding of the situation becomes dangerously contextually dependent. One of the risks being that the context is not necessarily a reliable source of the potential moral dangers it entails simply because certain situations, precisely those that are most dangerous, can neither be predicted nor avoided. How could Eichmann, for example, have predicted or avoided the ethically challenging situation with which he was faced? As a result what prevents us from being reduced to a lying, cheating, cowardly, and compassionless (as the case of Eichmann suggests) society? Does Doris believe that we are already there, in a state of moral decay, or does he propose alternative approaches guaranteeing or at least working towards assuring a minimum degree of virtuous behavior?

An attempt to answer this final question reveals perhaps the most serious of all the consequences ensuing from the situationist theory. This consequence pertains to their *negligence*, in light of their portrayal of humanity as weak, to provide a viable alternative to the ethical system they serve to undermine. As a result they condemn us to definite ethical failure. If we accept the situationist point of view put forth by Doris then the only hope for ethical behavior is, the highly *questionable* and *improbable*, avoidance of situations considered to provoke potentially unethical actions. To begin, this task presumes that we have the capacity to recognize ethically threatening situations. Which in turn necessitates that we, virtuously unreliable persons, possess a bank of stable and universal knowledge as to what constitutes ethical behavior. Moreover it suggests that we have the strength to act on such knowledge should we possess it. When examined from this perspective, the situationist moral philosophy appears to partially align itself to a traditional conception of morality in so far as it requires the agent to know right from wrong. Yet it differs from an agent centric moral theory in its distrust of our ability to put this knowledge into action when actually faced with the morally problematic situation. In essence, the situationist argument is that knowing what is right is not sufficient so as to assure right action. Then how can it be sufficient so as to assure the avoidance of wrong action?

Situationist theory fails terribly in this regard because it, in effect, disarms the victim. The picture that situationist theory paints, and the truths that it reveals, should serve to sound the alarms regarding the potential pitfalls of unanticipated situations and provide solutions that help arm potential victims against it. Instead, while situationists correctly identify the moral hurdles inherent in their theory they simply resign themselves to the

inevitability of human weakness and are content only to caution against the lure of situational temptation. The effect of which is to further alienate subjects from any motivation to behave morally, which in effect is the only tool they possess against the threats brought to light by the situationists. In sum, the principle shortfall of the situationists is their failure to consider seriously the question as to why such behavior occurs and what *can* and *must* be done about it.

Finally, the situationist position seems to *reduce* all virtue to the ability to avoid vice by recognizing that our virtue would not resist certain contextual demands. Does this situational deciphering capacity then constitute a virtue in itself? This can not be the case because of the serious shortcomings that such a quality entails as a driving behavioral force. The principle defect being its failure to elicit right action. While mastering the ability to recognize morally challenging situations, with the goal of avoiding them, is a valuable tool, typically, such situations require much more than mere avoidance. They require the positive act of doing the right thing either for ourselves or for others. Would it have been sufficient for Eichmann to merely extricate himself from his duties, would this have qualified as a virtuous act? It certainly would have been preferable over the alternative; abdication of all responsibility and participation in murder, but it would not have qualified as virtuous. Doing the right thing most often, and clearly in the Eichmann case requires more than passive abdication, it requires positive ethical conduct. Eichmann could have arguably used his position to save innocent people whenever possible, he could have protested the directives of his authorities or he could have sought another position where sabotage was possible. The Milgram subjects could have protested the unethical character of the study, they could have tried to help the supposed

student or protest for the termination of the experiment. Similarly, the “good” guards in the SPE could have attempted to stop the “bad” guards, efforts to halt the experiment could have been made or the inappropriate behavior could have been reported to the proper authorities. Finally, the military police in Abu Ghraib could have notified superiors of the despicable actions being perpetrated, those who stood by and did nothing could have tried to help the victims. The list of actions that would have qualified as virtuous is long but the simple act of turning away from a situation which one recognizes as morally challenging, as exceeding one’s capacity for virtue, does not qualify as one of them.

Chapter III: Plato's Theory of Virtue in *The Republic*

Gyges' Ring

The idea that virtuous behavior is transient and quite easily derailed has preoccupied thinkers for as far back as it is within our capacity to know. The situationists' conclusions, while disturbing, are not at all unique. In Plato's *The Republic* an argument which resembles, quite remarkably, that of the situationists is put forth by Glaucon, Socrates' interlocutor. To begin Glaucon asks the question that seems to underlie the contextualist argument; Why should anyone behave ethically if not solely due to the societal norms which restrict and determine our actions, what, if any, is the inherent motivation to behave virtuously? In book II of *The Republic*, Glaucon restates an argument (358e-359b) he holds to have been awkwardly expressed by Thrasymachus (338b-344c) and inadequately addressed by Socrates⁹ concerning *dikaiosuné*, or what is, according to Desmond Lee, commonly translated as *justice* but more appropriately as *doing right* or *morality*.¹⁰ In essence, Glaucon argues that justice, or morality, within

⁹ Glaucon admits to not believing in the truth of Thrasymachus' position (358c) and therefore considering it important that Socrates continue, and complete, his refutation of this commonly held erroneous understanding of justice. The necessity that Socrates "convince" his interlocutors as opposed to simply "seem to have persuaded" them is Glaucon's motivation for reiterating Thrasymachus' argument. (357a-b)

¹⁰ Desmond Lee, translator of *The Republic* in the Penguin Classics (1984) translates *dikaiosuné* as 'doing right' at 331c but argues, in footnote number one (I), in favour of Cross and Woollery's contention that "justice is a thoroughly unsuitable word to use as a translation of the Greek word. *Dikaiosuné* has a less legal and more moral meaning than 'justice'; it is in fact the most general Greek word for 'morality', both as a personal quality and as issuing in right action." (p. 65) The discussion of justice which follows seems to me to support a more general understanding of the Greek word *dikaiosuné* in that it pertains to the just ordering of the soul required for the attainment of virtuous character and the realisation of a moral life. *Dikaiosuné*, the central theme of *The Republic*, represents human excellence which, for Plato, lies in the pursuit, through philosophy, of the good. In this respect, its meaning goes far beyond the highly legal understanding associated with the contemporary understanding of justice.

society is the result of societal agreements entered into for mutual convenience but that given the opportunity *everyone* will behave unethically in order to further his self-interest. He contends that the natural state of man is to behave unjustly as it suits his purposes but that he restrains this inclination due to fear of suffering injustice himself. In other words justice, or morality, is not natural to man, injustice is.

In order to illustrate his argument Glaucon recounts the story of Gyges' ring (359c-360b). Gyges, a shepherd in the service of the king, discovers a chasm formed in the earth as a result of a great storm. Upon entering this chasm he meets with numerous wonders and riches including a human corpse lying inside a hollow horse. Gyges retreats from the chasm having stolen but one article, a golden ring from the finger of the corpse he encountered. Quite by hazard Gyges discovers that upon turning the bezel of the ring towards the inside of his hand he is rendered invisible. This phenomenon is simply reversed by returning the bezel outward. Gyges, intoxicated by his newly acquired power, decides to enter the king's court wherein he seduces the queen with whose help he murders the king and seizes the throne.

According to Glaucon, Gyges, far from representing the dark side of humanity towards which some, exceptionally evil, individuals are drawn typifies *every man's* inherent inclination towards self-serving injustice. As echoed by the contemporary situationist argument, Gyges, having previously served as a shepherd in the king's court, must necessarily have demonstrated a semblance of morality and conformity to societal norms, as did, once again, the actors in the cases discussed throughout the essay. Yet, according to Glaucon, the conformity attested to unquestionably represents an artificial

performance resulting from a contextually imposed morality. Once the situation permitted for the liberation of the inclinations *truly* innate to human kind Gyges behaved naturally and as a result *unjustly*. Glaucon claims that if two individuals, one having lived in an apparently just manner and the other having committed injustices, were in possession of Gyges' mystical ring both would behave in exactly the same manner; unethically, motivated entirely by the desire to fulfil their base pleasures and unruly ambitions. Virtuous character traits demonstrated under conventional circumstances, being unnatural to the agents, will not transcend the limits of the situation that imposed them originally. Neither the saint nor the criminal will behave justly of his own free will. Neither one would withstand the temptation to gain wealth, physical pleasures or great power were they afforded the means to acquire such gifts without fear of reprisal; "what a person with a seemingly ideal moral character will do in a particular situation is pretty much what anyone else will do in exactly that situation." This statement, quite astoundingly, is not spoken by Glaucon but can be found in the writings of situationist theorist Gilbert Harman.¹¹ Moreover, it resonates with remarkable similarity in the writings of John Doris where he contends that "we are safest predicting, for a particular situation, that a person will behave pretty much as most others would."(p.507)¹² In sum, ancient and contemporary theories converge practically verbatim, to argue against the

¹¹ This quotation is excerpted from a short essay found on Gilbert Harman's website on August 18, 1999.

¹² It is interesting to note that this theme is also deeply entrenched in contemporary pop culture in the form of superhero personas. Superhero characters, such as spiderman, superman and batman, for example, who have been endowed with superhuman powers, are deemed heroic due to their will to use their power for good as opposed to evil. This, in fact, is what differentiates them from their archenemies who, possessing similarly unique gifts, employ them to further their malevolent and selfish goals.

prevalence of human virtue as an end in itself, when stripped of the societal honors and rewards that render it desirable.

The Republic on Justice (dikaiosuné)

Glaucon's question as to whether or not Gyges represents *every man's* situationally dependent ethical character preoccupies Socrates throughout the remainder of *The Republic*. As the dialogue progresses Plato reveals an ethical philosophy that seeks to explain the undeniably dismal moral behavior witnessed empirically by situationists and ancients alike. To begin, in keeping with the ingenious thematic consistency of Platonic writings, the method that Socrates employs in developing his argument echoes its content. Throughout *The Republic* Socrates uses the *dialectic* method of investigation in order to bring to light the intrinsic value of moral conduct as well as to explain its absence. As will be discussed later in the essay, the nature of the *dialectic* is transformed as the dialogue progresses from an *interactive (refutative)* mode, characteristic of Plato's earlier writings, to what will be described as a *solitary* method.¹³ In general the *dialectic* consists principally of *discussion* the aim of which is to clarify the subject, usually concerning morality, under examination. The discussion, predominantly in the earlier portion of *The Republic*, takes the form of a *dialectical refutation (élegkhos)* consisting of cross-questioning wherein the interlocutors ask and attempt to answer probing questions

¹³Later in the essay I discuss the transformation of the *dialectic* from its classically *refutative* nature, being exposed at present, typical of Plato's earlier dialogues, consisting principally of an instructive, often edifying, discourse between two interlocutors, to what will be described as a *solitary* and internal dialogue. I will argue that the latter form of the *dialectic*, typified by the absence of interlocutors and consequently argumentation, does not represent a schism with the earlier form but a progression that corresponds to the ascension from the *tangible (refutative dialectic)* and *intelligible (solitary dialectic)* realms of knowledge.

so as to unravel mistaken preconceptions and, in the process, reveal, and maintain, the ideas whose validity withstands all examination.

The *dialectical refutation* is not only the method but also the embodiment of Socrates' principle preoccupation; the pursuit of truth especially as it regards questions of virtue. Nowhere is the unity between the artisan and his craft better illustrated than in the *Apology* where the Oracle at Delphi proclaims that there is no man wiser than Socrates.(21a) Socrates, in keeping with his proclamation of ignorance, is perplexed by the Oracle's claim and sets out to find one who is wiser than he.(21b-c) This very quest mimics the nature of the *dialectic*, strictly speaking, in so far as it represents a series of *refutations*, each of which peels off a layer of false knowledge, leading Socrates closer to a very important truth about himself. Towards this end he seeks out those most highly respected for their wisdom especially as it pertains to ethical questions. Upon engaging in discussions with them in the traditional *dialectic* method he discovers that his interlocutors' lack the fundamental prerequisite for wisdom; the readiness to void their minds of mistaken opinions through the awareness of their own ignorance.(21d) The said wisest men in Greece hold opinions that they have never truly questioned and, as a result, the validity of which has never been proven. Socrates' questioning reveals that the supposed knowledge held by his interlocutors does not hold up to profound reflection. In an interesting twist Socrates is forced to acquiesce to the accuracy of the Oracle's claim while simultaneously maintaining his claim of ignorance. Socrates contends that his quest has in fact demonstrated that no one is wiser than he is yet his wisdom consists of the absence of false knowledge, which is none other than the child of *élegkhos*. Ironically, Socrates' wisdom lies in the knowledge of his ignorance and in this way he is

the embodiment of the *dialectic* method he employs. The degree to which the practice of *élegkhos* is essential to Socrates is clearly indicated in the *Apology* where Socrates contends that “The unexamined life is not worth living for men.”(38a) Finally, while Socrates never professes to possess full knowledge that he can impart directly it is nonetheless knowledge to which he arrives when the cloud of opinion is lifted. Yet is such knowledge incongruous with the Socratic claim of ignorance? Not necessarily because this understanding of *knowledge* is in no way absolute which, it can be argued, is the definition of knowledge against which Socrates stands. It would not be inconsistent with Platonic writings to assert that the Socratic conception of wisdom and ignorance is conceived so as to avoid the dangers resulting from the cessation of questioning which unfortunately often coincide with the proclamation of knowledge. As a result Socrates’ claim of ignorance may be said to represent a dynamic understanding of knowledge wherein a state of knowing is never fully achieved, at least not by mortals. Ultimately, the perpetual *dialectic* is the human form of knowledge.

