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The Rich And The Virtuous: Who Should Prevail?

Imagine being extremely ill and applying for medical care. A dedicated worker would be recommended to Socrates’ city of pigs where only virtuous citizens are provided medical care. On the other hand, suppose you are an extremely wealthy, unemployed individual, such as Paris Hilton. Employees of NooSkinz and Organ Inc. would provide you with medical treatment and collect revenue from you until your dying day. This example provides a brief comparison of the philosophies underlying the books Oryx and Crake and The Republic. The treatment of health, disease, and medicine in Atwood’s Oryx and Crake have many parallels and contrasts with Plato’s discussion in The Republic regarding the administration of medical care, the nutritional diets recommended by each society, and viewpoints expressed regarding the balance between physical and mental health.

In Socrates city, medical treatment is not provided universally to its residents. Socrates’ theory is that “a good soul by its good virtue makes the body as good as possible” (Plato, 403-D). Although virtuous beings do not always outlive licentious individuals, Socrates believes that the virtuous citizens of his city should be the only ones who should be provided medical services. Within The Republic, Socrates discusses the medical treatment given to the “idle” citizens who do not exercise or work, and he states, “…doesn’t it seem shameful to you to need medical help, not for wounds or because of some seasonal illness, but because through idleness….one is full of gas and phlegm like a stagnant swamp, so that sophisticated Asclpiad doctors are forced to come up with names like ‘flatulence’ and ‘catarrh’ to describe one’s diseases” (Plato 405-D). In this passage, Socrates indicates that he does not have sympathy for individuals with diseases that could have been prevented if they had taken better physical care of their bodies. Although it is not easy to define who is an idle citizen, Socrates does expound upon the virtuous traits citizens should posses before they can expect to receive medical care, and he specifies situations where medical care should be denied.

Socrates uses the story of Asclepius in order to express his belief that society should promote the development of healthy and productive citizens. While discussing why Asclepius did not pass down the medical treatment that prolonged his life to his sons, Socrates believes it was “because he knew that everyone in a well-regulated city has his own work to do and no one has the leisure to be ill and under treatment all his life” (406-C). Socrates also went on to say drugs were, “sufficient to cure men who were healthy and living an orderly life before being wounded” (408-B). In Socrates’ opinion, however, he did not believe that virtuous citizens should receive medical care in all situations. Socrates agrees with Asclepius that “those whose bodies were riddled with disease” should not be given medicine because “such a person would be of no profit either to himself or to the city” (407-D). If such an unfortunate event happened to a citizen, “he’d die and escape his troubles” (406-E). Overall, Socrates supports the use of medicine and treatment of diseases only to preserve the individual’s ability to be productive, thus contributing to the advance of society.

In the novel Oryx and Crake, the medical corporations follow less rigid guidelines for providing services to individuals. In contrast to Socrates’ society, Oryx and Crake takes place in an era where scientific discoveries have cured almost every illness. In order to keep doctors employed, the HelthWyzer corporation “put hostile bioforms into their vitamin pills” (Atwood, 211). Crake further explains, “…they develop the antidotes at the same time as they’re customizing the bugs, but they hold those in reserve, they practice the economics of scarcity, so they’re guaranteed high profits” (Atwood, 211). Rather than promoting the good health of productive citizens, HelthWyzer commits a scam in order to create a profit. In a nearly perfected industry, HelthWyzer must infect their customer base in order to continue providing useful and profitable services. During the healing process, Crake states, “for maximum profit – the patient should either get well or just die before all of his or her money runs out” (Atwood, 211). The contrast of medical administration between HelthWyzer and Socrates’ city begins with the treatment process. Socrates works at helping the virtuous get well again, so they can continue to work. If an illness is terminal, Socrates believes that a citizen should not be treated, and he sees no value in prolonging an individual’s life with years of medical treatment. HelthWyzer, on the other hand, actually infects the healthy, offers him or her treatment, and encourages the ill individual seek medical intervention the rest of his or her life. These examples represent a significant disparity in belief regarding health, disease, and medicine between Oryx and Crake and The Republic. Although the philosophies of medical administration within Oryx and Crake and The Republic contrast sharply, the two books have similarities in their views of nutritional diets.

The diet of Socrates’ soldiers is similar to the diet of the Children of Crake. While discussing the soldiers’ training, Socrates states, “They must be like sleepless hounds, able to see and hear as keenly as possible and to endure frequent changes of water and food, as well as summer and winter weather on their campaigns, without faltering in health” (Plato, 404-D). This conditioning will help keep the soldiers healthier when facing harsh conditions where many types of foods are not present. Socrates builds on his idea of simplistic diets by alluding to Homer. Socrates states, “You know that, when [Homer’s] heroes are campaigning, he doesn’t give them fish to banquet on, even though they are by the sea in the Hellespont, nor boiled meat either. Instead, he gives them only roasted meat, which is the kind most easily available for soldiers” (Plato, 404-C). Socrates goes on to mention that Homer doesn’t mention anything about desserts to his soldiers because if “one’s body is to be sound, one must keep away from all such things” (Plato, 404-C). Socrates draws a conclusion from a diet of such rich foods, claiming, “I believe that we’d be right to compare this diet and this entire life-style to the kinds of lyric odes and songs that are composed in all sorts of modes and rhythms…Just as an embellishment in the one gives rise to licentiousness, doesn’t it give rise to illness in the other?” (Plato, 404-E). Socrates is afraid that such a rich diet could encourage his citizens’ to develop an appetite for greed, causing them to behave immorally. Furthermore, glutinous appetites could eventually cause a decline in physical health and the promotion of illness. Utilizing a similar diet, Crake has designed the Children of Crake to allow them to eat a similar simplified diet with resources that are always readily available.

