**Abstract**

In the *Republic*, Socrates argues that morality, called justice, is valuable both for itself and for what comes from it. Unfortunately, this view is not universally accepted. Contemporary psychology, however, reveals through research that what we experience is also what we come to expect. It follows then that, if we act in an immoral fashion we will expect the same from others. The more often we act immorally, the more suspicion will be ingrained within us. Suspicion quickly pervades our minds corroding our relationships and increasing our stress, thereby dramatically decreasing our happiness and contentment. Moral action, on the other hand, has the ability to strengthen our faith in others and create solid human relationships. Therefore, morality should be classified as having the highest type of value as Socrates contends- good for affecting how agents can relate, intrinsic value, and how they themselves feel, extrinsic value.

Empirically Socratic:

Ancient Knowledge of Morality’s Value Updated and Confirmed

By: Nathan R. Smith

1. **Introduction and Overview**

In the *Republic*, Socrates argued that morality, which he calls justice, has a value beyond its ability for extrinsic gain. “I myself put it among the finest goods, as something to be valued by anyone who is going to be blessed with happiness, both because of itself and because of what comes from it” (Plato 358a). However, most people apparently did not share this conception in his day. “That isn’t most people’s opinion. They’d say that justice belongs to the onerous kind, and is to be practiced for the sake of the rewards and popularity that come from a reputation for justice, but is to be avoided because of itself as something burdensome” (Plato 358a). Immediately this seems to be a fair depiction of moral actions because they often require agents to use up their own time and resources for another person who might never return the favor. Even today this sentiment is apparent when we fail to go to the aid of strangers or harm each other for our own personal gain. While Socrates unleashes a long and complex argument trying to prove his point throughout the rest of the *Republic*, its conclusion is not decisive. In an attempt to both strengthen and update this argument from its ancient origins, I will draw upon evidence from recent psychological research and argue that Socrates was correct in general, even if his specific formulations were different. As it turns out, humanity has within it certain qualities that make immoral acts – namely stealing, lying, cheating, and murder to name a few things that could generally be defined as immoral cross culturally – intrinsically harmful for actors regardless of their material gains. Furthermore the reverse is true for moral acts such that these acts are intrinsically beneficial for actors regardless as to material gains. To make this argument, I will begin by describing the setup in the *Republic* in which one of the strongest arguments against Socrates is presented. Then I will describe this argument commonly known as *Glaucon’s Challenge*. Next, I will describe certain responses that can be seen to follow from religious perspectives but suggest that this kind of response, if true, could be strengthened with available research (that would beneficially show the same point independently of religious affiliation). Finally, using contemporary research I will show how immoral actions create a condition in the mind which precludes the ability of non-pathological humans to fulfill our inborn social needs (pathological individuals would be those persons with mental disorders, such as sociopaths, that alters their mental processes in such a way that they are not even capable of having true connections to other humans). Therefore a condition of debilitating stress is created within such immoral agents. I contend that this demonstrates that the moral life has a certain kind of value which can be termed intrinsic and is unavailable to the immoral life. However, this is not exactly the same as the conception that Socrates suggests.

1. **Glaucon’s Challenge**

In the *Republic*, Socrates tries to determine exactly what justice is (331c-d). As he uses this term, justice can be thought of as synonymous with morality and, more specifically, as indicating the accomplishment of moral acts, while injustice can be thought of specifically as the accomplishment of immoral acts. After arguing with several individuals, he is challenged by Glaucon about the type of value that morality ultimately has. Glaucon posits that there are three kinds of evaluations of the good. First, a thing could be good because it is enjoyable in itself, simply by having it. Second, something could be good both for its own sake and for what results from it. Third, something could be good just because of what results from it while not being actually good in itself (357a-c). As has been stated, Socrates claims that morality has this second and highest kind of value while most others think that it fits into the third category. Glaucon argues against this view by trying to show that morality is only practiced out of necessity while there are actually better personal reasons to act immorally (358b-c). While Glaucon does not really want to believe this himself, he does not feel that anyone has properly defended morality so far and hopes that this argument will lead to the correct kind of defense for morality (358c-d). “I want to know what justice and injustice are and what power each itself has when it’s by itself in the soul. I want to leave out of account their rewards and what comes from each of them” (358b). In this respect, Glaucon presents one of the strongest arguments against the value of morality by use of the ancient story of *The Ring of Gyges* (a more recent version of which can be found in JRR Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*)*.*

