

Plato: Selections

Summary

These dialogues present several of the main ideas of Socrates's moral philosophy, including the views that one's primary concern should be cultivating justice within oneself, and that true wisdom consists of being aware of one's ignorance. By writing in dialogue, Plato also introduces Socrates's method of doing philosophy via the give and take of rational discussion.

In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates interrogates a young Athenian about the nature of *holiness*. When Euthyphro claims to know what the holy is, Socrates pressures him to provide a definition. After several initial attempts to do so are unsuccessful, Euthyphro proposes that the holy is what all the gods love, and the unholy is what all the gods hate. Socrates responds with a now-famous question: "Is the holy loved by the gods because it is holy? Or is it holy because it is loved?" When Euthyphro replies that the gods love things *because* they are holy, Socrates points out that this definition implies that things are holy *prior* to the gods' love for them. Thus Socrates complains that Euthyphro has not explained *what it is* to be holy. The dialogue closes without arriving at any satisfactory definition of the holy.

In the *Defence of Socrates*, Socrates is on trial for corrupting the young and failing to acknowledge the gods of Athens. Over the course of his defense, Socrates tells the story of how he came to be a philosopher, and claims that his superior wisdom consists in knowing that he is ignorant of things that other people falsely claim to know. Socrates also claims that death is not to be feared, for we do not know whether death is truly a harm or not. Despite his defense, Socrates is convicted and sentenced to death.

In the *Crito*, Socrates is in prison awaiting his sentence when he is approached by a friend, who argues that he should try to escape punishment. Socrates argues that by choosing to live in Athens, he has agreed to follow the laws of the city, and therefore it would be unjust for him to escape from prison. Because Socrates values justice more than he values his own life, he chooses to remain in prison. His sentence is carried out in the excerpt of the *Phaedo* printed here.

The *Republic* is Plato's masterpiece, and is a long reflection on the nature of justice, both at the level of the city-state and within an individual. Just as in the *Euthyphro* Socrates sought an account of the nature of holiness, here he seeks to know what it is for a person or a state to be just, and whether a just life is preferable to an unjust one. For this purpose, Socrates presents a detailed description of what he regards as the *ideal city*, ruled by philosopher kings. Just as the just city is ruled by philosophers, Socrates claims that a just soul is ruled by its rational part. One of the primary conclusions of the dialogue is that the life of a just person is also happiest.

Testbank Essay Questions

1. Write an essay critically examining *Euthyphro*'s dilemma. What question gives rise to the dilemma, and why are both possible answers to this question problematic? How do you think the dilemma should be resolved? Defend your answer.
2. In the *Defence of Socrates*, Socrates describes his quest to disprove the Delphic oracle's claim that he was the wisest man in Athens. How did he go about trying to disprove this claim, and what were the results? How does Socrates conceive of wisdom? Do you find his account plausible?
3. In the *Crito*, what arguments does Crito make to persuade Socrates to try to escape from prison? How does Socrates respond to these arguments? Who do you think has the stronger case, and why?
4. Describe Plato's allegory of the cave. What do the various components of the allegory represent? What is the point of the allegory?

Companion Website Study Questions

1. What definition of *holiness* does Euthyphro endorse, and what question does Socrates pose in response to this definition? What difficulties does Socrates's question raise for Euthyphro's theory? Is Socrates's question relevant to contemporary debates about religion and morality? Why or why not?
2. In the *Crito*, how does Socrates argue for the view that he is obligated to obey the laws of Athens? What do you think is the strongest objection to Socrates's view? Do you think Socrates was right to submit to execution rather than escaping? Why or why not?
3. What kind of a good does Socrates claim justice is? To whom is justice advantageous, on his view? How does he argue for this position? Do you agree with him?

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. When Euthyphro attempts to define the holy as prosecuting wrongdoers, Socrates objects that:
* a. there are many other things that are also holy.