Élegkhos is uniquely qualified to help answer the question that is central to this examination, namely, why is justice, or morality, desirable as an end in itself and how can its attainment be assured. In *The Republic* Socrates contends that this question is too difficult to respond to on the level of the individual and that it must be addressed on a societal level first and eventually scaled down and answered relative to the individual. For Socrates, justice, understood globally as morality, is defined more precisely as the ordering of the human soul. Following the tripartite depiction of justice on a communal scale Socrates portrays individual justice, in much the same way, as consisting of the harmonious interaction between the three elements of the soul (*psuché*); reason, desire

and spirit, *thumos*. Justice occurs when each element is performing its proper function. Reason represents the faculty that calculates and decides permitting understanding, well thought out action, foresight and wisdom in general. Desire or appetite depicts the human capacity for bare physical instinctive craving. Finally, *thumos* describes our pugnacity, the enterprising and ambitious elements of our being, in sum our spirit. When each faculty performs the function that is proper to it then reason naturally dominates over the whole. The degree to which one develops the faculty of reason, through intellectual and physical training, will determine their ability to achieve internal harmony and consequently elevate the quality of the *psuché*. *Thumos*, if its powers are appropriately channeled, through harmony and rhythm, serves to support reason in the execution of its objectives. Finally reason and *thumos* must work together to harness the fundamental physical desires that are inherent to human survival so as to prevent them from growing out of control and overpowering the other faculties.

The act of keeping the three elements of the *psuché* “in tune”(443d) is a crucial concept for Plato in so far as it represents the self-mastering necessary for a just, or moral, existence. A mind that is ruled by its ambitions or its desires will be swayed off track in its pursuit of right conduct. Internal justice, as Socrates describes it, provides the wisdom required for just action when confronted with circumstances of any kind. Socrates eloquently expresses this argument where he writes,

“when (one) has bound these elements into a disciplined and harmonious whole, and so become fully one instead of many, he will be ready for action of any kind, whether it is political or private; and he will reckon and call any of these actions just and honorable if it contributes to and helps to maintain this disposition of mind, and will call the knowledge which controls such action wisdom.”(443e)

More fundamentally, for Plato the just ordering of the human soul is the zenith of human excellence. When one leads a just, morally correct, life he is realizing the excellence towards which he naturally tends. The pursuit of human excellence, understood in this way, is the unique path to absolute happiness. Happiness, the unrelenting pursuit of which, culminates with the perception of *the good*. Plato holds *the good* to be the summum bonum of human existence, the apex towards which the just soul strives. The acquisition of which represents the sublime motivation of our eternal journey.

As is becoming increasingly clear, for Plato, as expressed through Socrates, virtue is intimately linked to knowledge. The just ordering of the soul, which is the prerequisite for virtue, is wholly dependent upon reason's capacity to reign over all other constituents of the *psuché*. In order for the mastering of reason to result in virtue the underlying principle espoused by Plato must necessarily be that knowing what is right will undoubtedly coincide with right action. Clearly if this were not the case then Plato's definition of justice would fall short as regards virtuous behavior since it would be possible to consistently know what is right but to be lured by various desires into unethical practices. Instead, Plato eliminates the possibility of *akrasia* by depicting the capacity of self-mastering as inherent to reason's excellence. As a result, in *The Republic* Plato portrays justice as the realm within which reason and lack of virtue cannot coincide. In the *Protagoras* Plato illustrates his powerful conception of knowledge as both a necessary and sufficient condition for virtue where he writes the following;

“In sum the idea that we develop of knowledge is one of a slave tossed about in all directions by one thousand wills. Is this also your opinion on knowledge? Or on the contrary do you see in it a beautiful thing, able to dictate to man, in such a way that he who knows the good and the bad will refuse invincibly to do anything against the prescriptions of knowledge and that wisdom be for man a sure support? [Protagoras]: I agree with you

Socrates and I add that I would be more ashamed than anyone to refuse to see in knowledge and wisdom the greatest of human strengths.(352b-d)¹⁴

In this way Plato sought to eliminate the arbitrariness typically attached by his contemporaries, and clearly ours as well, to morality. Plato believed, contrary to the prevalent opinion of his time, that human virtue was dependent only on knowledge, as was the case with all other *tekhne*, or techniques, which obeyed a set of rules that could be codified and subsequently imparted to others. He refused to succumb to claims that virtue, which he considered to be the most profound human preoccupation, was less reliable a pursuit than pottery, for example. An artisan possessing the right knowledge of pottery making, if he applies this knowledge, arrives at his desired result; the creation of pottery.¹⁵ Yet, as pertains to virtue most would argue that one who *knows* what is right

¹⁴ As will become increasingly evident, the position espoused throughout the essay, relative to the topic of *akrasia*, runs contrary to the standard view maintained at present by contemporary scholars. This “prevalent view” as it is referred to by Gabriela Carone in her article “*Akrasia in the Republic: Does Plato Change his Mind?*” identifies a division between, what is considered to be, the Socratic conception of *akrasia*, represented in the *Protagoras*, and the differing Platonic understanding of this theme as developed in *The Republic*. The generally accepted position, in a nutshell, is that, unlike Socrates who never admits to the possibility of *akrasia*, Plato does acknowledge the human capacity to know the good and choose not to embrace it. This point of view is based principally upon two key themes found in book four of *The Republic*, first, Plato’s tripartite division of the soul (435a-443c) which is said to allow for internal conflict between reason and appetite, and second, the story of Leontius (439e-440a), entailed within Socrates’ discussion of individual justice, esteemed to acknowledge the power of base desires over reason. Fortunately, I am not alone in the refusal to acknowledge a rift between the Socratic and Platonic conceptions of *akrasia*. In the above mentioned article, Gabriela Carone also argues, quite convincingly, in favour of thematic unity between the *Protagoras* and *The Republic* relative to the topic of *akrasia*. She argues that “Plato’s position in the *Republic* does not need to, and indeed should not, be read as a departure from the earlier, Socratic view. Plato’s position in the *Republic*, [she contends], is not only consistent with Socrates’ denial of *akrasia* in the *Protagoras*, but can also be seen as a continuation and elaboration of various Socratic theses.” (p.108-109) And later in her conclusion she stipulates that “It remains as unquestionable in the *Republic* as in the *Protagoras* that the presence of knowledge in the soul would be incompatible with any psychic conflict and thus with any kind of *akrasia*.” (p.144) Similarly, throughout the course of the present exegesis there is an attempt to indicate, whenever deemed appropriate, the thematic consistency regarding the question of *akrasia* between the earlier, termed, Socratic dialogues and the latter dialogues of which *The Republic* is representative.

¹⁵ In *Lesser Hippias* Socrates appears to argue in favour of a position that is diametrically opposed to the one presented here, that is, the impossibility of *akrasia*. In this short dialogue Plato, quite curiously, not only recognises the possibility of *akrasia* but claims that one who commits injustice voluntarily is a “better person” than one whose immorality results from ignorance. The principle objective of *The Republic* is to show that *justice* must and *will* inevitably reign over *injustice* in the human soul as well as the polis when reason takes its rightful place at the helm of the soul. This understanding of justice can not allow for the possibility that “those who harm people and commit injustice and lie and cheat and go wrong voluntarily,

will not reliably *do* what is right, or as the situationists so aptly claim, most people tend to demonstrate a *lack of character*.

Consequently, it is in light of Plato's theory of virtue science that the degree of importance of the *dialectic* becomes fully apparent. If virtuous action, which is the only means by which true happiness is achieved, is directly dependent on the unencumbered knowledge of the good and the *dialectic* is, according to Socrates, the privileged path to wisdom then the *dialectic* is a prerequisite for virtue. The *dialectic* is in this sense the foundation of virtue without which happiness can not be achieved. If right knowledge

rather than involuntarily, are better than those who do so involuntarily.”(372d) This amounts to the Platonic conception of excellence being turned upside down where excellence includes *excellent badness* and cannot be understood as representing what Socrates “truly believes”. In fact, at the end of the dialogue both Socrates and Hippias admit as much, that is, to not accepting the truth of this assertion. Hippias says “I can’t agree with you in that, Socrates.”(372d) To which Socrates responds “[n]or I with myself, Hippias. But given the argument, we can’t help having it look that way to us, now, at any rate. However, as I said before, on these matters I waver back and forth and never believe the same thing. And it is not surprising that I or any other ordinary person *should* waver. But if you wise men are going to do it too that means something terrible for us, if we can’t stop our wavering even after we’ve put ourselves in your company.”(376c) The position which Socrates appears to defend in this dialogue is, in fact, *anti-Socratic*. As a result, if its authenticity is to be acknowledged, the hidden *Socratic* meaning, underlying this exchange, must be sought out. While an in depth analysis of this meaning is beyond the scope of this essay, a preliminary hypothesis may be that Socrates seeks to demonstrate, through example, the inadequacy of rhetoric, the monological tool of a sophist such as Hippias, as compared to *élegkhos* to bring about virtue. To begin, Socrates admits to defending a position in which he does not believe, a practice typical of rhetoric, thus breaking the first rule of elenctic discussion. (*Gorgias* 495a, *Protagoras* 331c, *Critias* 49c-d) Moreover, Socrates also admits, cited above, that his argument is not necessarily concerned with what *is* true but only that which *seems* to be true as is, once again, the principle preoccupation of the sophists, completely undermining the goal of the philosopher. Also in the above passage, Socrates describes himself and Hippias as *wavering* which, as we are told in *Gorgias*, is a “shameful thing for us, being in the condition we appear to be in at present – when we never think the same about the same subjects, the most important ones at that – to sound off as though we’re somebodies.”(527d) It is not possible to accept that Socrates contented himself with *wavering* regarding questions that affected the well being of the soul. Instead Socrates must be understood as demonstrating to Hippias that oration that does not propagate the truth is futile. Hippias’ refusal, to the end, to concede to Socrates further supports this argument because it forces Hippias to acknowledge that the appearance of truth is meaningless, even dangerous, as regards questions of virtue. It serves to propagate Socrates’ avowal in *Gorgias* “that oratory and every other activity is always to be used in support of what’s just.”(527c) Another crucial indicator that Socrates seeks, in this dialogue, to confront rhetoric with *élegkhos* is that neither one of the interlocutors is refuted, no one is convinced by the arguments put forth which we know is of primordial importance to Socrates.(*Gorgias* 474a-b, 475e-476a) Ultimately, Hippias, *with all of his knowledge*, is shown incapable of arriving at the truth by use of his rhetorical talents. It would seem that Socrates also wishes to show the limitations of Hippias’s knowledge, of which he is so confident, with the goal of persuading him to use his talents so as to improve the condition of the souls of his audiences through the pursuit and dissemination of truth.

translates directly into right action, free of intermediaries, then virtue is secondary to knowledge. It is secondary in the sense that it is entirely dependent upon the acquisition of knowledge without which it cannot be realized. True virtue void of knowledge is an impossibility for Plato whereas knowledge does not depend upon virtue for its substance. The *dialectical* process renders intellectual enlightenment possible without which knowledge and virtue can not see the light of day.

A contemporary theorist, Joel Kupperman, in his article entitled "The Indispensability of Character" (2001) develops a Platonic inspired ethical theory whose fundamental principles, which echo the theory of justice presented above, provide a modern interpretation of the ancient perspective. Kupperman argues that most contemporary ethical philosophers make a mistakenly sharp distinction between the study of morality and axiology or the examination of the quality of one's goals and values. He suggests that the goals and values of a person of strong moral character will differ greatly from those of a person of questionable moral character, as will their respective interpretations of morally problematic situations. This implies that ethical behavior is interactive, that is, that it depends upon the appropriate evaluation of the situation as well as the knowledge and volition to act well. Clearly one's evaluation of any ethically challenging situation calls upon the entirety of their virtue laden experiences. This resembles Socrates' description of justice in that it depicts ethical choice as consisting of more than merely choosing from a list of moral dictums when faced with ethical quandaries. Instead, for Socrates, virtuous action results from the acquisition of right knowledge resulting from internal balance. In contemporary terms this internal balance may be seen as representing

that which Kupperman describes as the projects and life pursuits that one considers meaningful.

In an earlier article, "Character and Self-Knowledge" (1985), Kupperman, once again recalls the rational conception of morality articulated above from a modern perspective. In diametrical opposition to the situationist argument against the reliability of character traits, he develops a *character centric* ethical philosophy. Kupperman develops a holistic conception of character, which can be summed up as follows; self-knowledge is a rational exercise whereby past experiences translate into our ability to anticipate future behavior with an acceptable degree of reliability. Character, the thread that enables the continuity between past and present behavior, requires the rational volition for what Kupperman terms "self-ratification". He uses the term "self-ratification" to describe the intellectual decision to continue to pursue thoughts and actions that manifest one's character. In other words, the reliable prediction of future behavior depends on the conscious development and sustainment of one's character, a phenomenon that has regrettably been overlooked in contemporary society according to Kupperman. In this way he seeks to revitalize the ancient truism, clearly evident in the theory of justice developed in *The Republic* and refuted by the situationists, "that virtuous choice (arises) from good character."(p. 219) Kupperman quotes from Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* so as to demonstrate an example of the "survival" of the ancient perspective that he takes up; "If any action be either virtuous or vicious, 'tis only as a sign of some quality or character. It must depend upon durable principles of the mind, which extend over the whole conduct, and enter into the personal character."(p. 219)

The Republic on Character (euètheía)

Throughout *The Republic* Plato employs the term *Character (euètheía)* to signify one's *essence, the kind of person one truly is*. As will be shown in the discussion that follows, the seemingly Aristotelian position that *euètheía* is the result of habit adopted in the *Laws (792c-e)*, is not at all supported in the depiction of *euètheía* found in *The Republic*. Moreover, an Aristotelian understanding of *euètheía* would run contrary to the prominent theme of *The Republic*, which represents the principle focus of the present exegesis, that virtue ensuing from habit and custom, as opposed to philosophy, results in the illusion of virtue and devastating life choices as illustrated by the case of the fallen soul, discussed at greater length later in the essay, who mistakenly chose the tormented future life of a monstrous tyrant.(619b-e) In *The Republic*, *euètheía* corresponds to the quality of a person's soul, the degree to which it is *one within itself* in so far as it possesses internal harmony; *dikaíosuné*. It is in this respect that Plato sets the stage for Kupperman's revival of the contention that quality of *character* does in fact determine the degree of virtue one manifests throughout one's life.

