Ignorance Is Not An Excuse Essay, Research Paper

We only choose what we think is good and

if anyone chooses evil it must be through ignorance.

Ignorance is not an excuse

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Philosophy 110, Section 07 01

David Turpin, 4-23-01

Plato believes that we always choose good unless we are ignorant. Plato claims being ignorant would be the only excuse for choosing evil. His views of this are apparent in the Meno. As I read up on whether or not we deliberately choose evil I realized there are many sides, many ways to answer this question. My opinion is not as clear as I thought. In this paper I will go through numerous writings on this subject, such as the Meno. The writings by Augustine and Descartes basically support Plato’s argument. While comparing all the writings I hope that I can come up with a conclusion of my own.

During the conversation between Meno and Socrates Socrates urges Meno, through his method of asking questions, that nobody really desires evil. At the beginning Meno believes people do desire good and evil. Socrates says to Meno, that to desire an evil is to desire harm and misery. Meno eventually admits that no one desires evil because no one would ever desire harm or misery. They come to this conclusion, but they make sure to point out that ignorant people can still desire evil because they believe the evils to be good. This still goes along with their belief; no one truly desires what they know to be an evil (Pojman 67).

Overall, I think Socrates and Meno come to this conclusion very rationally. I would agree that anyone who does not desire harm or misery would not choose evil unless they are ignorant and do not really know it is evil. On the other hand I do believe there are some horrible people who do desire harm or misery. Unfortunately, we know in our world today that people choose to harm others. Take Timothy McVeigh, just for example. He knew when he put that bomb in the building in Okalahoma City that it would cause harm and misery to many people. Also, it is quite apparent that Mr. McVeigh is not ignorant. He happens to be a very smart man. Here is a perfect example of someone choosing harm, or evil without having the excuse of being ignorant. Unfortunately, we know there are many more people in the world like this. I give Plato the benefit of the doubt for his opinion because maybe in the time period he lived there were not these extreme examples of people choosing evils on purpose, without the excuse of ignorance.

Augustine’s writings on Free Will contain a segment about whether or not to choose sin. Augustine starts in the Garden of Eden, where all Christians believe everything began. Augustine states that in the Garden of Eden there were God’s commandments from above and the serpent’s, the Devil’s, suggestions from below. God’s commandments are the good and the suggestions from the serpent are evil. Augustine is real blunt when explaining what he believes. He says that if a person has reached a state of wisdom he shall have no problem in not succumbing to the suggestions from the serpent below. He states that even fools, the ignorant, will eventually be able to move on to a state of wisdom. They will then be able to overcome the evil suggestions of the serpent. Augustine does write that those who find wisdom after ignorance will have a problem letting go of the “sweetness” of the evil things they have become accustomed to (Pojman 407).

Again, I see the rational of Augustine’s argument. Being a Christian myself, I know and believe in the whole story of the Garden of Eden. The serpent came into the garden and tempted Eve with sweet fruit from the tree. When Eve took the fruit this is said to be the origin of sin. So the question is, did Eve choose evil? Did she know she was choosing evil? It is hard to specify. I guess I believe that Eve was in an ignorant state when she chooses to eat the fruit. She did not know the consequences of her actions. She knew she was not supposed to take the fruit, but she really did not understand what would happen if she did. This leads me to a dilemma. In saying what I just did about Eve taking the fruit this is saying that the origin of sin, of choosing evil, was caused by ignorance. This backs up what Augustine and the other philosophers stated. Then there is the present. Is evil inevitable now? I believe to a point it is, but we can no longer blame it on ignorance. We know the story of the Garden of Eden, we know the devil is tempting us with evils, and we know what the consequences could be if we choose the evil. This shows we are not ignorant like Eve was; we are in the state of wisdom. After all that is true we still choose evils, ignorance can not be used as an excuse.

Descartes, in his fourth meditation, argues th choice of good or evil in a different way. He first states why his will power and understanding are not to blame for his mistakes. Both the power of willing and the power of understanding come from God. Therefore, he says the power of willing is perfect and everything he understands he understands correctly. Therefore the reason for his mistakes, choosing evil, is the “scope of the will”. This is larger than the intellect. This means he makes mistakes because he does not have the means to understand the mistakes he is making (Pojman 479).

When comparing Descartes to Augustine and Plato I believe his argument to be the least logical. Basically, to me, his argument sounds like a big excuse. I believe we are all capable of understanding the difference between good and evil. The only people who are not able to always understand are young children. In their case it is our job to teach them what is right and wrong. Saying that the will is made of a much wider spectrum than our understanding is ridiculous. For those who are ignorant this is of course true, but I do not believe, as I have stated before, that all those who choose evil are ignorant.

As I researched more on this topic I found some interesting arguments supporting or deterring from the idea that ignorance causes someone to choose evil. One man that states something deterring is Plotinus. Plotinus is considered to be the founder of Neoplatonism. He started out by reading Plato. Plotinus believes the soul can become lost. It can forget what it has previously experienced or learned. In some cases this leads the soul to find evil. Plotinus recognizes this as nothing else but “misplaced desire for the good” (http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/p/plotinus/htm). This does not mean to me that the person is ignorant, just lost for the time being. Forgetful of what they have previously learned as good and evil. Even at the end of Meno, Socrates and Meno come to the conclusion that all knowledge is recollection. Therefore, to know goodness and evil we need to recall past experiences that have taught us the difference (Pojman 73).

I found this passage from Plotinus; “Evil, however, is not irremediable, since it is merely the result of privation (the soul’s privation, through forgetfulness, of its prior), and so evil is remedied by the soul’s experiences of love” (http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/p/plotinus/htm). I find this to be so beautiful and truthful. After all my reading and contemplating over what I believe, this is it. People choose evil because they have forgotten what they have learned, what they know to be right. Somewhere along the way they have lost their morals they need for deciding between good and evil. This does not mean they don’t know it’s evil, they do. They are for some reason not choosing to listen to the little voice in their head telling them not to choose the evil. Plotinus and I believe that through love from an outside source they can remember. They can recall their misplaced desire for good and evil. Maybe this is too much of a dreamer’s view, but I always like to look at the bright side of things.