- b. prosecuting wrongdoers is not always holy.
 - c. there is disagreement about what counts as “wrongdoing.”
 - d. all of the above.
- 2. Socrates and Euthyphro agree that the holy is:
 - a. treating everyone fairly.
 - b. paying one’s debts and keeping one’s promises.
 - * c. loved because it is holy.
 - d. obeying the laws of the state.
- 3. Socrates suggests that the holy is one part of:
 - a. what is prudent.
 - * b. what is just.
 - c. what is beautiful.
 - d. what is legal.
- 4. In the *Defence of Socrates*, Socrates suggests that his wisdom consists of:
 - a. knowledge of the order of nature.
 - b. knowledge of right and wrong.
 - c. the ability to tell which arguments are valid.
 - * d. knowledge of one’s own ignorance.
- 5. During his trial, Socrates argues that he would never intentionally corrupt others because:
 - a. it is his duty not to do so.
 - * b. this would make them vicious, and they would then harm him.
 - c. he would be likely to get caught if he did so.
 - d. he would not know how.
- 6. In the *Defence of Socrates*, Socrates claims that he does not care about avoiding death but does care to avoid:
 - a. a bad reputation
 - b. hunger
 - * c. injustice
 - d. all of the above.
- 7. Socrates tells Crito that he should attempt to break out of prison if and only if doing so would be:
 - a. to his advantage.
 - b. harmful to his enemies and advantageous to his friends.
 - c. pleasing to the gods.
 - * d. just.
- 8. Socrates claims that breaking out of prison would be wrong because:
 - * a. it would amount to breaking his agreements.
 - b. it would put his friends in danger.
 - c. it would put his family in danger.
 - d. people would lose respect for him.
- 9. Socrates argues that the city is like a parent because it has given him his:
 - a. birth.
 - b. upbringing.
 - c. education.
 - * d. all of the above.
- 10. According to the *Phaedo*, Socrates in his last moments:
 - a. complained bitterly.
 - * b. was calm and composed.
 - c. gave an emotional speech to his friends.
 - d. refused to speak to anyone.
- 11. In the *Republic*, Thrasymachus claims that justice is:
 - a. telling the truth and paying one’s debts.
 - b. doing what pleases the gods.
 - * c. the advantage of the stronger.
 - d. a harmony of the soul.
- 12. Socrates claims that justice is:
 - a. good for its own sake.
 - b. good for the sake of its consequences.

- * c. both a and b.
 - d. neither a nor b.
13. In the *Republic*, Socrates claims that justice is necessary for:
- a. being happy.
 - b. being virtuous.
 - c. achieving harmony.
- * d. all of the above.
14. Socrates claims that the soul is:
- a. inseparable from the body.
 - b. a simple immaterial substance, distinct from the body and lacking parts.
- * c. divided into three parts.
- d. imaginary.
15. According to Socrates, justice is when a soul is ruled by its:
- a. respect for the law.
- * b. rational part.
- c. desire for honor.
 - d. none of the above.

True/False Questions

1. Socrates claims things are holy because the gods love them. (F)
2. Socrates claims that Euthyphro should not prosecute his father unless he has knowledge of piety. (T)
3. In the *Defence of Socrates*, one of the accusers claims that Socrates does not believe in the gods. (T)
4. In the *Defence of Socrates*, Socrates claims that we should not consider the risks of living or dying in deciding what to do. (T)
5. In the *Crito*, Socrates claims that it is permissible to commit injustice in return for injustice. (F)
6. In the *Crito*, Socrates claims that he signed a written agreement to obey the laws of the city. (F)
7. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates refuses to drink the poison voluntarily. (F)
8. In the *Republic*, Socrates claims that the most beneficial kind of life is to appear just without being so. (F)
9. In the *Republic*, Socrates claims that it is never permissible for the rulers of the city to lie. (F)
10. In the *Republic*, Socrates argues that democracy is the best form of government. (F)

Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics

Summary

Aristotle claims that the study of ethics must begin by identifying the chief good for human beings, the end that all of us by nature seek. For Aristotle, this good is *happiness*. Many people disagree about exactly what happiness involves. Aristotle attempts to give a more precise account of happiness by determining the *function* of human beings. Just as a good flute player is one who plays the flute well, a good person will be one who fulfills the function of human beings. Aristotle argues that because humans are distinct from other animals insofar as they are *rational*, the function of human beings must be rational activity. Happiness, then, consists of excellent rational activity over the course of a complete life.