Glaucon’s story is about a man who finds a ring of invisibility, somewhat like Frodo. Unlike moral Frodo who overcomes temptation though, the man then uses this power to seduce the queen and kill the king, thus gaining the throne (359c-361c). Invisibility helps to illustrate the idea of ‘perfect immorality’ in which agents could do whatever they pleased without anyone else knowing. This power would ensure that everyone believed that you were moral while you actually acted entirely immorally. In this way Glaucon provides a way for agents to have all the benefits of a moral appearance and none of the detractions of an immoral one while being able to act totally immorally. Glaucon suggests that people believe that this would be the best kind of life. “No one believes justice to be a good when it is kept private, since, wherever either person thinks he can do injustice with impunity, he does it. Indeed, every man believes that injustice is far more profitable to himself than justice” (360c-d). Socrates tries to defeat this idea by examining the ideal city and how it would have to be (369a). Among other issues he says that the problem with immoral agents is that they are dragged around by their passions without any hope of ever reaching a higher state of being that has “stable or pure pleasure” (586a). However, the *Republic* ends on an unsatisfying note that does not fully prove that the value of morality is the kind that Socrates argues that it is. Therefore, the question of morality’s value is still pertinent today.

The *Republic* may have been written more than 2000 years ago, but people’s actions continue to witness their belief in the limited value of morality today. People insult others, but mainly behind their backs. People lie to deceive others into doing what is most beneficial for the liar; once again the wrong is accomplished subversively. Oftentimes the appearance of morality is used for gain at another’s expense. Almost no one blatantly commits immoral acts. If this clandestine feature truly describes immorality’s operation within humanity is, then it seems that perfect immorality would fit in more closely with the second higher type of good than morality actually does, because it allows for agents to happily do whatever they want while gaining whatever goods they desire. To defeat this idea it is necessary to show some kind of intrinsic harm coming from immoral actions even when the action is undetected. Similarly, to prove morality’s categorization within the second group of value, it is necessary to show that it has some ability intrinsic to it that immorality cannot achieve even in its perfected state. One possible solution can be found in religious conceptions of morality that give moral action intrinsic value. The strength of such a suggestion will be evaluated in the next section.

1. **The Religious Conception**

A response to Glaucon’s challenge can be found within religion. Most religions require that practitioners follow some type of moral code. Following these prescriptions in conjunction with other religious duties will gain agents spiritual rewards so great that they surpass earthly imagining. Clearly such a result would show morality’s extrinsic value. Its intrinsic value is discernible in terms of whatever deity or belief that the religious agent follows. Ideally, the deity or belief would be so great that intrinsic value would come simply from acting in accordance with it. In terms of the Christian God, for example, this could be expressed by the idea that God is so great that there is intrinsic value in acting in accordance with His will regardless as to the results. If these things are true, then these doctrines provide a strong reason to categorize morality as having the same type of value that Socrates attributed to it: intrinsic and extrinsic value. However, this depiction is only available to the religious and in this sense might only be found when agents already hold certain beliefs. For agents without these beliefs, such as atheists, this value is lost. If moral action is good in a way similar to that which Socrates advocated, its veracity should be manifest to everyone.

For this reason, I suggest that another, but universally applicable view, which could coexist with and even strengthen the religious conception, should be applied. This view must meet the criteria already suggested at the end of the second section while simultaneously containing the universality from this third section if it is to show that the value of morality really is that of the highest second category, namely having both intrinsic and extrinsic value. Fortunately there is evidence within contemporary psychology that demonstrates that morality does fit both of these criteria, demonstrating that Socrates was right in a sense.

