

# Did Socrates Kill Himself Intentionally?

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R. G. Frey<sup>1</sup> has argued that the Socrates of Plato's *Phaedo* killed himself intentionally. However, the arguments he offers do not lead to that conclusion. Frey initially claims that Socrates killed himself intentionally because '... he drank the hemlock knowingly, not unknowingly, or in ignorance of what its effect on him would be, and intentionally, ... and he died as a result of his act of drinking the hemlock' (p. 106). But this argument is invalid. For suppose Monica attends a lecture in which she learns that the movement of largish physical objects causes the movement of air molecules. Does that entail that when she walks out of the lecture and drives home, Monica is moving air molecules intentionally? It seems obvious that she does not. In general, an agent A's intentionally only if he both believes that what he is doing is A-ing and wants to A.

Frey is sensitive to this and goes on to argue that Socrates *did* want to die as follows:

It is apparent ... that Socrates intends to drink the hemlock. At least ordinarily, however, an agent intends an act only if he knows he is doing it and wants to do it either as an end in itself or as a means to some further end. So unless one is prepared to say that Socrates did not intend to drink the hemlock, we can infer from the fact that he intended to drink it together with his knowledge of what its effect on him would be, that he wanted to die (p. 106).

But this argument must also be invalid. For it has the same form as an argument which would allow us to infer that Monica wants to move air molecules from the fact that she walks out of the lecture and drives home intentionally and knows that the movement of largish physical objects causes the movement of air molecules. Such an argument would allow us to infer that everyone who knows of the effects of smoking and drinking on his health and yet pursues such activities intentionally must really want to be sick. Of course, Frey is right that if Socrates drinks the hemlock intentionally then he must want to do it either as an end in itself or as a means to some further end. But it does not follow that Socrates wants

<sup>1</sup> R. G. Frey, 'Did Socrates Commit Suicide?', *Philosophy* 53, No. 203 (January 1978), 106-108.

## Discussion

to die just because he knows that drinking the hemlock is a means to *that* end and drinks the hemlock intentionally.

More interestingly, Frey claims that '... in the early passages of *Phaedo* ... [Socrates] does betray a wish to die' (p. 106). But even supposing that he does in fact want to die, it still does not follow that Socrates killed himself intentionally. For imagine Monica picks up the book off her desk. What was her reason for doing so? Let us suppose that she wants to have some exercise and believes that picking up the book has that feature. But she also wants to read the book and believes that the action has that feature. It is possible that one of these reasons is alone her *real* reason for picking up the book. For let us suppose that the first of these is a very trivial want that would never have motivated her to pick up the book. Under such circumstances it would be false that Monica picked up the book because she wanted to have some exercise. If so, then it is incorrect to describe her picking up the book as 'intentionally having some exercise'. Similarly, it does not follow that Socrates killed himself intentionally from the fact that he caused his own death knowingly and wanted to die. For this may have been insufficient to motivate him. He may have wanted some other end to which drinking hemlock was a means (say, making his disciples cry) and *that* was his real reason for drinking the hemlock. I conclude that Frey fails to show that Socrates killed himself intentionally.

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