

TROUBLE AT WORK?

A Socratic Dialogue

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Bringing philosophy down from the heavens and giving it to the people has been my life's work. While many philosophical questions may seem abstract and irrelevant to every day life, philosophy can also be practiced by people who want to learn how to live well. I recently met a young person named Emma who was ruminating over a bad day at work. The following is my recollection of our dialogue.

-- Socrates

PAUL: Socrates! Socrates! It is good to see you. What brings you to the shopping mall?

SOCRATES: I am passing through on my way home.

PAUL: You're on your way home? Not if we can stop you. You must join us, here in the cafe, for coffee and discussion. This is my friend, Emma. I think you two will get along well. I've been telling her about you and the way you see the world. I think you might be able to help her with a problem she had at work.

SOCRATES: I see the world as it appears to me. Is there anything unusual about that? I cannot think of any other way I can see the world.

PAUL: You see, Emma? Already, he starts.

EMMA: It is nice to meet you Socrates. Please do join us.

SOCRATES: It is nice to meet you too, Emma. But I am sorry I must decline, for I need to return home to meet someone.

PAUL: What time is your meeting?

SOCRATES: 6pm. A friend is joining me for dinner.

PAUL: Well, it is 2pm now. There is plenty of time for us to talk.

SOCRATES: Very well. You have convinced me to detour from my plan.

PAUL: Wonderful. Come now, sit here with us. I shall order you coffee.

(he signals to a cafe staff member to bring more coffee)

PAUL: I am glad you turned up, Socrates. We've been talking about work and how it causes stress and lowers quality of life.

SOCRATES: My work improves quality of life.

PAUL: We've been talking about certain jobs, like Emma's.

SOCRATES: What job do you have, Emma?

EMMA: I work at a department store. Mainly in shoe sales.

SOCRATES: And you believe your work is lowering your quality of life?

EMMA: Unfortunately, yes. Especially today. A customer complained about me to my manager. It's really causing me a lot of stress. I have to meet my manager tomorrow to

talk about it.

SOCRATES: So, you are feeling stress, which is lowering your quality of life. Can you tell me, what exactly is causing your stress: the customer complaint, or meeting with your manager?

EMMA: Both, really. But mainly meeting with my manager.

SOCRATES: What will happen in the meeting?

EMMA: I don't know.

SOCRATES: You are stressed about something unknown?

EMMA: She might fire me.

SOCRATES: Oh dear, that would be most unfortunate, if you like your job. But you said your job is lowering your quality of life. Would it not be good fortune to be released from it?

EMMA: Not at all. That would cause more stress because I'd have to find a new job. I would have no money, and I wouldn't be able to pay my bills.

SOCRATES: Shall we take a step back, then, and examine the issue. Why did your customer complain about you?

EMMA: The customer wanted to swap a pair of shoes that are too small. She bought them about 3 months ago, but our store policy is to not offer exchanges for purchases after one month. So she was too late. She got really angry when I tried to explain the store's exchange policy.

SOCRATES: It sounds like you were following company policy. Would your manager approve or disapprove of you following company policy?

EMMA: I'm sure she would approve.

SOCRATES: And yet you feel stress about the meeting tomorrow. Is it not possible that your manager wants to congratulate you on how you dealt with the situation?

EMMA: Maybe, but I doubt it.

SOCRATES: Do you really think you might be fired for following company policy?

EMMA: Well, probably not. It's just that I don't know what's going to happen. That's why I'm feeling stressed. The manager will want to keep the customer happy -- you know, "the customer is always right".

SOCRATES: An unusual slogan, which I do not understand. Tell me, what might the manager suggest you do to keep the customer happy?

EMMA: She might want me to contact the customer and offer her the exchange.

SOCRATES: The customer would indeed be happy in that case. Would that be a bad outcome?

EMMA: There seems to be no point having a company policy if it can be broken whenever a customer asks for it, so in that way I think it would be bad.

SOCRATES: The contradiction may well harm the company. But I wonder, in what way would this harm you? Why are you feeling stressed about this possibility?

EMMA: It's hard to explain.

SOCRATES: Try to say it just as you think it. What's really bothering you?

EMMA: Well, the thing is, I told the customer that she couldn't exchange her shoes. She got really angry with me and complained to my manager. Now if my manager makes me contact the customer to do the exchange, she'll think ... I don't know ... it will be like she won. She went above my head and won. It will be embarrassing and I'll feel foolish.