As will become evident, this conception of *euètheía* is central to, and consequently developed in conjunction with, *The Republic's* educational agenda. Plato introduces the concept of *euètheía* early on in *The Republic* at the onset of his discussion concerning the education of the phulakes, or guardians, where he asks the following question; "where are we to find a character that is both gentle and high spirited at the same time?" (375c) This prologue is significant in that it relates *character (euètheía)*, from the onset, to what amounts to the precursor of the internal mechanics of the tripartite soul. Plato's

philosopher rulers will achieve the rare balance between *gentleness* and *high spiritedness* when they acquire the internal harmony of the soul, discussed above, that is justice.

Still within the context of appropriate moral education, several of Plato's ensuing mentions of *euètheia* (400d, 400e, 401a and 401b) occur in relation to the reciprocal dynamic between *euètheia* and external influences or, more generally, environment, specifically as it pertains to the arts; literature, poetry and music. Contrary to the common misconception surrounding Plato's disdain for all such crafts, the above mentioned passages, representing but a few, point to Plato's high regard for the enormous *potential* benefits of what he esteems to be powerful sources of influence on *euètheia*. He makes this abundantly clear where he writes, "rhythm and harmony permeate the inner parts of the soul more than anything else".(401d) It is precisely due to Plato's acknowledgment of the important impact that music and poetry bear on the developing souls of the philosopher rulers, positive or negative depending on the quality of the craft, that he insists on the necessity of rigid controls over these arts when used in education. More precisely, if music and poetry, for example, are to benefit the guardian's mind they must begin by reflecting the traits that they intend to inspire. A goal that can only be accomplished, according to Plato, when the arts in question are modeled after people who already possess the traits or characteristics desired. For example, in order to find moderation in the "regulation of meter"... "we shouldn't strive to have either subtlety or great variety in meter. Rather, we should try to discover what are the rhythms of someone who leads an ordered and courageous life and then adapt the meter and the tune to his words, not his words to them."(399e-400a) Plato pursues this line of reasoning as

pertains to the content of the words that are to accompany the harmony and rhythm of the music where he writes the following;

“further, if, as we said just now, rhythm and mode must conform to the words and not vice versa, then good rhythm follows fine words and is similar to them, while bad rhythm follows the opposite kind of words, and the same for harmony and disharmony. [Adeimantus]: To be sure, these things must conform to the words. What about the style and content of the words themselves? Don’t they conform to the character of the speaker’s soul? [Adeimantus]: Of course. And the rest conform to the words? [Adeimantus]: Yes.(400d)

Once again *euètheia* is mentioned in association with the state of the soul which points directly to the degree of justice acquired. These passages, which precede Plato’s overt representation of justice, while not containing specific references to *dikaiousunè* nonetheless point to the principle elements of what will soon be revealed as Plato’s theory of justice; moderation, order, harmony and courage.

A few lines later Plato’s conception of character as the vessel of justice is further confirmed and elaborated upon as mention is made of the final, primordial element of justice; intelligence, reason. Plato writes, “fine words, harmony, grace, and rhythm follow simplicity of character-and I do not mean this in the sense in which we use ‘simplicity’ as a euphemism for ‘simple-mindedness’-but I mean the sort of fine and good character that has developed in accordance with an intelligent plan.”(400d-e) The interpretation of Plato’s conception of *euètheia* being developed here, and throughout the essay, is supported by Georges Leroux in his recent translation of *La République* (2004) where he writes, in reference to the preceding passage, “Platon s’empresse de préciser qu’il entend par là (*euètheia*, el) le caractère comme support de la vertu, c’est-à-dire la réflexion dirigée vers le beau et le bien, et non la simple habitude, l’absence de réflexion.”(p. 581) Moreover, following Plato’s overt exposition of the essence of

justice, *euètheia* is directly linked to justice as the vehicle by which justice manifests itself in virtuous action. In response to Adeimantus' contention that in actual practice philosopher's are either useless or dangerous(487c-d) Socrates, having addressed the question of their utility, contends that the genuine philosopher, an erotic lover of *truth*, cannot possibly engender *evil* which is its opposite.(490c) Instead, the lover of truth possesses "a healthy and just character"... consisting of "courage, high-mindedness, ease in learning and good memory"... "with moderation following it."(490c) Nonetheless, concedes Plato, the accusation that his contemporary, so called philosophers, pose a danger to society is in fact justified in so far as they are imposters who misrepresent themselves as *philosophers* and consequently cause more harm than good. The fundamental problem, argues Plato, lies in the inability of the profoundly corrupt state of the Greek constitution, the purification of which is among the principle preoccupations of *The Republic*, to provide "appropriate instruction" for the philosophical nature.(492) As a result, the conception of *euètheia* that Plato is developing appears to be dual consisting of the fundamental nature of the person which is acted upon, or influenced, by the instruction that it receives, thus the great emphasis in *The Republic* on the proper education of the philosopher rulers. A conception that is consistent with his portrayal of justice as resulting from the continuous embellishment of one's natural tendencies towards excellence that accompanies the acquisition of right knowledge. Plato clearly articulates the important and multi faceted relationship between character and education where he writes,

"there isn't now, hasn't been in the past, nor ever will be in the future anyone with a character so unusual that he has been educated to virtue in spite of the contrary education he received from the mob-I mean, a human character; the divine, as the saying goes, is an exception to the rule. You

should realize that if anyone is saved and becomes what he ought to be under our present constitutions, he has been saved—you might rightly say—by divine dispensation.”(492e)

It does not require tremendous extrapolation to decipher the reference here to Socrates who often defers his insight to divine intervention. A supposition which is directly confirmed where Socrates contends that, in contrast to men who pretend to be philosophers while only preaching “sophisms” or the falsities proliferated by the “mob”,

“there remains...only a very small group who consort with philosophy in a way that’s worthy of her: A noble and well brought up character, for example, kept down by exile, who remains with philosophy according to his nature because there is no one to corrupt him, or...my own case is hardly worth mentioning—my daemonic sign—because it happened to no one before me, or to only a very few.”(496a-c)

The importance of education on *euètheia* for Plato cannot be overemphasized. A philosophic nature immersed in an unhealthy environment not only “fails to develop its full power” but “declines into a different character.”(497b) Plato believes that when potentially noble natures are “destroyed” in this manner the results are particularly negative because great evil, like great good, does not result from ordinary natures but from vigorous ones.(491e) “But”, explains Plato, “if it were to find the best constitution, as it is itself the best, it would be clear that it is really divine and that the other natures and ways of life are merely human.”(497c) This, of course, sums up the philosopher ruler’s objective; to instill the order and divinity that he personifies into “people’s characters, whether into a single person or into a populace”.(500d) *Euètheia* becomes, for Plato, synonymous to the essence of the person which is determined not by natural tendencies alone but by the entity that emerges when education and nature converge. The philosopher ruler’s role as a craftsman who educates “human character” by divine inspiration lends the concept of *euètheia* primordial status in *The Republic* in that it is

upon the quality of the citizens' characters that the caliber of the constitution depends.(501a) Plato writes "there are as many forms of *human character* as there are of constitutions...[since constitutions are born] from the characters of the people who live in the cities governed by them".(544e) Consequently, where Plato goes on to say that "if there are *five forms of city*, there must also be *five forms of the individual soul*" his use of the terms *character* and *soul* interchangeably results in the equation of human character to the individual soul of which the former is a vessel.(544e) Plato's final references to *euètheia* coincide with his description of the constitutions that he deems to be inadequate. He describes the progressive deterioration of each constitution, along with the defining characters of its constituents, into an inferior society in terms of a progressive relinquishing of control to the inferior echelons of the soul. Once again, as has been seen throughout *The Republic*, deterioration results not from knowing what is good and choosing to embrace the bad, *akrasia*, but from inappropriate education that fails to bring about profound knowledge of the truth.¹⁶ Reason is to the individual characters what the *phulakes* are to the constitutions; Plato describes the decline of a man with an aristocratic character as resulting from a lack of purity "in his attitude to virtue...because he lacks the best guardians...reason"(549b), and later

¹⁶ Gabriela Carone evokes a similar argument in her article "*Akrasia in the Republic: Does Plato Change his Mind?*" in response to the "prevalent view" of contemporary scholars relative to the topic of *akrasia* which claims that "desire has a strength which is independent of the strength of reason and the degree of the agent's expected good." As proof of the contention that it is reason's strength that determines what proportions desire will take, Ms Carone directs us to Plato's insistence that "double standards imposed on the timocratic youth, who hears different stories about what things should be honoured and valued, have the effect of causing him internal struggle (8, 549 C-550 B) and that bad *λόγοι*, imparting false beliefs on children and adults, can cause the strengthening of one's lower desires (10, 605 A-C, 606 A-E, cf. 2, 391 E-392 A) as in the case of mimetic poetry, which presents as 'all right' to the audience characters and actions which are not. [According to Ms. Carone] This suggests that the particular beliefs the agent adopts about what is good do have an effect on the strength of her desire: it is partly on these grounds that Plato recommends that only hymns to the gods and eulogies to good characters should be admitted as poetry into his city (10, 607 A 3-5, cf. 3, 401 D, 410 C)."(p.128)

“knowledge, fine ways of living, and words of truth...are the best watchmen and guardians of the thoughts of those men whom the gods love”.(560b)¹⁷

In sum, the central theme of *euètheia* spans the entire length of *The Republic*. Its development appropriately coincides with the dialogue’s advancement of the theory of virtue for which *euètheia* is, as has been shown, a vessel that at once supports and reflects its content, virtue, which, in turn, defines and substantiates it. As a result, the Platonic conception of *euètheia* as put forth in *The Republic*, like virtue, cannot result from habit and custom but must necessarily stem from philosophical reflection. Moreover, every possible measure must be taken so as to assure that virtuous character be nurtured and encouraged by external influences incorporating the principles that result from such reflection. Good character, understood from this perspective, is therefore the overt expression of the human excellence that is virtue.

¹⁷ Once again, Gabriela Carone, in the article cited in the previous footnote, supports this interpretation where she writes, “the text at other places indicates that Plato is far from allotting appetites a strength which is independent of the strength of reason’s own desire. Thus, in *Republic* 6 the proper channelling of love towards knowledge and truth has the effect of *weakening* all other desires (485 A-E, cf. *ασθενεστεραι* at D 7); similarly, in the money-or honour- loving person, their strong love for their main target weakens their love for learning truth and philosophy.”(p. 129) Later in the article, she elaborates upon her conviction that Plato does not abandon the understanding of *akrasia* put forth in the *Protagoras*, by referring specifically to Plato’s comparison between the polis and the individual, as I have done in this passage, as pointing to mistaken beliefs and underdeveloped reason, not *akrasia*, as responsible for the deterioration in character observed. She writes, “in view of Plato’s parallel between the polis and the individual, the money-loving and licentious human types must also possess beliefs about what is good. But certainly in these cases, the soul is confused as stated at 6, 505 D-E, and as we also find in books 8 and 9 with respect to those human types where the proper goals of reason no longer predominate. Thus for example, the appetites of the democratic man, which have grown strong because of ignorant upbringing and bad company, see his *ακρόπολις* empty of knowledge and truth and finally take it over with false beliefs (8, 560 A-C). The most pitiful case is the tyrannical soul, which is ‘full of turmoil and regret’, being insatiable (9, 577 D-578 A. Reason within it has become weak (cf. *ασθενη*, 589 A) and is ‘dragged about’ (*ελκεσθαι*) by the other parts (ibid.)”(p.135-136)

The Theory of Forms

Underlying the rational depiction of human psychology and the corresponding conception of character exposed above is, undeniably, Plato's theory of forms. While an in depth discussion of the hallowed theory of forms is clearly beyond the scope of this essay, it is important to underline the crucial role that this concept plays in Plato's ethical philosophy as well as to address its implications relative to the discussion at hand. To begin, Plato's insistence on the supremacy of reason over habit and custom as the inevitable path to virtue, in so far as knowledge of *the good* will necessarily lead to right action, can only be fully appreciated when understood relative to one of the defining principles of his philosophy; the forms. As a result, this pivotal theory serves to further unite and elaborate upon the central themes discussed throughout the essay by elucidating the relationship between the tangible domain, our physical world, and the intangible realm of the intelligible wherein reside the forms and their summit, the *form of the good*. Moreover, as will become evident, Plato discusses the forms principally in relation to the education of the philosopher rulers wherein he cautions that only very few will possess the rare combination of qualities required so as to attain this knowledge.(503b) This line of reasoning begs the question, to be discussed below, as to whether or not Plato's exclusivity serves, ironically, to support the situationists' argument by rendering virtue unattainable except for an extraordinary few. Finally, the unverifiable and metaphysical nature of Plato's theory of forms will be put into question in so far as it allows for skepticism as to the very existence of the forms and, or, their capacity to be known. The consequence of which is to put into question the very attainability of virtue, that is, if the

forms, so fundamental to virtue, do not exist or if they can not be known then is virtue unattainable?