Attaining this sort of happiness requires certain *virtues*, states of character that involve firmly established dispositions to act, think, and feel in certain ways. Although we cannot precisely specify the nature of each virtue, each consists of a “mean” between extremes—in all areas of our lives, we must avoid excess and deficiency. The virtue of courage, for example, consists of a disposition to neither flee from every battle nor to rashly pursue the enemy at all costs. Aristotle divides the virtues into two classes: moral virtues and intellectual virtues. Whereas the intellectual virtues are acquired by learning and involve the rational part of the soul, the moral virtues come about as a result of habit, and govern our emotions and appetites. Because we can become virtuous only by performing virtuous acts, *moral education* is of utmost importance on Aristotle’s view.

Aristotle spends most of the book discussing the nature of particular virtues, and their role in the good life. In the end he concludes that although any life of virtue is valuable, the best kind of life is one of rational contemplation. Setting up a society in which people can attain this sort of life is therefore of the utmost importance, and is the goal of politics.

Testbank Essay Questions

1. What is the *function* of human beings, according to Aristotle, and what is required to perform this function well? How does Aristotle argue for his account of the human function? Is it plausible to claim that human beings have a function? Why or why not?
2. Aristotle claims that “virtue is a kind of mean.” What does he mean by this, and how does he argue for it? Is this an illuminating way of thinking about the virtues?
3. Explain Aristotle’s account of moral responsibility. What is it for an action to be *voluntary*, on Aristotle’s view? When can people be praised and blamed for their actions? Do you find his account plausible?
4. What role does education play in the good life, according to Aristotle? What sorts of education and training does he think are required if we are to become virtuous?

Companion Website Study Questions

1. What is the aim of human life, according to Aristotle? What does he think is required to achieve this aim? Does thinking about the aim of human life provide a good starting point for ethical discussion? Why or why not?
2. What is a virtue, according to Aristotle? How do virtues relate to pleasure, on his view? Do you agree with his claim that the good life essentially involves exercising the virtues?
3. What is the best kind of life for a human being, according to Aristotle? What reasons does he give for his view? Do you find this kind of life attractive?

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. According to Aristotle, a final end is something:
 - a. not achievable by action.
 - * b. desirable in itself.
 - c. desired for the sake of something else..
 - d. achievable only at the conclusion of a person’s life.
2. Aristotle claims that the function of human life is:
 - a. survival and reproduction.
 - b. service to the gods.
 - * c. rational activity.
 - d. to pursue pleasure.
3. Aristotle states that if we ask what the highest good of human action is:
 - a. there is no agreement about the answer.
 - b. most people agree that it is pleasure.

- * c. nearly everyone agrees that it is happiness.
 - d. there is no objective answer to this question.
4. Aristotle claims that virtue is:
- a. necessary and sufficient for a good life.
 - * b. necessary for a good life, but not sufficient for one.
 - c. sufficient for a good life, but not necessary for one.
 - d. neither necessary nor sufficient for a good life.
5. According to Aristotle, happiness is:
- a. a state of mind.
 - b. a feeling or sensation.
 - c. a craft.
 - * d. activity of the soul in accordance with virtue.
6. Aristotle conceives of a virtue as:
- a. a capacity.
 - b. an ability.
 - c. an activity.
 - * d. a state of character.
7. In Aristotle's view, the virtues are:
- * a. acquired through habit.
 - b. acquired through philosophical reflection.
 - c. a gift from the gods.
 - d. innate.
8. Aristotle describes each virtue as:
- a. a maximum.
 - b. a minimum.
 - * c. a mean.
 - d. an extreme.
9. Aristotle divides the virtues into:
- a. natural virtues and artificial virtues.
 - * b. moral virtues and intellectual virtues.
 - c. positive virtues and negative virtues.
 - d. human virtues and divine virtues.
10. According to Aristotle, an action is *involuntary* if:
- a. it is performed out of ignorance.
 - b. it is done out of compulsion.
 - * c. either a or b.
 - d. neither a nor b.
11. Aristotle claims that *justice* is
- * a. giving equal persons equal shares.
 - b. the will of the stronger.
 - c. giving to each according to need.
 - d. giving to each according to ability.
12. According to Aristotle, *self-mastery* is:
- * a. desire harmonizing with reason.
 - b. desire ruling reason.
 - c. reason ruling desire.
 - d. reason and desire ruling appetite.
13. In Aristotle's terminology, *incontinence* is when:
- a. one does not know that one's actions are wrong.
 - * b. one knows that one's actions are wrong, but does them anyway.
 - c. one knows that one's feelings are inappropriate, and does not act on them.
 - d. one does the right action, but for the wrong reason.
14. According to Aristotle, the best kind of life is essentially one of:
- a. political activity.
 - b. maximal pleasure.
 - c. close friendship.