1. **Anticipation By Experience**

Much of contemporary science is based on the idea that the same events under the same conditions will produce the same results. This principle applies to the actions of humans as well. Experiencing something multiple times under the same conditions generally causes us to expect it. For example, fire is hot. After learning this from experience, when we see fire we expect that touching it will cause our skin to burn and so we refrain. Externally this is true, but it is also true internally. Experience is not limited to the external world but includes the internal world of our mind. In the same way that we can be conditioned by the external, our behavior can condition what we expect others to do as well. In other words, our expectations of other agents’ actions are shaped by our own behavior. While there has been no scientific study conducted on actions that actually used the terminology of ‘immoral’ in reference to an action’s quality, perhaps due to the variability found within the category, and attendant expectations, several studies in psychology have clearly shown that an important connection does exist between actions and expectations.

One study evaluated how lying affects a person’s perception of others. In this study researchers put participants in various situations where they received extra credit points for a class based upon their answer to a question (which they were always told was right) and then a confederate’s ability to answer the same question (who the participants thought was another participant but was actually working with the experimenters). The confederate then answered supposedly through a method provided by the first participant (whether this method worked was controlled based upon the group they were put in). In one situation participants (deceivers) was induced to lie to the confederate about their method and the second received points for ‘correctly’ solving all problems together. In a second situation, participants (deceivers) also lied, but the lie failed to allow the second participant to gain points. In a third situation the participants simply told the truth to the confederate without knowledge of the correct answer. Similarly the earning or failure to earn points varied. After this, participants rated the confederate on a number of factors including the confederate’s honesty. One hypothesis stated that

“If [the] deceiver's distrust operates as a wholly cognitive false consensus process, then the liar's deceptive behavior itself acts as evidence for dishonesty in others. That is, from his or her own deceit the liar infers that others are deceitful. According to this model, the eventual harm done by the lie is not relevant to the honesty judgment” (Sagarin 1169).

In other words, it is possible that any lie will cause deceptive agents to perceive the recipient of the lie as dishonest regardless of the recipient’s recognition of the lie. This was supported by resulting information. “The results supported this hypothesis; participants who lied to their partners perceived them as significantly less honest relative to participants who did not lie. Furthermore, this effect appears to be independent of a generalized derogation of the victim” (Sagarin 1170). This evidence shows that even agents who could achieve Glaucon’s perfect immorality would begin to experience a kind of paranoia: agents would begin to suspect that everyone was treating them, or thinking about treating them, in a similarly inconsiderate and immoral fashion. Other studies have found similar results. Specifically, an evaluation of previous studies along with studies actually implemented by David Dunning and Andrew Hayes showed that an individual’s expectation of another’s behavior is crucially related to their own behavior (Dunning 213).

“In three studies, we found evidence that people activated information about their own behaviors and achievements, without instruction or prompting by any external agent, when judging those of other people. As in previous work, we found that judgments of another person's behavior depended on the behavior of the person doing the judging” (Dunning 225).

These studies indicate that it is natural to use our own actions as a reference when we think about what another might do. Therefore, if agents frequently act in immoral ways, the agents will begin to suspect that others will do the same. The agents will soon become suspicious of everyone around them. This, therefore, is an indication that even perfect immorality is self-damaging in an intrinsic way that is inescapable for non-pathological agents. Also, it suggests that morality would be intrinsically good for agents as their belief in human goodness and their ability to interact with others would be strengthened by their action along with the extrinsic benefits found in agents’ treatment at the hands of others. This first point about the inherent problem within human immorality will be strengthened in the next section while the second, about the value of morality, will be expanded in section six.

1. **The World (of Wealth) is Not Enough**

It could be argued that perfectly immoral agents would not need to trust anyone in order to be happy. So long as people trusted them, they could manipulate and use others for their own advantage. Perfect immorality would allow them to gain anything they needed or wanted: cars, houses, money, etc. Trust from others would even allow them to fulfill many of their human needs: sex, companionship, respect, etc. While distrusting those around them they could fulfill their wants and needs. However, empirical research opposes the idea that non-pathological individuals can sustain a high level of happiness with this kind of life.