Snowman states, “Since the Children of Crake are vegetarians and eat mostly grass and leaves and roots, this material burns well enough” (Atwood, 158). Similar to Socrates soldiers’ meals, which consist of anything edible that exists in their current environment, the Children of Crake can survive with the natural resources that surround them in the forest. In order to be conservative of food resources, Crake made a modification to the children, allowing them to eat caecotrophs, which consist “of semi-digested herbage, discharged through the anus and reswallowed two or three times a week” (Atwood, 158). In order to provide a proper diet, “the caecotrophs were enriched with Vitamin B1, and with other vitamins and minerals as well, at four or five times the ordinary level or waste material” (Atwood, 159). After the extermination of the human race, there is no need to create a human work force to produce food. Rather than training the Children of Crake how to produce and distribute food, Crake makes them self-sufficient so that food resources don’t become scarce and food production is simply not a part of the Children of Crake’s civilization. However, the Children of Crake have developed several other physical modifications which contribute to their overall safety and health.

The sole focus of physical health of the Children of Crake contrasts with the broader spectrum in which Socrates defines health. Socrates considers health to be both mental and physical. Socrates leads Glaucon to draw the conclusion, “that those who devote themselves exclusively to physical training turn out to be more savage than they should, while those who devote themselves to music and poetry turn out to be softer than is good for them” (Plato, 410-D). Socrates states that if physical strength is “overstrained, it’s likely to become hard and harsh” (Plato, 410-D). If a moderate amount of care is given to physical health, “the soul is both moderate and courageous” (Plato, 411-E). Health of the mind, on the other hand, is more abstract than most topics he discusses earlier, but it is clear that Socrates considers the development of a healthy mind to be an integral part of an individual’s overall health. Socrates hypothetically discusses a situation where an individual is merely healthy in physical strength, and he states, “Doesn’t whatever love of learning he might have in his soul soon become enfeebled, deaf, and blind, because he never tastes any learning or investigation or partakes of any discussion or any of the rest of music and poetry, to nurture or arouse it?” (Plato, 411-D). He also compares it to “savagery like a wild animal, living in ignorance and stupidity” (411-E). A healthy balance between mental and physical health allows them to “be in harmony with one another, each being stretched and relaxed to the appropriate degree” (412-A). In Socrates opinion, physical health is not significant by itself. Crake’s creation, on the other hand, does not believe that it is necessary to maintain a balance between physical and mental health.

Crake has developed enough physical modifications to allow the Children of Crake to live a comfortable existence. Snowman explained that, “the chemicals programmed into the men’s urine are effective against wolvogs and rakunks, and to a lesser extent against bobkittens and pigoons” (Atwood, 154). This defense mechanism kept the Children of Crake safe from outside predators. This physical modification was a preventative measure used to preserve the health of the Children of Crake. If the Children of Crake were injured outside the urine circle, the Children of Crake could use their purring ability to help one another. The Children of Crake were modified to produce frequencies that were the same “as the ultrasound used on bone fractures and skin lesions” (Atwood, 156). These two modifications are examples of how Crake designed his children to remain physically healthy. It is important to note that while Oryx and Crake focus on preserving the physical health of the children, there is absolutely no attention given to their mental health. In fact, efforts are made to ensure that the children’s brains are unable to comprehend their history. Due to the prior extermination of the human race, the Children of Crake were oblivious to the history of their planet. Crake had also attempted to eliminate “what he called the G-Spot of the brain” (Atwood, 157). The “G-Spot” was a reference to the section of the brain which organizes religion. In contrast with Socrates’ world, an absence of a belief structure would eliminate many of the important works which he believes would support mental health.

HelthWyzer and Socrates share the belief that a community’s operational health is more important than an individual’s health. Socrates would let an ill person die simply because he or she is unproductive. HelthWyzer would keep him or her alive so he or she could continue to pay for medical treatment. Each thinker holds his own personal belief regarding the administration of medical treatment. Crake, on the one hand, strives to equip his children with the necessary physical modifications to prevail in their environment. Socrates expands on this idea of sustaining physical health, encouraging his citizens to maintain a moderate balance between physical and mental health. Overall, HelthWyzer, Crake, and Socrates strive to manage the health of their communities because they believe it is for the good of society, even if it is detrimental to individual citizens.

Works Cited

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