- * d. contemplation.
- 15. The final good is:
 - a. that for the sake of which we seek everything else.
 - b. that which is preferred to everything else.
 - c. that which requires nothing else.
 - * d. all of the above.

True/False Questions

1. According to Aristotle, people never voluntarily do anything bad. (F)
2. Aristotle claims that the chief or highest good of human life must be something that is desirable in itself and never pursued for the sake of something else. (T)
3. In Aristotle's view, for a thing to perform its function well is to achieve what is good for it. (T)
4. Aristotle characterizes virtue as a state of character disposing one to choose the mean between extremes. (T)
5. Aristotle claims that the best sort of life is an active life of politics. (F)
6. According to Aristotle, the function of human life is rational activity. (T)
7. Aristotle claims that the virtues are innate. (F)
8. According to Aristotle, to be virtuous is for the rational part of one's soul to govern over the non-rational part. (F)
9. Aristotle argues that we are morally responsible for whether we are virtuous or vicious. (T)
10. According to Aristotle, happiness is an activity, not a state. (T)

Epicurus: Letter to Menoeceus and Leading Doctrines

Summary

In these two writings, Epicurus provides a sketch of his practical philosophy, which is centered on the concept of living a life free from pain and fear. In his view, the key to the good life lies in three philosophical doctrines, for the best sort of person is one who “holds reverent opinions concerning the gods, and is at all times free from fear of death, and has reasoned out the end ordained by nature.” First, Epicurus claims that although the gods do exist, most people hold false and impious views of them. Although many people are concerned to please the gods so that they might be rewarded and not punished, Epicurus claims that the gods are blessed immortal beings who do not intervene in human affairs. Second, Epicurus argues that fear of death is irrational, because death cannot harm us. Harm, in Epicurus’s view, consists of unpleasant sensations. Because death is the absence of sensations, death cannot harm the dead. If death cannot harm us when it arrives, it is senseless to fear it in advance. Death, Epicurus claims, is nothing to us, and is neither to be feared nor yearned for.

Finally, Epicurus presents his view of the end of human life set by nature. All human beings act for the sake of pleasure, and the absence of pain and fear. This end is both what we *do* seek, and also what we *ought* to seek, in everything we do. Nonetheless, Epicurus holds that it is rational to forgo certain pleasures if doing so will allow us to avoid greater pains in the future, and to suffer minor pains in return for greater pleasures later. We will best achieve the end of pleasure and freedom from pain and fear if we live simply, avoiding luxury and indulgence. Furthermore, one cannot live a pleasant life without living honorably and justly. Despite the importance he places on pleasure, the life that Epicurus recommends is not one of sensual indulgence, but a simple and austere life of philosophy and the cultivation of virtue.

Testbank Essay Questions

1. Explain Epicurus’s argument for the conclusion that we ought not to fear death. What do you think is the strongest objection to this argument? Do you think the argument is sound? Why or why not?
2. What does Epicurus think is the end of all human action? What would a successful human life look like, on his view? Does he present a compelling picture of what it is to live a good life? Defend your answer.
3. What role does Epicurus think that philosophy can play in allowing us to live good lives? What conclusions of philosophy does he think are essential to our well-being? Do you agree with him?
4. Epicurus characterizes justice as a “kind of compact” between people. What does he mean by this, and what are the implications of this view? Is this conception of justice defensible?