To begin, in *The Republic*, the notion of form or *eidōs* is, summarily, described as the objective of knowledge in so far as it represents the *truth* towards which the philosopher's mind naturally tends. This *truth*, is situated beyond the physical realm and can only be perceived intellectually, through contemplation. There is an *eidōs*, or form, idea or pattern for every tangible element that represents what each *thing* truly *is* and in which each *thing* partakes (*metechēin*), but is not to be confused with, and from which it gains the minimal degree of reality attainable in the physical world. Plato elevates the concept of *eidōs* to yet a higher level with the notion of the *form of the good*. In the sun simile (507a-509c) Plato seeks to illustrate, through a comparative exegesis whereby the *form of the good* is likened to the sun, this crucial concept representing the ultimate echelon of human knowledge and consequently the essence of human excellence. The *form of the good* may be described as the *eidōs* of the *eidōs* in so far as it is "by their relation to it [the form of the good] that just things and the others become useful and beneficial." (505a) More clearly, Plato argues that the possession of any knowledge without knowledge of the *form of the good* is necessarily incomplete in that it lacks the goodness essential to the object of knowledge. Finally, once apprehended, the verity of the *eidōs* and ultimately the *eidōs of the good* is immediately visible and, as a result, all activity in the physical realm will, by necessity, be guided by its principles. The fact that this conception of *eidōs* is at the root of Plato's theories of justice, character and virtue is self-evident. Right action, or justice, is guided by reason which seeks the *eidōs* in all things especially as regards all ethical questions. As a result, justice ensues when reason

seeks and apprehends the *truth* that exists beyond the illusions of *truth* that result from the acceptance of commonly held opinions and beliefs which are not the *fruit of philosophy*, or profound reflection. The forms, as the sole, supreme and infallible objects of knowledge, further render virtue that results from mere habit or custom illusory as their appearance in Platonic philosophy assures that true virtue is necessarily the product of the lifelong quest for knowledge and, more precisely, knowledge of the *form of the good*.

In *The Republic* the attribution of the capacity to acquire this knowledge is highly elitist. It is largely attributed to the philosopher rulers and is said to be possible only for a highly gifted few. Plato explains this by stipulating that the philosopher (*philosophos*) must embody a combination of traits that are only rarely present at once in a single constitution. Socrates argues that individuals who possess qualities such as “ease of learning, good memory, quick wits, smartness, youthful passion, [and] high-mindedness”(503c) will not easily lead the stable and orderly life required of the *philosophos*. While, on the contrary, those who possess “stable characters, who don’t change easily, who aren’t easily frightened in battle, and whom one would employ because of their greater reliability”(503c-d) do not display the willingness and aptitude for learning necessary for rigorous philosophic instruction.

Moreover, in the analogy of the line (509d-511d), a sequel to the sun simile, where Plato elaborates upon the relationship between the two orders of reality introduced in the simile, this exclusivity is reaffirmed. Briefly, the analogy serves both to outline the differing degrees of truth inherent in the varying realms of reality and, more fundamentally, to indicate the varying states of mind (*pathémata*) at work in the

apprehension of the different realms. Plato identifies two realms, the intelligible (*to noéton*) and the visible (*to horáton*) each of which is further divided. The latter entails an inferior echelon of images, such as shadows and reflections in water etc., and a superior realm consisting of the objects they imitate, namely, the tangible elements of which our physical world consists. The former contains a realm considered inferior because of its dependence on assumptions and images as well as an echelon described as superior due to its freedom from the constraints of hypothesis and imagery. The four corresponding states of mind are, in descending order of reality, *noêsis*, *dianoia*, *pistis* and *eikasia*. *Noêsis* is the purely intellectual *dialectic*¹⁸ mode of apprehension that ascends from the knowledge of one form to the other culminating with the *first principle*, or the *form of the good*. *Dianoia*, or discursive reasoning, is associated with mathematical understanding in that apprehension is dependent upon the postulation of assumptions. *Pistis* is the state of mind by which the minimal degree of truth inherent to the physical world is apprehended. It is the vehicle by which we apprehend as of yet unverifiable contentions. Finally, the state of mind of *eikasia*, or illusion, corresponds to the apprehension of images cast by the objects of the physical realm that are the antipathy of truth and clarity and include “secondhand impressions and opinions”¹⁹ maintained by the majority of people.

The analogy of the line reveals several important elements for the purpose of this discussion. To begin, it provides the first view as to how the mental state to be attained by the philosopher ruler differentiates itself from the others. Prior to this point Plato had

¹⁸ At the end of this section there will be a brief discussion addressing the transformation of the concept of the *dialectic* from that espoused in Plato’s earlier dialogues as well as the beginning of *The Republic* to its present representation in association with the theory of forms.

¹⁹ J.E. Raven, *Classical Quarterly* (Jan.-April, 1953), p. 18.

spoken of the plight of the philosopher in his pursuit of true knowledge without mention of the complex hierarchy that distinguishes the *philosophos* from the vast majority of the population as regards the subject (intellectual operation) and the object (degree of reality) of apprehension. Moreover, accompanying this elaboration is the realization that Plato, by limiting the capacity for *noêsis* and *dianoia* to the philosopher, must situate the vast majority of people as trapped within the realms of images or shadows and, at best, superficial appearances. The classification provided in the analogy of the line, appearing to render the common man incapable of transcending his illusory existence, has serious consequence as it applies to the question of whether or not true virtue is possible. If Plato had concluded his characterization of the two orders of reality with the simile of the sun and the analogy of the line the predominant prognosis would be that the acquisition of the knowledge required for virtuous character is limited to a very small, practically insignificant, minority. As a result, the situationist claim that virtue is inaccessible gains plausibility or at best the argument that stable and reliable ethical traits are generally attainable and sustainable becomes difficult to support from a Platonic perspective.

Fortunately, Plato's cave simile demands a wider interpretation of the classification set out in the analogy of the line rendering its hopeful message of the potential for ethical emancipation more generally applicable. Plato employs this final simile so as to reiterate the essential qualities of the forms and, at their helm, the form of the good as well as the relationship between the tangible and intangible realms. In addition the cave simile serves to improve upon the sun simile and the line analogy on two important levels. First by enhancing the depiction of the modes of understanding termed *pistis* and *eikasia*. Second by further illustrating the complex nature of the ascending and descending

movement between the varying layers of reality within the domains of illusion and intelligence. Briefly, as the content of the simile is well known, Plato relates a tale of prisoners whose entire existence takes place within the confines of a cave restrained in such a way so as to render visible only that which is directly in front of them. The cave itself consists of a long entrance revealing daylight, behind and above the prisoners burns a fire and between the fire and the prisoners is a road, covered by a curtain, to which the prisoners have their back. Behind this curtain there are men carrying many items, which protrude above the curtain, and include articles such as human and animal replicas in a variety of materials. The fire burning behind the spectacle of men and paraphernalia on the road works to cast a bizarre shadow on the wall in front of the prisoners which, given their restrained state, serves as their sole, albeit distorted, view of the world. According to Plato “in every way they would believe that the shadows of the objects we mentioned were the whole truth (*aléthés*).”(515e) Plato goes on to explain that if any one of these prisoners were to be released from their imprisoned state their transition from illusion to increasing states of reality would undoubtedly be painstaking in that it would entail the readjustment of their entire conception of reality. Socrates explains that the emancipated prisoner, whose sight has adjusted to the reality outside of the cave, would be blinded anew were he to return to the darkness of the cave. His ability to discern between the shadows cherished below impeded, he would be mocked and ridiculed by the cave dwellers who would consider his vision impaired by the voyage to the outside world. As a result, any attempt by the free man to impart truth and liberty to those below would meet with fierce and violent resistance.

The key to deciphering this curious tale can be found in the words premising its account, which exalt its role in facilitating the listener's ability "to picture the enlightenment or ignorance of our human condition." (514a) To begin, this sentence encapsulates the grandeur of the simile's task in that it claims to reflect the human potential for both *enlightenment* and *ignorance*. According to Socrates the prisoners in the cave are "drawn from life", in the sense that they do not depict individuals in an aberrant state of mind but are representative of the level of awareness proper to the *common man*, or as will be shown, the unreflective mind. (515a) The prisoners constrained within the cave represent, for Plato, the average individual's failure to distinguish between illusion and reality when they unquestionably accept appearances. This, of course, refers to the states of mind of *illusion* and *belief* whose objects are opinions possessing the appearance of reality but whose truth has never been substantiated. The ascent from the darkness of the cave to the progressively brighter light of the fire, the light of the outside world and finally the sun itself is a metaphor for the evolution of the mind. It depicts the movement from the intellectual darkness of belief and opinion to the intellectual clarity of intelligence culminating with the apprehension of the idea of the good seen in both the line analogy and the sun simile. Socrates confirms this interpretation where he says,

"this simile must be connected throughout with what preceded it. The realm revealed by sight corresponds to the prison, and the light of the fire in the prison to the power of the sun. And you won't go wrong if you connect the ascent into the upper world and the sight of the objects there with the upward progress of the mind into the intelligible region...the final thing to be perceived only with difficulty, is the form of the good." (517a-b)

The simile of the cave distinguishes itself from the sun simile and the line analogy in its capacity to illustrate not only how the upper and lower echelons of knowledge and truth relate to one another in terms of their relative reality and clarity but *why* and *how* this relationship manifests itself. It graphically portrays the virility of familiar opinions entrenched in the mind of the average man and the tenacity with which most individuals cling to commonly accepted notions resisting their subjection to rigorous questioning and the dire consequences that ensue. This stubbornness of spirit, for Plato, results from ignorance and serves to maintain human beings in the depths of intellectual darkness. Clearly it is as a result of ignorance that the prisoners resent the emancipated man's attempt to liberate them. It is equally ignorance that causes them to revere shadows as truth. Plato's message is transparent; if the prisoners knew the truth about their condition they would immediately and automatically choose freedom in the *real* world over life in a prison falsely believed to be that which constitutes living in the world. For Plato, the misguided prisoners living their lives in ignorance represent the lost souls on earth living lives devoid of reflection. As has been discussed, Plato equates truth with knowledge of the forms the acquisition of which necessitates *élegkhos*, or the *refutation* of false beliefs, progressively guiding the mind towards intelligence.²⁰ The principle impediment to this intellectual ascent is ignorance of the human condition in the temporal realm. This ignorance consists of mistakenly embracing ephemeral preoccupations, such as physical desires, acquisition of wealth and title, as conducive to true happiness. So strong is the

²⁰While this understanding of *élegkhos* seems to be put into question in the *Meno*, as will be discussed at the end of the section on the theory of forms (p. 70-74), there is no doubt that in the *Symposium* Diotima's description of the dialectic of love supports the contention that knowledge of the forms consists of the progressive ascension, motivated by love for the beautiful, of the mind from the tangible to the intangible realm through the acquisition of increasingly true ideas and the evacuation of false beliefs. (210a-212b)

human attachment to such perceived goods that any attempt by the enlightened amongst men at illuminating an alternate, true, path to happiness, requiring the relinquishing of superficial pursuits, is viciously rejected. It cannot go unmentioned that Plato has Socrates, his accusers and his trial in view in his portrayal of the free man amongst prisoners whose attempt at saving them is ignorantly met with violent retribution. Yet, those who succeed in catching a glimpse of the truth embrace it even more fiercely than do the ignorant illusions. Once a human being understands the truth of his condition, as was the case with the liberated prisoner, it is impossible that he will choose to remain in the shadows. The profound conviction that Plato seeks to impart through the simile of the cave is that no man of sound mind chooses the illusion of being over being itself.

This concept brings full circle the principle themes, discussed earlier in the essay, of justice and virtue science whereby Plato rejects the possibility that one can know the truth or the good and not embrace it. Justice, or a well ordered soul, results solely when reason takes its rightful place at the helm of the soul representing the soul's emancipation from the lures of the flesh and the ambitions of *Thumos*. For Plato, the absence of internal harmony whereby the soul is overpowered by *Thumos* or appetite does not result from weakness but from the absence of reason; the ignorance as to the good that is the cause of weakness. The cave simile supports this interpretation; had Plato esteemed *enkrateia*, or the self-mastering over passions, desires and ambitions, as more fundamental to happiness than reason he would have portrayed the prisoners as rebels who had succumbed to *akrasia*, or the act of knowing the good yet choosing the bad. Had this been Plato's intent the appropriate treatment for such individuals would have been rehabilitation not enlightenment, as this would have already proven to be insufficient.