SOCRATES: You think the customer would have won a battle against you? Would it not be more accurate to say that she won a battle against the company? Forgive me, but you are not making the company rules, right? You are merely communicating decisions that the company makes, am I correct?

EMMA: That's true, but I'll still feel foolish if this happens. It's like I'm just a lowly shop assistant and what I say to the customer doesn't matter. And she'll know that, because all she had to do was go above my head to talk to someone who isn't as lowly as me.

SOCRATES: Are you saying that you would feel foolish because the customer would think that you are lowly? Or to use language I find more familiar, the customer might think you are unworthy and you would therefore feel unworthy. Is that what you are thinking?

EMMA: Yes, that's it, exactly.

SOCRATES: It seems to me, Emma, that we do not know why your manager wants to meet you, so you are making an assumption which may be false.

But let us assume that your manager will indeed ask you to offer your customer an exchange. Your reasoning, then, can be represented as follows:

P1. (premise) If a customer thinks I'm unworthy, then I will feel unworthy

P2. (premise) Because I have to tell the customer that my manager has decided to let her proceed with the exchange, the customer will think I'm unworthy.

C. (conclusion) Therefore, I feel unworthy

Does it help to hear your thoughts outlined this way? Or shall I keep quiet?

EMMA: I think talking through this is helping.

SOCRATES: Shall we examine your first premise? Is the opinion of other people important to you?

EMMA: Of course. I have to deal with people every day, so their opinion really matters to me.

SOCRATES: Is it a problem if someone does not approve of you?

EMMA: That's what I'm saying. In fact, that's exactly what's bothering me.

SOCRATES: Then we have identified another premise in your reasoning: *I must have the approval of other people*. Let us rework your reasoning with the new premise:

P1. (premise) I must have the approval of other people

P2. (premise) If I must have the approval of other people, then if a customer thinks I'm unworthy, then I will feel unworthy

P3. (premise) Because I have to tell the customer that my manager has decided to let her proceed with the exchange, the customer will think I'm unworthy.

C. (conclusion) Therefore, I feel unworthy

Let us examine your new premise. Is it true that you *must* have the approval of other people?

EMMA: I'm human. I want people to like me.

SOCRATES: Of course. But you now appear to be saying something else. Is there not a difference between *wanting* people to like you and believing that you *must* have their approval?

EMMA: Yes, there is a difference.

SOCRATES: You speak with wisdom. Indeed, there is a difference between stating a preference on the one hand and insisting that the world *must* be a certain way on the other. Tell me: can you control the thoughts of other people?

EMMA: Not directly, no. But I think I can influence their thoughts.

SOCRATES: How do you influence people's thoughts?

EMMA: By the way I talk and act towards them.

SOCRATES: This sounds right to me. But regardless of what you do, people's thoughts are private and they are free to think what they want, am I right?

EMMA: I suppose so.

SOCRATES: In your dealings with the customer, have you been honorable and polite?

EMMA: Most certainly. I am always honorable and polite.

SOCRATES: Then, as a free person, you have done your best. The customer is also a free person and will decide for themselves how to view the situation.

EMMA: But I don't want them to hate me.

SOCRATES: Of course not. You prefer that people approve of you. But you cannot control their thoughts, so demanding that you *must* have the approval of others appears to be unrealistic, does it not?

EMMA: Okay, okay. I understand. I guess I just have to accept that some people won't approve of me.

SOCRATES: A wise acceptance. Shall we take a closer look at your second premise. Why would someone thinking you are unworthy make you feel unworthy?

EMMA: I don't know why. It's just a feeling. I can't control my feelings.

SOCRATES: Can't you? Doesn't that depend on how you come to have your feelings? You may find that changing your thoughts about a situation can, indeed, give you control over how you feel. Now, you just said that in dealing with the customer you were both honorable and polite.

EMMA: That's right.

SOCRATES: And in following store policy, were you acting with good intention?

EMMA: Yes. I was trying to do the right thing.

SOCRATES: In trying to do the right thing, is it not true that you were acting justly?

EMMA: I think I was acting justly.

SOCRATES: Given what you have said, do you think you are unworthy?

EMMA: Not at all.