Material goods can definitely make life easier to live. While lacking them may cause misery, having them is not a guarantee of happiness. After certain basic needs are met, the correlation between happiness and wealth disappears (Landau). It seems that other factors play significant roles in determining happiness. “Japan saw a fourfold increase in real income per capita between 1958 and 1986 without any reported increase in satisfaction. In one place after another, rates of alcoholism, suicide, and depression have gone up dramatically, even as we keep accumulating more stuff” (McKibben 4b). This and other evidence suggests quite clearly that material goods alone cannot ensure happiness. While this does not prove that immoral gains are worthless, it does significantly cast doubt on the idea that immoral action can make you happy in any significant way. The case of Joseph Stalin, a famously immoral individual, can serve as an imperfect example that helps to show the truth of such claims as they manifest in reality.

Stalin was incredibly wealthy. He had the power to have whatever he could ever want to the point that he would literally force people to be his friend. Unfortunately this was not enough to make him happy. While it is true that other factors were probably pertinent to Stalin’s paranoia, his case still manages to exemplify the harsh effects that immoral action can have upon a person’s psyche. In this way, his actions contorted his perspective. “His bitterness, paranoia and fear make it hard to imagine anyone else wanting to be Stalin. He is described as ‘sickly, suspicious’ by Khrushchev, who wrote, ‘He could look at a man and say, “Why are your eyes so shifty today?” or “Why are you turning so much today and avoiding looking me directly in the eyes?”” (Glover 250). Stalin became paranoid and was dragged into misery. In this way it is evident that power and wealth without trusting relationships fail to lead to happiness. Comparatively, trusting human relationships have many unique benefits that make health and happiness likely.

A truly trusting human relationship is unattainable for someone who regularly commits immoral acts. This is evidenced by Kashy and DePaulo who argue in their psychological study, “Who Lies”, that liars have difficulty relating intimately. “Although lying and socializing might coexist amicably, lying and relating to others intimately and meaningfully probably do not. People who present themselves inauthentically[sic] are unlikely to experience their social interactions as intimate or meaningful” (Kashy 1039). The occasional deceit may not cause suspicion, but a life filled with frequent immoral actions will cause a high level of suspicion within any such actor. Suspicion and deceit in combination make it highly unlikely that agents could have truly meaningful relationships. “[I]n order for two committed people to maintain relationship closeness, they must have a never-ending reciprocal pattern of behavior in which each person tries to know the other and to allow the other to know him or her” (Harvey 94). In this way, it is evident that moral action has intrinsic value in its ability to allow for and strengthen human relationships.

1. **Stress**

Having shown in the previous section that moral action has intrinsic value in its ability to create and maintain intimate relationships, I will now argue that it has extrinsic benefits in the achievement of a high level of happiness for the actor. It has been shown that habitually immoral actors have significant difficulties maintaining relationships. These difficulties stand as strong obstacles against the non-pathological achievement of human happiness. In this way immoral action may be limited in its extrinsic value. Human relationships can have unique effects on the human psyche. People are complex and developing a relationship with another person takes time and effort. The benefits of such a relationship exceed those that can be found in the possession of objects. “There is strong evidence that people are healthier, are happier, and live longer if they have satisfying close relationships” (Harvey 94). Having close and trusting relationships with other individuals can help agents to relax, providing relief from the strains of life. Stress is especially known to be very detrimental to health (Hadany 881). The agents who have strong relationships with close companions have systems of support through which they can de-stress and off-load this harm (Pennebaker). Within these systems they have no need to worry or act in ways that make them uncomfortable. So long as basic needs are met, evidence has shown that this kind of support structure leads to a happier, longer, and healthier life in ways that excessive material goods cannot. “People who can name several intimate friends with whom they share their intimate concerns freely are healthier, less likely to die prematurely, and happier than people who have few or no such friends” (Myers 14). However, as discussed previously, such relationships are entirely dependent upon mutual trust.