Instead he paints the portrait of men whose lot results fully from their ignorance of the good. When seen in this light self-mastering, or *enkrateia*, can be understood as inherent to reason in so far as reason is the principle cause of internal harmony and similarly, the presence of self control is not possible where reason is absent.(430d-432b)²¹

Plato's message, in the cave simile, is an optimistic one in that freedom from our state of ignorance, identified as the plight of the human condition, is depicted as attainable if we are to trust the symbolic relevance of the pilgrim who succeeds in elevating his condition by accessing the outside world. While Plato speaks specifically of the intellectual ascent of the philosopher ruler, in the cave simile, he nonetheless seems to paint the more general portrait of a remediable human condition whereby the transition from ignorance to enlightenment lies within our control. A transition that represents the most important of human pursuits meriting the title of "true philosophy" and corresponding to the acquisition of excellence. As Plato so elegantly confirms, "what is

²¹ This is an important passage as regards the position espoused throughout the essay concerning Plato's view on the possibility of *akrasia* and the corresponding role of *enkrateia*. Here *self-discipline* is not described as a virtue required in order to control the weaker elements of the soul (spirit and appetite) but as a virtue that coincides with the harmony of the soul as well as the polis. In fact the term that Plato speaks of in this passage is *sophrosuné*, translated by G.M.A. Grube, rev. and C.D.C. Reeve as *moderation*, which Socrates contends is "ridiculously" referred to as "self-control".(430e) Socrates condemns the latter term for suggesting that the same person is at once master and slave; "The stronger self that does the controlling is the same as the weaker self that gets controlled, so that only one person is referred to in all such expressions."(430e-431a) Accordingly, Socrates goes on to explain, what will resemble his description of justice which follows, that *moderation* occurs naturally within a harmonious soul where he says that "moderation resembles a kind of *harmony*".(431e) Contrary to the standard opinion that the division of the soul in the Platonic corpus must necessarily coincide with the existence of *akrasia* and *enkrateia* Plato writes "unlike courage and wisdom, each of which resides in one part, making the city brave and wise respectively, moderation spreads throughout the whole. It makes the weakest, the strongest, and those in between – whether in regard to reason, physical strength, numbers, wealth, or anything else – all sing the same song together. And this unanimity, this agreement between the naturally worse and the naturally better as to which of the two is to rule both in the city and in each one, is rightly called moderation."(431e-432a) In "Akrasia in the Republic: Does Plato Change his Mind?" Gabriela Carone supports this reading of *The Republic's* depiction of *akrasia* where she writes, "Plato characterizes virtue not as reason exerting control on desires which may none the less oppose it in strength, but as harmony and friendship between all parts of the soul, which have come to share the same beliefs (4, 444D 13-E I, 443 D 3-E2, 442 C 10-D3). How can such a friendship and harmony exist at all, unless one supposes that the lower desires in that case have a strength which is proportionally subservient to (rather than antagonistic to or independent of) the degree of good that the virtuous and knowledgeable person expects to obtain from realising them?"(p. 127)

at issue is the conversion of the mind from a kind of twilight to the true day, that climb up into reality which we shall say is true philosophy.”(521c) It is clearly this wider interpretation of Plato’s message that is retained and propagated throughout the essay as a response to the lack of virtue to which the experiments and historical experiences discussed previously attest. Furthermore, as will be seen, it is this reading of Plato that is supported and elaborated upon later in *The Republic*. In book ten, Plato overtly and conclusively proclaims the necessity of philosophy, in direct opposition to habit and custom, as the sole means to happiness in this life and the next as regards all persons and not solely the philosopher ruler.

Finally, even if knowledge of the forms, which Plato depicts as the source of virtue, is potentially universally attainable their abstract nature brings into question the very existence, or at best the attainability of, the forms themselves. If one is to adopt a Platonic point of view in response to the situationists’ claims and, more importantly, as a path to virtue, as is the case here, then does the failure to prove the existence of the forms undermine the validity of the theory that stems from them or the possibility of virtue all together? Firstly, the validity of the principles that result from the theory of forms is sustainable independently of their source. The necessity to look beyond the mere acceptance of the opinions of the many in the hope of identifying intellectually verifiable principles so as to guide our moral conduct has tremendous merit in and of itself. The value of philosophical reflection as to right conduct and the ordering of our soul according to an elevated psychological state that reigns over our desires and ambitions is profoundly valid regardless of the existence of Plato’s theory of forms. Nonetheless, the fundamental principle of the forms, if given a contemporary interpretation, do have an

indisputable pertinence on at least one very important level, relative to the discussion at hand, which stems from the very roots of Plato's inception of the intelligible forms. Plato's Cratilian and Heraclitian influences convinced him of the lack of stability of the tangible realm. Heraclitus argued that "you could not step into the same river, for other waters are ever flowing on to you" so as to illustrate his contention that the tangible world is in a constant state of flux. Cratylus pushed this theory to its extreme conclusion maintaining that *we cannot even step into the same river once* suggesting that nothing remains itself long enough so as to be identified, or known. It has been argued that Plato posited the theory of forms in an attempt to *save knowledge* so to speak. That is to say, Plato removed the forms from the tangible realm so as to preserve their existence as knowable entities. As a result, even if Heraclitus and Cratylus are right and knowledge within the tangible realm is impossible all is not lost if that which gives the physical domain its presence is safely preserved in the intelligible realm separate from the incessant change of the visible realm. A similar concern continues to preoccupy ethical philosophy in general and the present inquiry in particular. Underlying the conclusion adopted here that correct ethical choices are consistently possible is the principle that there exists a code of correct conduct by which the ethical person will abide. Identifiable ethical principles are a necessary condition for correct choice. As a result, if there is to be a standard of acceptable behavior the ethical principles guiding this behavior must not be susceptible to fluctuation. Instead they must be constant, reliable and unchanging. This of course recalls and preserves the characteristics of the forms on a practical level. In sum, even if the forms can not be known or if they do not exist the acceptance of the

less abstract concept of inalienable principles in ethics may be said to shield against the relativism that so preoccupied Plato.

The following conclusion of the present section on the theory of forms represents a brief digression seeking to shed light on the transition of Plato's portrayal of *dialectic* from its refutative and interactive nature discussed earlier,²² to its role in the apprehension of the supreme principle of knowledge, *noêsis*. Clearly in the analogy of the line the *dialectic* to which Socrates refers (511b) is disconnected from two of its previously determining characteristics namely that of interactive discourse between interlocutors and the *refutative* nature typically associated with Socratic argumentation discussed earlier. This shift in the nature of the *dialectic* found within the analogy of the line is echoed throughout the latter part of *The Republic* wherein the *refutative* element of the discussion, still quite evident early on, dissipates as the dialogue progresses. In *Socrates, Ironist and moral philosopher* (1991) Gregory Vlastos explains this methodological deviation as resulting from a profound personal intellectual transformation in the life of Plato. (p. 165) The crux of Vlastos' argument is that what amounts to the "throwing overboard" (p. 165) of *élegkhos* coincides with the advanced state of Plato's immersion into the study of mathematics. Vlastos contends that this alteration of intellectual focus led to Plato's losing faith in his traditional *refutative* method of edification and, more generally, education. He suggests that important instances where the *refutative dialectic* is shunned occur as a result of their inadequate fit with the mathematical model which, according to Vlastos, Plato was in the process of constructing. In *Meno* Vlastos points to "a reduced version of *élegkhos*" whereby

²² The *refutative* dialectic typical of the dialogues of Plato's youth is discussed on pages 42-44.

Socrates seeks to “demonstrate” that learning results from reminiscence by allowing a young slave to “discover” the solution to a geometrical problem.²³(p. 166) Here Socrates departs from his traditional adversarial role, which according to Vlastos, proves inadequate, by providing the young slave with a necessary hint which serves to trigger his reminiscence of the solution to the geometrical problem in question. For Vlastos these exchanges depict two pivotal departures from the earlier *refutative* dialogues; first, the recourse to geometry and second the theory of reminiscence. Vlastos considers the presence of these two themes as highly significant, the first in so far as it reveals the advanced state of Plato’s knowledge and interest in geometry and the latter in so far as it clearly departs from the aporetic nature of the *refutative* dialogues. As discussed earlier, Plato’s *refutative* dialogues were not intended to arrive directly at knowledge but to dispel false beliefs serving to impede the apprehension of truth. Vlastos interprets this shift as Plato’s renunciation of the elenctic method due to its inadequacy when compared to its mathematically inspired rival in bringing about conclusive verifiable knowledge.(p168) Finally, Vlastos finds further support for his theory in Plato’s use of *hypothesis* in *Meno* as a starting point for discussion as to whether or not virtue can be taught.(86e-87b) Vlastos argues that study by hypothesis undermines the Socratic insistence seen in previous dialogues, and central to *élegkhos*, that the premise of philosophical discussion always consist of only that in which the interlocutors truly believe.(p. 173-174)

As concerns the scope of the present inquiry, while Vlastos’ arguments are indisputable on certain levels their applicability to *The Republic* solicits reserve. First,

²³ *Meno*, 82a-85c.

that there is an obvious movement away from the traditional *refutative dialectic* of the earlier dialogues in the transitional dialogues as well as the dialogues of maturity and advanced age²⁴ is clear. Also Vlastos' contention that this shift reflects an underlying doctrinal metamorphosis seems inevitable. The nature of the mathematical influence to which he points, particularly in *Meno*, also seems well founded. Nonetheless, as regards *The Republic* Plato's blind faith in the mathematical model seems to have, once again, metamorphosed. While a detailed account of the influence of Plato's mathematical preoccupations on *The Republic* is clearly out of place at this junction, a few salient points merit mention. To begin, the early portion of *The Republic* is unquestionably *refutative* reminiscent of the early Platonic dialogues.²⁵ Also, it is quite significant that while Plato clearly recognizes the elevated stature of the study of mathematics on all levels, the education of the philosopher rulers and its importance in the ascension towards the supreme knowledge of the good, its status remains inferior to the purely intellectual realm of *noêsis*. As a result, knowledge dependent on hypothetical postulations is subjugated by the intellectual apprehension of anhypothetical truths associated with the form of the good. Also, unlike what we see in *Meno*, in *The Republic*, Plato reverts to the wholly aporetic model of the earlier dialogues. The dialogue concludes with a myth attesting to the irresolute nature of the questions under discussion. More importantly still, the thematic content of the dialogue mimics its aporetic structure. The question of

²⁴ I am referring to Vlastos' chronological classification as put forth in *Ironist and moral philosopher*.

²⁵ In Book I of *The Republic* there are several mentions of the term *refutation* spoken by Socrates' emphatically confrontational interlocutor, Thrasymachus.(336c, 337e,) Moreover, at the close of his exchange with Thrasymachus Socrates describes him as "blushing" which coincides with the shamed persona of a refuted interlocutor.(350d) Furthermore, Socrates implores Thrasymachus to say only what he truly believes, again a typical component of the elenctic dialogue.(350e) Thrasymachus admits to having been reduced to knowing nothing(354b-c) in keeping with the traditional goal of *élegkhos*. Finally, in Book II Glaucon argues that the goal of the discussion is not to "seem to have persuaded" his interlocutors but...[to] truly convince" them as to the truth of his message.(357a-b).

justice can not be concretely *demonstrated* it can only be accomplished in the soul of the individual who has the courage to rid himself of the mistaken opinions with which the impure polis is imbued. If Plato does experience the euphoria of mathematically inspired knowledge perhaps this phenomenon is best understood as yet another stage in the evolution of his thought. As this brief digression has attempted to outline, it would appear that, in fundamental ways, in *The Republic* Plato returns to his elenctic roots in spite of the absence of the technical characteristics typically associated with *élegkhos*.

As a result, an attempt to identify the evolution of Platonic thought by focusing on the continuity, as opposed to the apparent dichotomy, in the concept of *dialectic* may prove insightful. The virtual evacuation of the *other* that occurs on both levels, content and form, in *The Republic* is not gratuitous and can be interpreted as indicative of the fact that Plato's abandonment of the *elenctic* method represents a thematic evolution, only not the evolution of Plato's mathematical development as suggested by Vlastos but, the evolution of his theory of forms. In this sense, and in keeping with an extraordinary thematic consistency, Plato's concept of *dialectic* can be said to follow the lead of *knowledge* and *reality* in that it varies with respect to the subject matter it addresses. That is to say, when truth is sought regarding questions appropriate to the visible realm then discussion respects its tangible form and interlocutors move towards increasing clarity in so far as this is attainable while understanding continues to be dependant upon images. Yet once the dialogue broaches subjects of an increasingly metaphysical nature the *dialectic* arguably is emancipated accordingly from the tangible realm and consequently from the necessity of the interlocutors who represents it. When understood in this light the *dialectic* persists intact throughout in its essential capacity as a dynamic tool conducting

the mind progressively higher and ultimately towards the supreme principle of knowledge. Consequently, as opposed to identifying a tension between the two versions, the interactive and solitary *dialectic* may be seen as a natural extension of one another, whereby each is appropriate to the echelon it serves, as they move from the tangible domain of opinion to the intelligible realm of science. A continuity that maintains the integrity of Socrates' avowal to the men of Athens to,

“obey the god rather than [them], and as long as I draw breath and am able, I shall not cease to practice philosophy...I shall question him, [who does not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of his soul] examine him and test him...even if I am to face death many times.”(*Ap.* 29c-30c)

The Myth of Er

The theories of justice and forms that Plato develops throughout *The Republic* synthesize in the myth of Er(614b-621b), concluding the dialogue, so as to provide an enlightened formula serving to guide the process by which individuals make life-altering choices. A formula that is considered here to be a preferred alternative to the situationist account of the human capacity for virtue providing profound insight into the factors contributing to ethical behavior or the lack thereof. To begin, the myth represents Plato's deviation from the use of prose in preference of more illustrative explanatory tools. This may be seen as the first hint as to the content of the myth. In *The Republic* Plato has turned to the use of pictorial and poetic literary styles under specific circumstances, namely, in order to relate that which transcends the reach of traditional prose. Contrary to the contention that such literary tools represent a doctrinal lull it would appear that in

The Republic Plato calls upon them when revealing his most sublime theories; previously the forms with the similes of the sun and the cave as well as the analogy of the line and now, as will be shown, the fate of the soul.