SOCRATES: Then if the customer *thinks* you are unworthy, should you not remember the things that make you a worthy person: that you are honorable, polite, act justly and with good intention?

EMMA: I should try.

SOCRATES: If you have acted honorably, justly, and with good intention, your soul is intact and you have nothing to worry about.

EMMA: I don't believe in souls.

SOCRATES: Think of your *soul* as your *character*. Your character is intact. The customer cannot harm your character with her thoughts. I have long argued that the only *real* harm that one can suffer is damage to one's soul. And this damage occurs when one lives an unjust life. One should therefore focus on keeping one's soul healthy by living justly, which in this case you seem to have done.

EMMA: Really!?! This is starting to sound a little silly. Do you know what he means, Paul?

PAUL: We often disagree, Socrates and I. And I must say that we can refute his current

point very easily. Simply watch someone fall from a high window and break some bones and Socrates will be refuted. Surely you would agree, Socrates, that when someone is physically injured they are harmed.

SOCRATES: Ah Paul, I have heard that response many times over the years, and I admit that my belief is contrary to the common sense belief of most people. Nevertheless, I maintain that worldly misfortunes, such as damage to flesh and bone, have no lasting significance and are nothing compared to the damage that you can inflict on yourself by living an unjust life. The soul is of more value than the body, and life would hardly be worth living if it were damaged. So Emma need not concern herself with the opinions of others. She must focus on living a just life.

PAUL: I don't buy it, Socrates. If I were paralyzed I'd certainly disagree with your claims.

SOCRATES: Answer me this, Paul: is a dishonorable, unjust person who behaves shamefully, but who is in top physical condition as good a person as an honorable, just person who acts admirably, but has suffered a physical injury?

PAUL: You're up to your tricks again. Are you sure you're not a sophist?

EMMA: Wait a minute, Paul. I think I understand what he's saying. He's saying that regardless of what happens to your body, if you live a just life you are better than if you live an unjust life, which means you're a healthier person. Is that what you're saying, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Healthy people can reside in damaged bodies, can they not?

EMMA: Yes, I get it. I actually get it.

SOCRATES: So, Emma, if the customer thinks you're unworthy, what does that mean?

EMMA: It means she doesn't know me. I live an honorable life. I am worthy.

SOCRATES: I couldn't have put it better myself. Shall we take a look at your third premise: *Because I have to tell the customer that my manager has decided to let her proceed with the exchange, the customer will think I'm unworthy.*

Will you please clarify for me: upon what do you base your thought that the customer would consider you unworthy simply because your manager has decided to let them exchange their shoes?

EMMA: This is also hard to put into words. I was thinking that because I don't have the authority to make that decision myself, the customer had to go to my manager who can make the decision. Then if I have to go back to the customer to tell them that I was wrong, the customer will see me as subordinate.

SOCRATES: Is there another way to see the situation?

EMMA: I'm not sure.

SOCRATES: If you had broken the rules, the customer might then have been contacted by the manager for another reason. And as you would clearly be in the wrong, she may, in such a case, see you as subordinate and unworthy. But you didn't break the rules. You followed the rules. Now you think the manager will make an exception and ask you to pass new information on to the customer. Do you really think she would consider you unworthy for following this process?

EMMA: Well, I supposed I don't really know.

SOCRATES: Is it not possible that the customer will thank you for getting in touch, gladly exchange the shoes, and think nothing more of it?

EMMA: That is possible.

SOCRATES: This possibility disarms the third premise in your reasoning, does it not?

EMMA: Yes, I think I might have been focusing too much on the negative possibility.

SOCRATES: Now that we have examined your reasoning, what will you do next?

EMMA: I think I'll wait until my meeting tomorrow. I will tell my side of the story and listen to my manager. I have no idea what she's going to say, so I shouldn't invent stories in my head. I think I did the right thing, so I can't be reprimanded for my actions. If she wants me to get back in touch with the customer to offer the exchange, I'll be polite as always, and let her know that the company has reconsidered. She'll be happy.

PAUL: This sounds good. Thanks for joining us, Socrates. I am still in disagreement about the soul and the body. Perhaps we can talk about that another time?

SOCRATES: I am almost certain that the opportunity will arise again in the future. But for now, I must leave you, for I have an appointment tonight. It was nice to meet you Emma.