Companion Website Study Questions

1. What does Epicurus mean when he claims that “death is nothing to us”? How does he argue for this claim? Should those who fear death be convinced by his argument? Defend your answer.
2. What is the best sort of life, according to Epicurus? What sorts of things should we pursue, and what should we avoid, on his account? Do you find his picture of the good life attractive? Why or why not?
3. What is Epicurus’s account of the nature of justice? What makes a law just or unjust, on his view? To what extent does his view make justice vary from society to society? Do you think his account is correct?

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. According to Epicurus the gods are:
 - a. known by clear vision.
 - b. immortal.
 - c. blessed.
 - * d. all of the above.
2. According to Epicurus, an impious man is one who:
 - a. does not believe in the gods of the many.
 - * b. attaches to the gods the beliefs of the many.
 - c. does not offer sacrifices to the gods.
 - d. breaks his contracts.
3. Epicurus conceives of death as:
 - a. the beginning of the afterlife.
 - b. one component of the continuous cycle of rebirth.
 - * c. the deprivation of all sensation.
 - d. the greatest harm that one can suffer.
4. Epicurus argues that death harms:

- a. the living.
 - b. the dead.
 - c. both a and b.
 - * d. neither a nor b.
5. According to Epicurus, by pleasure we mean:
- a. desire satisfaction.
 - b. freedom from pain in the body.
 - c. freedom from pain in the mind.
 - * d. both b and c.
6. Epicurus claims that the end of all human action is:
- * a. the avoidance of pain and fear.
 - b. luxury.
 - c. honor.
 - d. pleasing the gods.
7. According to Epicurus:
- a. every pleasure is good, and every pleasure is to be chosen.
 - * b. every pleasure is good, but not every pleasure is to be chosen.
 - c. not every pleasure is good, but every pleasure is to be chosen.
 - d. not every pleasure is good, and not every pleasure is to be chosen.
8. Epicurus recommends a diet that:
- * a. is simple and inexpensive.
 - b. is full of fancy and delicious foods.
 - c. is vegetarian, so as to avoid causing pain.
 - d. consists solely of foods that one has grown oneself.
9. Epicurus claims that all other virtues spring from:
- * a. prudence.
 - b. temperance.
 - c. justice.
 - d. courage.
10. In Epicurus's view, justice is:
- a. a kind of prudence.
 - b. a kind of harmony.
 - c. a kind of fairness.
 - * d. a kind of compact.
11. According to Epicurus, the wealth required for a good life is:
- * a. easily procured.
 - b. attainable for everyone, but only through great effort.
 - c. available only to the rich.
 - d. available only to the gods.
12. Epicurus claims that differences of opinion must always be settled by reference to:
- a. tradition.
 - b. abstract reason.
 - * c. perception.
 - d. the law.
13. Epicurus states that of all the things required for a complete life, the greatest is:
- * a. honor.
 - b. friendship.
 - c. luxury.
 - d. good food.
14. Epicurus conceives of the greatest good as:
- a. honor.
 - b. fame.
 - * c. prudence
 - d. justice.
15. According to Epicurus, a law is unjust when:
- a. it is not in accordance with natural law.

- b. it is not in accordance with the traditions of society.
- c. it is offensive to the gods.
- * d. it is not beneficial to those it affects.

True/False Questions

1. According to Epicurus an impious person is someone who does not believe in the gods of the many. (F)
2. According to Epicurus, we should not fear death. (T)
3. In Epicurus's view, the virtues come from prudence (T)
4. Epicurus claims that the best kind of life is one of great excitement and sensuality. (F)
5. According to Epicurus, it is better to act well and to fail than to be successful due to chance. (T)
6. Epicurus claims that whenever pleasure is present, pain in the body and mind are absent. (T)
7. Epicurus argues that natural science is necessary to attain the pleasures we seek. (T)
8. Epicurus claims that happiness requires great wealth, and is therefore not available to everyone. (F)
9. According to Epicurus, what is just in one set of circumstances can never be unjust in another. (F)

Epicurus claims that the study of philosophy is not suitable for