

Lesson Description Overview: Socrates on Happiness

University level: Philosophy, History, Western Civilization

Note: This is a lesson based on a class Lance Hickey taught at Suffolk Community College



Class One

After having read and discussed Plato's *Republic* Book One, students will be familiar with the basic ideas of the Socratic method and his views on happiness and morality. After covering the debate between Thrasymachus and Socrates, show the following video from youtube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0qZfsFo2RI>

Moderate an in-class discussion based on the video, focused on the question: does injustice pay? Is it better to be immoral than moral if one could get away with one's immoral behavior?

Direct them to the POH website and assign them the section:

<http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/socrates/socrates-on-happiness/>

Have them write a ½ page typed answer one of the following questions:

- 1) After reading 'Socrates on Happiness' from www.pursuitofhappiness.org and Book One of Plato's *Republic*, what features of Socratic happiness do you find most appealing? How would *you* define happiness?
- 2) After reading 'Socrates on Happiness' from www.pursuitofhappiness.org and Book One of Plato's *Republic*, think about the relations between morality and happiness. Do you agree with Plato that the most moral people tend to be the happiest?

Class Two

Begin class asking some students to read from their answers. Engage students in a debate about happiness and whether or not it is more associated with pleasure or with morality. Connect discussion to Positive Psychology and similar debate between happiness as SWB (Subjective well-being) and PWB (Psychological well-being).

Discuss Robert Nozick's thought-experiment, the experience machine (use in class handout here). Nozick asks us to imagine an experience machine that could give us

whatever desirable or pleasurable experiences that we could possibly want. Scientists have figured out a way to stimulate a person's brain to induce pleasurable experiences (think of some Matrix-like machine that can produce any virtual reality). The experiences inside of the machine would be just as real as our experiences in the real world. He asks us, if we were given the choice, would we choose the machine over real life? Would we choose to program a life for ourselves that is based solely on achieving pleasurable experiences? And if not, why not?

Connect this question to the main theses of psychological hedonism, ethical hedonism, and utilitarianism. Then connect back to the readings on Socrates: what would Socrates say about the experience machine? Note to the students that his full response will not come until Book Nine of the *Republic*.

For the next class, assign Book Two of the *Republic*. Ask them to write a ½ page reflection paper answering the following question:

Q: If you had a ring of invisibility like the one described in Book Two of the *Republic*, would you use the ring, even at the expense of law and morality? If not, why not? And would this be a good enough reason?