In the myth Plato recounts the story of Er, a soldier, who was killed in battle only to return from the *other world* as a messenger bearing invaluable information about choice and responsibility. Er recounts how the souls, referred to as the “souls of a day”(617d) and arriving both from heaven and earth, are informed by Lachesis, one of the three fates and daughter of Necessity who sings to the sirens’ music of things past, that “here (they) must begin another round of mortal life whose end is death.”(617d) An interpreter proceeds to explain that, by “the word of Lachesis”(617d), each soul, respecting the numerical order of the lot which they are attributed, is directly responsible, without the assistance of a Guardian Spirit, for choosing their future life on earth from amongst a series of potential life choices. Naturally the array of options will decrease as the numerical value of the lot increases leaving fewer potential life options. The interpreter then sets before them a number of life patterns, exceeding the quantity of souls, and consisting of “every conceivable kind”(617e-618a) the character of which it was left up to the *souls of a day* to decipher. The interesting outcome is that the first soul to choose acted hastily without truly reflecting upon his selection and elected the life of a tyrant. As his choice was irrevocable he was devastated when granted a preview of the future depicting a life consumed by unimaginable evil.(619b-c) Er goes on to describe how “for the most part (the remaining souls) followed the habits of their former life”(620a) when effecting their choice. For example, the soul of Orpheus chose the life of a swan since, having died at female hands, he refused to be born to a woman and the “baffoon”,

Thersites, chose the life of an ape in keeping with his former life, to name a couple. Only Odysseus, the last soul in the selection process, deviates from this pattern by seeking out a future life that differs greatly from his previous one when he embraces the life, neglected by the others, of an ordinary man who minds his own business.(620c)

An attentive analysis of Plato's myth of Er reveals a synopsis of Socrates' response to the central question of *The Republic* as well as to this essay, namely, why morality is desirable as an end in itself and how this revelation serves to assure its actualization. To begin, the myth is wrought with intricate symbolism throughout that contributes to the depth and clarity with which Plato's message is advanced. In keeping with the importance of Plato's use of myth, the subject matter further exposes the appropriateness of this vehicle. A discussion revealing the structure of the universe and judgement in the other world does not constitute verifiable knowledge as it is beyond the capacity of any man's experience and, as a result, it cannot form the object of rigorous discussion. Further motivation underlying Plato's use of myth may stem from the fact that Socrates' avowal of ignorance impedes him from imparting such knowledge directly necessitating the introduction of a third party as source of knowledge, in this case, *the myth*. Another interesting symbolic nuance is Plato's choice of Lachesis as presiding over the ceremony commencing the selection process for the next "round of mortal life".(617d) Lachesis is one of the daughters of *necessity* which may readily be understood as representing the inevitability of the process that Er describes. Moreover she is said to be one of the three fates allowing for the interpretation that what follows contains an element of fate yet Socrates explicitly negates the role of fate, or divine providence, where he says that "The fault lies not with God, but with the soul that makes the choice."(617e) One way of

reconciling this apparent inconsistency may lie in Plato's characterization of Lachesis as singing "of things past".(617c) When considered within the context of the myth in its entirety it becomes clear that while the choice of a future life rests completely within the hands of the soul choosing it nonetheless depends upon, and is in this respect determined by, the nature of his previous life. As will become increasingly clear as the analysis progresses, the soul's future is fated by its past life. The subtlety of this message is encapsulated within the following insightful words imparted by Lachesis to the souls prior to effecting their future life choices "excellence knows no master; a man shall have more or less of her according to the value he sets on her."(617e) The underlying question, if excellence is to be achieved, becomes; how is the value one places on excellence established? And the answer can be summed up in one word *philosophy*. In the myth of Er, contrary to the sun simile and the analogy of the line, Plato speaks of human excellence in general and not specifically as it pertains to the philosopher ruler. He argues that the degree to which it is achieved depends on the extent to which each and every one of us has valued, and consequently, pursued the love of wisdom. As we have seen it is this premise that forms the foundation of Plato's theories of justice and the forms. In the pivotal passage reproduced below, where Socrates reiterates the imperative of the acquisition of knowledge as a necessary condition for the realization of human excellence, he expressly addresses a fundamental aspect of this required knowledge to which he has only previously alluded. The understanding in question consists of the clarity of mind required so as to identify the spiritual guide who may then lead us to embracing the life saving philosophy permitting us to make "supreme choices". Plato describes this process as,

“the moment...when everything is at stake”. “And that is why (he goes on to say) it should be our first care to abandon all other forms of knowledge, and seek and study that which will show us how to perceive and find the man who will give us the knowledge and ability to tell a good life from a bad one and always choose the better course so far as we can; we must reckon up all that we have said in this discussion of ours, weighing the arguments together and apart to find out how they affect the good life, and see what effects, good or ill, good looks have when accompanied by poverty or wealth or by different dispositions of character, and what again are the effects of the various blends of birth and rank, strength and weakness, cleverness and stupidity, and all other qualities inborn or acquired. If we take all this into account and remember how the soul is constituted, we can choose between the worse life and the better, calling the one that leads us to become more unjust the worse, and the one that leads us to become more just the better. Everything else we can let go, for we have seen that this is the best choice both for living and dead.”(618c-e)

In his article, “The Myth of Er”, H.S. Thayer (1988) reads this passage as a clear affirmation that “there is a science and knowledge (*epistémé*) for discerning the good life and enabling us to choose the best”. This interpretation clearly supports the analysis of *The Republic* put forth throughout the essay. Thayer, who shares the non-exclusive reading of *The Republic* adopted throughout the essay, proceeds to ask the following question “how are we to acquire this knowledge; where are we, in Socrates’ words, to “learn and discover who can give” us this power?”(p.371) The conclusion to which Thayer arrives is that it is in Socrates that the enlightened interlocutors recognize their spiritual guide and in *The Republic*, as a whole, that the attentive reader is directed towards the path of philosophy, the sole key to correct moral choice and ultimately happiness. In the myth, serving as moral guide, it is the excellence of one’s future life that is at stake and it is dependent upon the pursuit of philosophy, consisting, as we have seen, of knowledge of the forms and the resulting equilibrium of the soul, accomplished

prior to one's death. In sum, Plato confirms *every man's* potential for virtue where he writes the following;

“anyone who, during his earthly life, faithfully seeks wisdom and whose lot does not fall among the last may hope, if we may believe Er's tale, not only for happiness in this life but for a journey from this world to the next and back again that will not lie over the stony ground of the underworld but along the smooth road of heaven.”(619d-e)

Plato illustrates the consequences of having lived either an ignorant or enlightened existence on just or unjust future life choices by painting the portraits of two souls, one who chooses a *good life* as well as of his unfortunate counterpart who chooses the *worse life*. Plato's ingenuity, and the crucial knowledge that he imparts regarding the central question of this essay, lies in the atypical form that he attributes to the unjust soul. Curiously, the soul that chose the life of a tyrant was a soul that had descended from heaven. Plato employs this juxtaposition of good, symbolized by heaven, and evil, the future life choice of a despicable tyrant, so as to boldly illustrate the belief, developed throughout *The Republic*, that evil stems not from the conscious rejection of the good, *akrasia*, but from the misguided acceptance of apparent good as good itself.²⁶ Plato

²⁶ Once again, Gabriela Carone in “*Akrasia in the Republic: Does Plato Change his Mind?*” interprets the story of Leontius (439e-440a) in a manner that demonstrates the same point that I am arguing in this passage relative to the unenviable soul who chooses the future life of a tyrant. As mentioned, in endnote number fourteen (p. 47) above, Leontius' internal struggle is cited by the proponents of the prevalent view of *akrasia* in *The Republic* as proof of Plato's acknowledgement of desire's potential to overcome reason. To begin, Carone correctly identifies that nowhere in this passage is reason mentioned, the struggle that takes place occurs between *θυμός* and the *επιθυμητικόν* and may serve to show that the former part of the soul is not always necessarily victorious over the latter. Yet, she goes on to say that, even if we admit that *θυμός* is fighting against appetite for something that reason would “normally believe to be good” and that desire is triumphant “the agent does not need to be acting against what he at that time believes to be best.” Her point, similar to mine, is that, if Leontius' reason is overcome it is a weak form of reason that falls more appropriately under the heading of Socrates' understanding of *mistaken belief*. She writes, “Reason is ‘overpowered’ not in the sense that the agent performs the action while at the same time strongly believing that he should not, but in the sense that, at that moment, his reason has been weakened and come to adopt the beliefs of the prevailing part... Conflict in the *Republic* may thus be seen as synchronic in the sense that there are simultaneous conflicting things that are believed to be good, and the conflict is regrettable because it may result in a belief prevailing which is not grounded in the real good.”(p. 138-139) In her conclusion she writes, “even though the *Republic* may present a picture of reason being opposed and overturned by

clearly conveys this message where he writes that the soul was unequipped to make this pivotal decision because,

“(h)e was one of the souls who had come from heaven, having lived his previous life in a well governed state, but having owed his goodness to habit and custom and not to philosophy; and indeed, broadly speaking, the majority of those who were caught in this way come from heaven without the discipline of suffering, while those who came from earth had suffered themselves and seen others suffer and were not so hasty in their choice.”(619c-d)

Here, for the first time in the dialogue, Plato speaks specifically of the potentially deceptive nature of the supposedly well-governed life. Plato vividly warns against the destructive illusion of security masking the apparently well-governed life that has consisted principally of abiding by conventional dictums, *habits and customs*, under familiar and unchallenging circumstances. These *habits and customs* result from the mistaken beliefs, *pistis*, and illusions, *eikasia*, discussed earlier in the line analogy and the simile of the cave, associated with the physical world in which we live, *to horáton*. On a more practical level, they take the form of socially accepted truths held by the majority that solidify themselves into habituated behavior and customary practices as regards all areas of life, including morality. These *so-called* truths are based on unenlightened beliefs resulting, not from philosophical reflection but, simply from the acceptance of the *visible realm*, accessible not by the mind but by appetite and spirit or ambition, as the ultimate reality. Moreover, these *false opinions*, valuing pleasure and

lower desires, Plato is there making it clear that those would be cases where reason has been left underdeveloped, in such a way that the individual's incomplete share in reason is far from being equated to the possession of knowledge. Rather, it is when reason has been made 'weak' in ignorant souls devoid of *voús* that it cannot rule and is easily dragged about (cf. 9, 586 B-D, 588 E-589 A, 590 C); by contrast, in the real lover of truth and knowledge all other desires have become weaker (cf. 6, 485 A-E).”(p. 144)

ambition above all else, are transmitted from generation to generation without question or reflection as to their validity resulting in a generalized ethical malaise. These habits and customs are conducive to, at best, a life resembling that of “a blind man on the right path”, as described by Plato earlier in *The Republic*, in that conventional opinions create the illusion of a *good life* within the safe boundaries of situations that do not challenge one’s ethical foundation. The danger being that the empty values underlying this *semblance* of morality will crumble when challenged rendering the soul defenseless in the face of the greatest human battle, the authentic edification of the soul. The misguided soul in the myth of Er was handicapped precisely because his life in heaven had not presented him with the ethical challenges, or *suffering* as Plato suggests, that would have obliged him to reflect upon the conventional beliefs which governed his life and progressively elevate his ethical knowledge to the status of infallible truth. “For this reason”, writes Plato, “and because of the luck of the draw there was a general change of good for evil and evil for good.”(619d) Lacking the wisdom to recognize and subsequently pursue a good life consisting of justice at all costs, the soul from heaven mistook the life of a tyrant and the wealth and power it represents as *the good*. Had this soul passionately pursued philosophy it would have understood that the life of a tyrant runs contrary to true human happiness as it fails to maintain the delicate balance between reason, *Thumos* and appetite necessary for the harmony of the soul that is *dikaiosuné*. The tyrant’s incommensurate desire for wealth and power results in the inappropriate reign of *Thumos* and appetite over reason. Plato brilliantly expresses this contention where he writes that the principle human preoccupation must consist of the relentless pursuit of the wisdom that leads to the good life,

“so that we may be unmoved... by the temptation of wealth or other evils, and avoid falling into the life of a tyrant or other evil-doer and perpetrating unbearable evil and suffering worse, but may rather know how to choose the middle course, and avoid so far as we can, in this life and the next, the extremes on either hand. For this is the surest way to the highest human happiness.”(619a-b)

Odysseus, in spite of being the last soul to enact his future life selection and consequently having a greatly limited array of choices before him, typifies the enlightened choice of a just soul. As it turns out Lachesis was true to her word when she claimed that “even for the last comer, if he chooses wisely and lives strenuously, there is left a life with which he may be well content.” Odysseus confirms this where he rejoices his future life decision claiming that “had his lot fallen first he would have made the same choice.” After looking “round for a long time, Odysseus finally came upon the “uneventful life of an ordinary man... lying neglected by the others.”(620c-d) Odysseus’ selection was based upon his liberation from all ambition as a result of his previous sufferings. Plato’s message is that philosophy, consisting of the profound reflection of life experiences, will lead to a clear vision of the truth towards which one must tend. Odysseus’ choice of an ordinary man symbolizes his recognition of the beauty of moderation and his disdain for excesses of any kind. Which, as we have seen, are the defining principles of justice personified by the choosing soul that was Odysseus. Plato concludes the myth and with it *The Republic* by stressing the tremendous importance of Er’s message where he writes the following,

