

# Ethical Living Through Self-Knowledge

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Merlin CCC, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018

## Three Questions of Philosophy:

1) Logic	How can we know anything, and when can we be confident in our beliefs?	knowledge
2) Physics	What is the world like? That includes “what are we humans like?”, since we’re part of the world!	self-knowledge
3) Ethics	Given what we know about the world (and ourselves), how should we respond to the world?	ethical living

## Some Questions:

1. Who/what am I?
2. What is in my control?
3. How can I act from a place of knowledge and understanding?
4. What goals can/should I have?

## Which situations are better or worse for ourselves?

(See Plato, Gorgias 474c–489e; pages 39–49 in Zeyl’s translation.)

<b>(a) being punished justly</b> <i>example: penalty for a crime I really committed, or a lie I really told, etc.</i>	<b>(b) punishing someone else justly</b> <i>example: penalizing someone who really committed a crime, or told a lie, etc.</i>
<b>(c) being punished unjustly</b> <i>example: when I did nothing wrong, but just because someone has arbitrary power over me</i>	<b>(d) punishing someone else unjustly</b> <i>example: penalizing someone who did nothing wrong, just because I can</i>

Plato’s answers are on the next page...

Plato's answer: From best to worst: b, c, a, d.

<p><b>(a) being punished justly</b>  <i>example: penalty for a crime I really committed, or a lie I really told, etc.</i></p> <p><i>For Plato, this is the <u>second-worst</u> choice. Here (unlike b and c), because we deserve a just punishment, we have already done something bad which harmed our soul. But at least now we are getting appropriate treatment, which may repair that harm and help us to act better in the future. The fact that our body or possessions might be harmed during punishment is minor, in comparison to the state of our soul.</i></p>	<p><b>(b) punishing someone else justly</b>  <i>example: penalizing someone who really committed a crime, or told a lie, etc.</i></p> <p><i>For Plato, this is the <u>best</u> (or, the <u>least bad</u>) choice, since we are not being harmed in any way (in soul, body, or possessions), and we are performing a healing or improving work for someone else's soul, just like a doctor heals someone's body.</i></p>
<p><b>(c) being punished unjustly</b>  <i>example: when I did nothing wrong, but just because someone has arbitrary power over me</i></p> <p><i>For Plato, this is the <u>second-best</u> of these choices, since only our body and/or possessions are being harmed, but our soul—which is most fully within our control, and most fully ourselves—is not being harmed.</i></p>	<p><b>(d) punishing someone else unjustly</b>  <i>example: penalizing someone who did nothing wrong, just because I can</i></p> <p><i>For Plato, this is the <u>worst</u> choice of all. Here, not only are we harming someone else, but more importantly, we are harming our own soul, without receiving any treatment to improve ourselves.</i></p>

### Toward Some Answers to our Questions...

*Here are some take-away lessons from our discussion, related to the four questions on the first page. Please do not think of any of them as “the final answer.” Instead, treat them as starting points for further reflection and meditation, and as guides to engaging with the texts listed under the Recommended Readings.*

1. I am a rational being. That means that I'm able to deliberate, and to make judgments and choices. At least for these Greek thinkers, this makes me like the higher spiritual beings (Gods, angels, spirits), and different from many of the other animals.
2. I am free when what I choose, or what I will, actually comes about in my life. Epictetus writes movingly about this throughout his work, especially in *Handbook* 1, and *Discourses* 4.1.
  - a. In cases having to do with my body, my possessions, other people's opinions, and everything else which is not under my control, I might cultivate either a

kind of indifference, or an acceptance and embrace of whatever comes my way. This is lovingly captured in Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus*, quoted by Epictetus on the last page of the *Handbook*.

- b. In other cases, I do have control: my intentions, desires, reactions, and the like. This is where I should focus my attention, and my sense of value and purpose, and it is here I have the opportunity to maintain my integrity (or not!).
  - c. When I focus my attention on the things where I do have control, I will find myself valuing my soul, much more than I value my body or my possessions.
3. These answers flow from what these philosophers take to be an accurate understanding both (1) of myself, as a rational being, and (2) of the other forces in the world—including impersonal causal forces, as well as the actions of other people—which define my opportunities and my limits.
    - a. This understanding belongs to the domain of “physics,” which comes ahead of “ethics.” The deeper my understanding of these two parts of physics, the more effectively I will be able to act in the world.
  4. If I am primarily a rational being, then my value, dignity, and self-worth should be based on cultivating my understanding, and becoming like God, insofar as possible.
    - a. There may be a variety of paths which will lead to this deep and authentic flourishing, but there will also be many goals and desires which get in the way of flourishing. Here, the Desire Map activity may be helpful for sorting out which are which.
    - b. As I continue these reflections, I will realize that my own intentions and behaviors, and whether I behave well or poorly (justly or unjustly) toward others, matter far more than the ways that others behave toward me.