

## The Unexamined Life

### Some Thoughts on Examining Our Lives

I have long been intrigued by the claim, attributed to Socrates, that the 'unexamined life is not worth living'. For a start, there is the absolute and uncompromising tone of the language, "not worth living". Why not set the bar lower and simply claim that an examined life is better than the alternative or that it's useful to think about things before acting? Perhaps the quotation was framed with a fair measure of rhetorical flourish. On the other hand, what if the words were meant to be taken at face value? What could lead a person to say that a certain type of life is not worth living? I do not (and cannot) know precisely what the historical Socrates had in mind. After all, he is glimpsed but darkly through myriad competing lenses tinged by the thoughts of others. And I am not a good enough scholar to clarify the image. So, instead, I have tried to develop a plausible understanding of what the claim might mean – at least in order to be intelligible (and compelling) to me. This understanding is, unsurprisingly, unoriginal – a 'bog standard', 'this worldly' form of humanism. Despite this, I still find it useful to discuss.

Although it seems rather obvious, I think that the key to understanding Socrates' claim is to recognise it as being addressed to those who participate in 'human Being' (that form of 'Being' that is distinctive to humans). For Socrates (as for many others then and since) human Being is marked by the capacity to transcend instinct and desire, and to make conscious, ethical choices. This is not to deny that instinct and desire have the power to shape human behaviour, at least as powerfully as they do in the case of other forms of being – ant, cow, fish, etc. However, while I think it highly unlikely that any lion would not kill an antelope out of concern for the children of its prey, I know that many human beings can and do act against the urgings of instinct and desire simply because they think that to act would be wrong. There need be no restraining hand, no accusing witness. Rather, a simple belief that some act is 'wrong' – will regulate behaviour even if unobserved. There is obviously much else to be said about this approach – not least in response to many, foreseeable objections. But that is for another time. For now, I would suggest that one can make sense of Socrates' claim, if it is understood to mean something like – those who do not examine their lives (make conscious ethical decisions) fail to live a life that allows them to experience being fully human.

Of course, as Socrates demonstrated in his own life (and death) being fully human (in the sense sketched above) can be extremely challenging. In a world of abiding uncertainty and complexity one can recognise a certain attraction in not examining too much, or for too long in life. Thus, the allure of those who offer to provide clear answers, simple directions, precise instructions (whatever) so that you may set aside examination and merely comply, or unthinkingly follow custom and practice – perhaps living a conventionally moral life rather than an examined ethical life. One can easily imagine how pleasant an unexamined life might be. And it is for this reason that I think Socrates makes his claim so uncompromising.

Socrates obviously knows the burden of being free – especially in conditions of radical uncertainty where values and principles might compete with equal 'weight'. If he cannot convincingly claim that an examined life is necessarily more pleasurable (or even useful) then he is left to suggest that is, in fact, the only life worth living if we are to be fully human.