Frequent immoral actions erode agents’ abilities to trust while moral actions strengthen the ability to trust. “When asked to judge others, people thought about their own behaviors, increasing the excitation level of that information and thus the probability that that information might be used in future social judgment” (Dunning 227-8). The more experience we have trusting, the easier it is for us to trust and form relationships. This kind of moral mindset can make such advantageous relationships more likely and more common. On the other hand, immoral actions cause suspicion. As relationships rely on mutual trust, it is very unlikely then that someone who felt suspicious of others could have this kind of relationship (Harvey 94). This indicates that the benefits of trusting relationships are reserved to people who act morally.

1. **Conclusion**

In the *Republic,* Socrates argues that morality has the highest kind of value as it is good both intrinsically for agents and extrinsically in what results from it. While this conclusion’s veracity has been questionable, contemporary research in psychology has validated Socrates’ belief, if not in exactly the same way as he argued. Non-pathological humans have needs that can only be settled by human relationships. These relationships are not possible in agents with immoral lives due to humanity’s style of expectation in which our own actions are the basis for our judgment and expectation of others. Therefore, even perfect immorality precludes the fulfillment of these needs in non-pathological humans, thus showing an inherent problem for the immoral life. Conversely, as the moral life is a requirement for these necessary relationships, then there is an inherent part of morality that directly affects our minds in a way that is good and beneficial. This would be what Glaucon was referring to when he wanted to know exactly what kind of effects morality and immorality had upon the soul when left to their-selves (Plato 358b). In addition to the extrinsic benefits of how others treat agents and how the agents feel, this clearly shows that morality fits in the highest category of value. While immorality might lead to higher material gains, these gains do not have the value, beyond basic needs, of the moral. From this evidence it might be possible to argue that morality has a higher value than immorality, but that argument is not completely supported by evidence. Available evidence primarily shows a different kind of value and does not prove that *any* *amount* of immorality is worse than *any amount* of morality (as Socrates would want). Therefore, it seems most prudent to leave such a task to a separate investigation. For now it is enough to show that morality truly resides among those things that have the highest type of value, a placement that no form of immorality can achieve.

**Works Cited**

Dunning, David, and Andrew F. Hayes. "Evidence For Egocentric Comparison In Social Judgment." Journal Of Personality And Social Psychology 71.2 (1996): 213-229. PsycARTICLES. Web. 24 Dec. 2011.

Glover, Jonathan. *Humanity: a Moral History of the Twentieth Century*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2000. Print.

Hadany, Lilach, Tuvik Beker, Ilan Eshel, and Marcus W. Feldman. "Why Is Stress so Deadly? An Evolutionary Perspective." *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 273.1588 (2006): 881-85. Print.

Harvey, John H., and Brian G. Pauwels. "Recent Developments In Close-Relationships Theory." Current Directions In Psychological Science (Wiley-Blackwell) 8.3 (1999): 93-95. Academic Search Premier. Web. 2 Dec. 2011.

Kashy, Deborah A., and Bella M. DePaulo. "Who Lies?." Journal Of Personality And Social Psychology 70.5 (1996): 1037-1051. PsycARTICLES. Web. 2 Dec. 2011.

Landau, Elizabeth. "Money and Happiness: Over $75K Doesn't Matter." CNN Health. CNN, 1 Sept. 2010. Web. 3 Dec. 2010.

McKibben, Bill. "Why Having More No Longer Makes Us Happy." *Deep Economy: the Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*. New York: Times, 2007. Print.

Myers, David G., and Ed. Diener. "Who Is Happy?" *Psychological Science* 6.1 (1995): 10-19. Print.

Pennebaker, James W. *Opening Up: the Healing Power of Confiding in Others*. New York: W. Morrow, 1990. Print.

Plato. *Republic*. *Plato: Complete Works.* Ed. John M. Ed. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hutchinson, 1997. 971-1223. Print.

Sagarin, B. J., K. v. L. Rhoads, and R. B. Cialdini. "Deceiver's Distrust: Denigration as a Consequence of Undiscovered Deception." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 24.11 (1998): 1167-176. Print.