“if we remember it, (it) may well preserve us in turn, and we shall cross the river of Lethe safely and shall not defile our souls. This at any rate is my advice, that we should believe the soul to be immortal, capable of enduring all evil and all good, and always keep our feet on the upward way and pursue justice with wisdom. So we shall be at peace with the gods and with ourselves, both in our life here and when like the victors in

the games collecting their prizes, we receive our reward; and both in this life and in the thousand-year journey which I have described, all will be well with us.”(621c-d)

Finally, in this passage, Plato faithfully establishes, on yet another level, the intricate link between true knowledge and virtue as regards ethical choice in that knowing what is right is sufficient so as to assure the choice of a just life. In his article Thayer arrives at a similar conclusion where he writes that “knowing what is right, and choosing accordingly, comes close to fulfilling the very meaning of moral conduct, for Plato, knowledge and virtue, again, being interrelated.”(p.373)

If we are to adopt an inclusive, wider, reading of *The Republic* as suggested earlier, it is reasonable to assume that, while the myth is preoccupied with the fate of the soul upon death, this message applies with equal tenacity to our present lives and to the important ethical choices that we make every day. In the article mentioned above, “The Myth of Er”, H. S. Thayer arrives at the same conclusion. He speaks of the symbolic importance of the “timelessness of the scenery and events of the myth” accomplished by Plato’s portrayal of “life...as an endless series of transitions in which souls pass to and fro from earthly existence to the journey of 1000 years in the other world.”(p.376) Thayer interprets Plato’s temporal mise en scene as intended to relay the message that the myth is playing itself out in a constant state of “now”. He goes on to say that while a sense of past and future exists within the myth, involving the consideration of past life experiences as well as their counterparts, future life choices, the focal point remains grounded in the moment; the act of choosing. Thayer writes, “the full moral force of the story is concentrated in this present moment which will continue to be repeated endlessly in an eternal series of “nows””. He further points to Plato’s use of the term *souls of a day*,

describing the choosing souls, as an indication of Plato's intention to generalize the act of choice so as to include the daily moral decisions that amount exponentially into human excellence. Thayer contends that Er's message, in spite of its unquestionable fictitiousness, "contains the most realistically practical and worldly deliverance one could hope for and with all the redeeming utility one could demand."(p.376) Thayer's insistence on the importance of the myth's message resembles closely that of Socrates himself in the dialogue. As does Thayer's contention that the myth be interpreted as suggesting that all human beings are inevitably called upon to make choices that will have serious and long lasting consequences on one's "character and the direction of the life we go on to live and which will also qualify other choices we may make in the future."(p.377) He goes on to describe the act that accompanies these important occurrences of choice in our lives as manifestations of taking "our life into our hands". He concludes by saying, "*The Republic* as a whole is addressed to these perennially occurring perils and critical crises in human life, whatever particular forms they take and variety of occasions. For it is just in such cases that the lesson needs most to be learned concerning the meaning and moral importance of how to choose well."(p. 377)

Joel Kupperman in his article "The Indispensability of Character" also recognizes the timeless relevance of Plato's ethical philosophy where he looks towards a Platonic response, as we have done, to the situationist's claims. In the above mentioned essay, Kupperman addresses his commentary principally to the following arguments articulated by Gilbert Harman; "it may even be the case that there is no such thing as character, no ordinary character traits of the sort people think there are" and "we need to convince people to look at situational factors and to stop trying to explain things in terms of

character traits.”(p.239) Kupperman’s response to the situationists is that their position is based upon what he considers to be an overly simplified “view of what character is.”(p.240) As a result, Kupperman looks towards Plato’s *The Republic* as providing a more profound conception of character and moral virtue.²⁷ He argues that while Harman looks to the Milgram experiments as proof that “virtuous character is an illusion” perhaps “a Platonic response is that...what they show is that it is much rarer than most people might suppose.”(p.243) Rarer because, as the myth of Er teaches us, virtue must be profoundly assimilated and does not result from the mere adhesion to societal norms. Kupperman describes the morally exemplary individual as differing “from most people both in (terms of their) goals and in the way she or he interprets morally problematic situations.”(p. 245) This understanding of the elements determining ethical behavior seems to provide a contemporary version of the Platonic view once it has been liberated from the abstract constraints of the theory of forms. As Kupperman suggests, the degree of “moral reliability” that a person demonstrates when faced with morally problematic situations will depend a great deal on the nature of the values and goals they embrace. As the myth of Er clearly depicts, the soul from heaven chose the life of a tyrant precisely because he lacked the power of his convictions. A more familiar example might be that the correct moral behavior of a spouse with profoundly religious convictions would arguably be more reliable when faced with the temptation of breaking his or her vows. Whereas a person who does not value the sacrament of marriage and the commitment that it entails but who has nonetheless “habitually” behaved well may be less reliable in a tempting situation without any fear of conventional reprisals. Kupperman argues,

²⁷ A more detailed account of Plato’s conception of character takes place on pages 51-57.

consistently along Platonic lines, that “the way in which someone takes, or perceives a situation” contributes with equal force to the realm of choice wherein what the individual perceives as salient in the situation will determine the moral value of his choice. Kupperman’s contention is that “judgments associated with genuine virtue would of course involve a different way of seeing morally problematic situations.”(p.247) This way of *seeing the world* in turn manifests itself into, and is influenced by, important life projects and the attainment of certain moral standards. Kupperman adds that, while there is inevitably a *fluidity* and *openness* to life that results in change, and less than absolute predictability, of character and behavior there nonetheless remain core values and pursuits that motivate the self-control required for their preservation. Yet, concludes Kupperman, the consistent adherence to these principles “may be less common than people think.”(p.250)

Chapter IV: The Republic Answers the Situationist Claim

Philosophy; Choosing the Kind of Person That We Want to Be

The message that this essay has endeavored to impart is that within each of us resides the potentially nameless soul of a future tyrant or the just soul and virtuous life choice of Odysseus. The power as to which course we choose rests in our hands and depends upon the degree to which we pursue virtue throughout the course of our lives and the impact that our character has on the daily choices that, ultimately, define us. The lack of virtuous character that the situationists' point to, and the examples discussed in this essay attest to, is proof that some, if not most, individuals do not possess Odysseus' strength of character. This, unfortunately, is an empirical fact acknowledged, not only by contemporary situationist theorists but, by Plato himself whose *Republic* was written in response to the lack of virtue that he witnessed in Greek society. Consequently, it is not the situationists' observations of faltering virtue, as such, that is in question here²⁸ but the erroneous transition from empirical observation to philosophical conclusion in which the

²⁸ The accuracy of the statistics pointing to *lack of character* put forth by the situationists are certainly put into questions by authors such as Gopal Sreenivasan in his article entitled "Virtue Theory and Trait Attribution" (2002) and Seymour Epstein in his article "The Stability of Behavior: On Predicting Most of the People Much of the Time." (1979) The former disputes the interpretation of the data upon which Gilbert Harman and John Doris base their conclusions. He discusses three inadequacies in the experimental situations employed by the situationists so as to test the reliability of character traits; 1. Their failure to take into account the subject's own construal of the situation. 2. Their inclusion of behaviour only marginally relevant to the trait in question. 3. Their disregard for the normative character of the responses in which virtue theory is interested.(p. 47) The latter, Epstein, refutes the situationists' position on a methodological basis. He is critical of trait studies that base their conclusions about behaviour on one situation. He argues that if we observe traits over a longer period of time stability does emerge. According to Epstein, stable character traits are observed over a wide range of variables provided that they are evaluated over a sufficient number of occurrences.(p. 1105)

situationists engage. That is to say, situationist theorists accept, what they consider to be, *weakness of character* as an inevitable function of human nature upon which they develop a theory of virtue wherein *ethical choice* is exercised only as regards avoidance of morally problematic, and thus potentially dangerous, situations as discussed earlier.(p. 34-38). In contrast, the superiority of Platonic and Socratic ethical philosophy in shedding light on the nature of human virtue stems precisely from its fundamental belief that lack of virtue, far from inexorable, is an unfortunate departure from the moral excellence that is, not only attainable but, the defining principle of what it is to be human. In this manner preserving the crucial ethical dimension entailed in the important life defining choices that amount to *choosing the kind of person that we want to be*.

It is along these determining theoretical lines that the situationists and the ancients divide as regards their understanding of the unenviable ethical conduct of Eichmann, the Milgram and Stanford Prison subjects, as well as the Military Police and Intelligence in Abu Ghraib. The Situationists consider these occurrences as proof of the fact that ordinarily *good people* will behave immorally in ethically challenging situations. Unfortunately, as has been shown, the situationists are not overly concerned with the unavoidable question as to *why* virtuous individuals so readily succumb to situational pressures. Situationists argue that their observations *demonstrate* the weakness of human character and the unreliability of virtuous character traits, yet they fail to *explain* the root cause of this behavior. Certainly *lack of character* cannot be summoned to explain *lack of character*; any more than darkness can suffice to explain night. The force of Plato's ethical philosophy is that it helps us to truly understand that which the situationists simply observe. In *The Republic*, it becomes apparent that seemingly good people, who

behave badly, such as the subjects of our study, are just that *seemingly good* but not *truly good*. From this Socratic perspective the lack of virtue to which these cases attest is thought to result from *ignorance* as to what *the right thing to do* consists of. As should be abundantly clear by now, Plato characterizes virtuous action as *the fruit of philosophy* attainable solely through profound and consistent reflection of ones self and others the culmination of which is the knowledge that leads to choosing the virtuous life course. When seen in this light, the deplorable behavior addressed throughout the essay can be understood as resulting from insufficient training in virtue rendering the individuals involved ill equipped to face the ethically challenging scenarios with which they met. If we are to trust Plato, then the apparent goodness attributed to the subjects in question was the result of habit and mere adherence to societal norms and customs that proved void of substance when put to the test. In fact each and every analysis conducted throughout the course of this essay can be seen as pointing to the validity of this explanation. To begin, the examples discussed clearly show that the despicable behavior that occurred did not result from profound ideological convictions, psychological deviations or malevolent motivations, but merely from a variety of *banal* factors that succeeded in exercising tremendous behavioral influence. As regards Adolf Eichmann, discussed earlier in depth(p. 8-16), this fact is readily evident and neatly summed up from the very title of Hannah Arendt's analysis of his life and trial; *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on the Banality of Evil*. The entire goal of this work is precisely to dispel the misguided belief that evil action requires a monstrous agent for its execution. Moreover, Stanley Milgram poignantly testifies to arriving at the very same conclusion regarding the obedience experiments where he writes,

“I must conclude that Arendt’s conception of the *banality of evil* comes closer to the truth than one might dare imagine. The ordinary person who shocked the victim did so out of a sense of obligation – a conception of his duties as a subject – and not from any peculiarly aggressive tendencies. This is, perhaps, the most fundamental lesson of our study: ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority.”(p. 6)²⁹

With respect to Philip Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment, the subjects involved in the study, unlike the Milgram subjects, were aware of its simulated nature, and as a result were even less prone to malevolent motivations. To recall the earlier detailed discussion(23-26), the Stanford subjects, ordinarily descent people serving as voluntary participants in a psychological experiment, were strongly influenced to behave inappropriately by a series of prosaic factors that, while confusing and disorienting, were nonetheless void of intrinsic ethical significance to the actors. Finally, even in Abu Ghraib, Zimbardo argues that the abusive military police were motivated more by situational forces similar to those that contributed to the outcome of his Prison Experiment, than they were by political or ideological stimulus.(26-30) The benign nature of the behavior alternating forces present in all the cases discussed contributes to the conclusion that lack of virtue was not the outcome of the behavior in question but the cause. In order for forces, of a benign nature, to gain such important behavioral impact, the ethical entities with which they met, and upon which they acted, must have been lacking in structural fortitude. From this perspective the emphasis shifts from the unreliability of character traits to the quality of character as such. Along Platonic lines, if

²⁹ This theme is discussed in detail on pages 16-23.

the ethical system to which the subjects attest to have maintained allegiance throughout was insufficiently powerful, or substantial, so as to thwart the banal behavior altering forces at work in the challenging situation it encountered then it is the ethical system that must be strengthened.

Moreover, the subjects, themselves, who behaved unethically claimed that their actions, which ran contrary to their previously held belief system, were not accompanied by any change in their moral viewpoint. That is to say, testimonies from the subjects, wherever this was available namely in Eichmann's case and through post experimental interviews with the Milgram subjects, point to the counter intuitive phenomenon that their moral self images³⁰ remained basically in tact in spite of actions that consistently undermined this perspective. Adolf Eichmann claimed, quite incredulously, both to have never felt any animosity towards the Jewish people and to have always lived his life, prior to the trial, according to the Kantian categorical imperative that his will be sufficiently noble so as to qualify as potential universal maxims.(p. 135-136) Similarly, many of the Milgram subjects experienced very pronounced tension resulting from the conflict between what they considered to be the values to which they had always adhered and the situation that challenged them. One subject giggled and attempted to stifle his laughter uncontrollably as he administered increasingly elevated levels of voltage and as the learner's screams became progressively tormented. He nonetheless continued to shock the learner to the maximum voltage level. Post experiment, the subject proceeded

³⁰ Stanley Milgram discusses the loss of the inhibitory force of self-image, where one may refrain from performing harsh actions due to its consequences on his/her self-image, when one enters the agentic state. The action is no longer seen as reflecting one's own motives and therefor has no bearing on one's self-image.(p. 147) While this certainly does play a role in explaining why the self-images of the subjects under discussion were not affected by their actions it does not undermine the present argument in so far as it is the more fundamental issue concerning the facility with which one suspends one's supposed values to begin with that is in question.

to describe his actions in terms which perpetuated his belief in his *good character* even in the face of his highly questionable behavior; "I'm a nice person, I think, hurting somebody, and caught up in what seemed a mad situation...and in the interest of science, one goes through with it."(p. 54). Another subject, a housewife, who in spite of her distress, causing irrepressible anxious utterances and shaking, continued to electrocute the learner "to the end of the board, administering the 450-volt shock three times"(p.80) described herself as follows in a post experimental interview; "I'm unusual; I'm softhearted, I'm a softy. I don't know how I as a woman stand in relation to the other women; they're a little harder than I am. I don't think they care too much."(p. 83) The incongruency of the subjects' self-images and their behavior further serves to substantiate the Platonic position espoused throughout the essay. If these individuals can continue to consider themselves to be people of *good moral character* when they have gratuitously inflicted harm on innocent, unsuspecting, victims then it is not a far stretch to conclude that their understanding of what it truly means to be virtuous is itself erroneous. The interviewer, a member of the Yale School of Psychiatry, also points to insufficiently developed ethical clarity as contributing significantly to the "lack of compassion" demonstrated by the second subject described above. He writes, "It is not surprising that she failed to mobilize the psychic resources needed to translate her compassion for the learner into the disobedient act. Her feelings, goals, and thoughts were too diverse and unintegrated."(p.84) Yet, Nowhere is ignorance as to the true essence of virtue more apparent than in Eichmann's contention to have abided by the Kantian imperative discussed above. That a man, of relatively sound mind, who has contributed to the annihilation of hundreds of thousands of people can continue to perceive himself as

abiding by such elevated ethical standards attests to a profound ignorance as to the significance of the terms he utters. Eichmann's understanding of the ethical principles he describes amounts to what can only be explained as an extremely superficial, self serving and child like interpretation of complex philosophical constraints requiring acute, enlightened and mature reflection.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence as to the validity of Plato's faith in philosophy as the vehicle to virtue, for the purpose of this essay, stems from the wealth of information made available due to the unique methodological nature of the Milgram experiments. More clearly, factors such as the subjects' conviction as to the authenticity of the experiment as well as detailed immediate and longer-term post experimental interviews provide invaluable insight into the psyche of the individuals who participated in the study. Providing the reader with an unadulterated view of first, the subject's spontaneous behavior, second, his/her explanation of that very behavior and finally of the subject's reflections once they had fully assimilated the consequences of the experiment. These accounts show unequivocally that the subjects whose virtue was not compromised by the morally problematic situation that they encountered had, for a variety of reasons, participated in philosophical reflection concerning ethical questions. As a result, these individuals had recourse to a strong ethical foundation with which to confront the moral confusion they faced. One such person is a professor of the Old Testament who categorically refused to continue inducing the electrical shocks on the learner once he had reached 150 volts. To the experimenter's insistence that the subject "must continue" the professor invoked arguments addressing the degree of the experimenter's reflection regarding the ethical soundness of the experiment, as well as the importance of both the

learner's will and the participant's freedom to act according to his beliefs. In fact this subject explains his decision to cease inducing shocks onto the learner as resulting from, not the negative choice to disobey the orders of the experimenter but, the positive choice to obey the will of the learner.(p. 48) Clearly, the individual's religious convictions contributed to his clarity of thought and ultimately to his choice of right action. This is confirmed during an interview session wherein the true purpose of the experiment is revealed and, in response to the following question posed by the experimenter, "What in your opinion is the most effective way of strengthening resistance to inhumane authority? The subject answers, 'If one had as one's ultimate authority God, then it trivializes human authority' ...the answer for this man lies not in the repudiation of authority but in the substitution of good – that is, divine – authority for bad."(p. 49) Another individual described in the study as having refused to continue to shock the learner at 255 volts is an Industrial Engineer who emigrated from Holland to the United States after the Second World War. In his exchange with the experimenter, in much the same way as the previous subject, he invokes the necessity to respect the learner's will to cease the experiment, he questions the experimenter's allegations as to the harmlessness of the shocks sighting his personal experience as an electrical engineer, and finally evokes the principle of freedom of choice in response to the experimenter's insistence that the subject "has no other choice" but to continue with the experiment.(p. 51) This man shows intellectual resolve relative to questions of right conduct. Contrary to many of the subjects who did not choose to stop shocking the learner, this man spoke in an intelligent and obviously reflected manner of the courage required in assuming complete responsibility for one's actions as opposed to transferring "the responsibility onto

someone else” or in this case onto “the structure of authority”.(p.52) The subject’s ability to act upon his convictions may stem from his experience and reflection upon the obedience to a malevolent authority that he speaks of having witnessed in Nazi-occupied Europe. This individual’s interest and preoccupation with ethical questions is further attested to by his conviction, expressed in a letter written to the staff conducting the experiment, “that the social sciences and particularly psychology” are of primordial importance in today’s world.(p. 52) The final example of disobedience discussed in Stanley Milgram’s *Obedience to Authority* concerns a thirty one year old female Medical Technician employed at the University Medical School who had emigrated from Germany five years earlier. At 210 volts this subject firmly remarks “Well, I’m sorry, I don’t think we should continue.” In spite of the experimenter’s insistence that the *experiment must continue*, she remains resolute and consistent. Once again, in a manner resembling the previous disobedient subjects she refutes the experimenter’s apparent expertise regarding the harmlessness of the shocks, and imposes the importance of her free will as well as that of the learner. As regards the woman’s responses Stanley Milgram remarks that “The woman’s straightforward, courteous behavior in the experiment, lack of tension, and total control of her own action seems to make disobedience a simple and rational deed. Her behavior is the very embodiment of what I had initially envisioned would be true for almost all the subjects.”(p. 85) It becomes clear that the woman’s life experiences had provided her with the knowledge that rendered her decision to disobey clear and definite. This subject had grown to adolescence in Nazi Germany and “was for the great part of her youth exposed to Nazi propaganda. When asked about the possible influence of her background, she remarks

slowly, ‘Perhaps we have seen too much pain’.”(p. 85)³¹ These examples of resilient character traits, able to withstand enormous situational pressures, embody the pure optimism of Platonic and Socratic philosophy; the edifying power of knowledge. These individuals, in the spirit of Odysseus, distinguished themselves from their fellow subjects because their life experiences had exercised an edifying impact on their characters. That is to say, in all three examples discussed, the subjects appear to have acquired their moral fortitude through reflection motivated by their life experiences and accompanied by the crucial choices that culminated into virtuous character; their actions were not and could not have been fortuitous. As a result, from this perspective, a plausible hypothesis regarding the examples of lack of virtue discussed throughout the essay may be that Eichmann, for example, armed with rigorous and consistent moral training would have been equipped to resist the situational pressures he encountered. He would have possessed the tools by which to choose between salient goals and competing virtues. The same can be argued regarding the subjects of the Zimbardo experiment and the Abu Ghraib prison experience. Moreover, even those subjects who participated in the Milgram study and failed to resist the pressure of authority attest to the tremendous moral learning gained from participation in the experience. One such subject, one year following the experiment,

“affirms ...that he has definitely learned something of personal importance as a result of being in the experiment, adding: ‘What appalled me was that I could possess this capacity for obedience and compliance to a central idea, i.e. the value of a memory experiment even after it became clear that continued adherence to this value was at the expense of violation of another value, i.e. don’t hurt someone else who is helpless and not

³¹This statement is clearly reminiscent of the section of the myth of Er (619c-d), explored earlier (p. 80-82), where Plato contends that the soul from heaven chooses the life of a tyrant because he lacks “the discipline of suffering”.

hurting you. As my wife said, 'You can call yourself Eichmann.' I hope I can deal effectively with any future conflicts of values I encounter.'"(p.54)

Conclusion

The value and, consequent necessity, of ethical education is the insightful and invaluable principle that underlies the Platonic philosophy embraced in the present testimony as to the attainability and sustainability of virtuous behavior. This preoccupation manifests itself throughout *The Republic* both in Plato's deliberated and poignant development of the necessity and nature of the philosopher rulers' moral education as well as his more general insistence, culminating in Book X, on the imperative of philosophy as savior of all souls. In the first instance, ethical education is conceived principally as an integral and rigorous component of a comprehensive academic structure. While in its wider application, ethical education, assisted by a moral guide, consists of profound philosophical reflection that results in the acquisition of elevated intellectual principles. Principles that will rightfully prevail over passion and spirit thus allowing one to attain the summit of the human condition; the serenity of the soul that results solely from a rational existence unencumbered by the ephemeral entrapments of material and societal benefits. While the educational methods and systems envisioned by Plato, as pertains to the instruction of the philosopher rulers in particular, are in many ways unacceptable by contemporary standards³², the present day pertinence of the principles that guide them is unquestionable. In sum, the fundamental Platonic belief that good character demands life long rigorous intellectual training that

³² This statement refers principally to Plato's views on the communal family, his elitist conception of educational and his questionable curriculum timeline.

incorporates the concerted efforts of environmental, institutional³³, and academic³⁴ forces rings as true today, if not more so, as it did over two thousand years ago. The collapsing moral state to which the situationists point, and to which the horrifying examples discussed in this essay testify, is proof that serious measures must be taken so as to remedy the lack of philosophical reflection that is their root cause. From this perspective, comprehensive moral instruction, so lacking in contemporary society, becomes, not only preferable but, an urgent necessity. When theorists become so disheartened that they simply resign themselves to ethical ineptitude and actually take pains to construct ethical theories that work around immorality it is time to take notice. The Platonic notion that virtue, living a good life and happiness are inextricably linked is, from this perspective, a truism the neglecting of which has, and will continue to have, serious and far-reaching consequences. In contemporary western societies the previously existing sources of moral education, church, state, community and family, have all but disappeared as spiritual guides. They have in fact been replaced by the abundant and immediate proliferation of conventional *wisdom* more void of rational inspiration than ever. This essay has attempted to show the relevance of Plato's mistrust of the unquestioned assimilation of such prevailing norms and, consequently, the possibility and, ultimately, the necessity of the pursuit of moral excellence.

³³ The importance of environmental and institutional influences on character is developed in the section of the essay discussing *character*, i.e., p.51-57.

³⁴ While the details of Plato's conception of appropriate academic instruction falls outside the scope of this essay what is retained for the purpose of the discussion at hand is the importance of incorporating rigorous ethical training into a formal academic curriculum.

Ironically, the situationists help bring to light the very important first step that must accompany the actualization of this Platonic inspired theory of the acquisition of virtue; awareness as to the false sense of security that all too often accompanies superficially acquired virtue. The situationist claim that character traits are contextually dependent inadvertently serves to signal the very same danger against which Er's story cautions; ethical complacency must be avoided at all costs because it permits mistaken beliefs to fester and rear their ugly heads only to manifest themselves into evil actions.(619c-d) In his article, "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics", John Doris invokes contextualist studies that point to the existence of overconfidence as concerns the self-prediction of our ethical behavior suggesting that typically individuals mistakenly predict that they will consistently behave in a virtuous manner.(p.516) The juxtaposition of this claim with Doris' more general argument that situation, not character, determines behavior points to the hypothesis that underlying unethical behavior is a moral smugness that results in a lack of awareness as to the necessity for continued ethical growth. More clearly, situationist findings inadvertently contribute to the understanding that it is precisely those individual's who possess an unjustified confidence in the strength of their character that set themselves up for ethical failure. This correlation implies that individual's who are ignorant to the exacting demands of true virtue and the need for continuous ethical growth will be *caught off guard* when confronted with moral conundrums such as those exposed in this essay. It is in this manner that reflection upon the situationist point of view helps to satisfy the principle Platonic criterion of ethical knowledge; knowing that we do not know what we think we know.

The timeless truth seems to be that ethical education, if it is to build character strong enough to face the pivotal challenges that define us as human beings, must necessarily permeate the very fiber of our existence. Striving to know *right* with the maximum clarity possible is the only personal assurance we hold that Eichmann is not *every man*, that he does not lie dormant in each of us waiting for the opportune situation to emerge. It is only once philosophy, in the form of rigorous ethical education, is incorporated into our personal and institutional systems that good character ceases to be merely an illusion reflecting the habituated customs typically mistaken for virtue. The objective is to develop good character resulting from profound ethical reflection, which, in turn, manifests itself into virtuous goals and informed perceptions of what is salient in morally relevant situations. Thus arming ourselves against the conflicting virtues and blurred ethical lines that render certain situations, as we have seen, so morally precarious. The eternal optimism of this Platonic perspective is the underlying belief that goodness is intrinsic to human excellence and knowledge is its vehicle which, if we embrace it fully, will, not only deliver us from the potentially dangerous web of, as of yet unknown, benign forces but also, assure the happiness that can only result from a life of goodness.

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