

On Socrates

The Unexamined Life Is Not Worth Living

By Hyrum Hendrickson

Few men have had greater influence on the development of Western culture than Socrates. His teachings have become ubiquitous, not only within intellectual circles, but within the populace as a whole. Much, if not most, of modern philosophy is a response to his ideas. However, in recent years, philosophical responses to Socrates have become far more critical. His work seems now to be in a transition from fame to infamy. This paper seeks to provide a response to modern philosophers and defend the strength, rigor, and utility of Socrates' arguments. Specifically, we will focus on a bold and controversial claim; "The unexamined life is not worth living". We will defend this claim as an intellectually rigorous and valuable idea. To understand the wisdom of his argument, we must examine it closely. This paper will first explain what Socrates meant by this claim. We will show its remarkable clarity, we will show how this claim is compatible with generally accepted ethical intuitions, we will show the comprehensive explanatory value of this claim, and finally we will consider popular counterarguments.

This argument arises very naturally within the context of defining human value and meaning. Often human value is defined in terms of happiness or pleasure. Socrates disagrees with this decision and seeks to explain why it is wrong. If a person's value is defined as happiness, then anyone who is unhappy and unlikely to be happy again has little or no value. Socrates offers a wise solution to this conundrum. He defines the value of things as the ability of that thing to fulfill its purpose. In order to decide what gives human life value, he says that we must find the unique purpose of humans.

Clearly this cannot be happiness or pleasure; many animals are capable of happiness and pleasure just as we are. Instead, Socrates defines human value as exercising intellectual virtues. This is a clever solution. Humans are uniquely able to learn, progress, and grow. People have value because they are able to do something that no other creature can, they can learn. Our highest value is found in fulfilling our purpose. This definition gives rise to his famous claim, "The unexamined life is not worth living", or in other words, those who do not exercise intellectual virtues do not fulfill their unique purpose as humans, and thus their lives do not hold value. This claim is remarkable for its clarity and simplicity. Many other moral systems can become quite complex, this abstraction can be concerning. One must only read the first few paragraphs on a book about utilitarianism before realizing how unclear the system really is. Socrates' claim has greater argumentative strength because of its clarity and simplicity.

Furthermore, Socrates' system is compatible with what is generally perceived in most cultures as just and unjust. Consider a man who has committed theft. Most would consider his punishment in the context of his attitude following his capture. If he seems unrepentant and likely to repeat, many would argue for a harsh punishment, but if he seems unlikely to do so, leniency and rehabilitation will be encouraged. If he is willing to progress and learn from past mistakes, we will value his presence in society. However, if he is unwilling to become better, we will refuse him readmittance. This attitude is held by most people; they subconsciously seek to assign value to the exercise of intellectual virtues.

Additionally, Socrates' claim has substantial explanatory power. His system is remarkably simple and easy to understand, yet it is able to encompass a wide range of

human intuition. Throughout most social interactions, trust is built when someone is willing to work and become better. We implicitly trust those who are exercising intellectual virtues. The comprehensiveness of his claim should not be discounted, many popular ethical systems are characterized more by their exceptions than their rules. They may seem simple on the surface but a close analysis necessitates many slight modifications and additional rules to remain consistent.

There are several common counter arguments used as attempts to refute Socrates, perhaps the most common argument may come from those who find meaning in more than strictly learning. Many find a great deal of meaning in the arts, in relationships, etc. However, those who use such examples to argue against Socrates fail to understand the totality of his claim. Such things are encompassed within the arms of an examined life. Surely one who is passionate about art will not simply look at it, one who finds meaning in art will study it, ponder it, and wonder about it. In other words, they examine it. Anytime someone finds passion, they pursue it. This pursuit of passion is a critical element of an examined life. It is an exercise of the intellectual virtues.

Similarly, many will attempt to refute Socrates by claiming that many people find a lack of knowledge enjoyable. They claim "Ignorance is bliss." People may claim that life is more enjoyable without examination. However, Socrates does not claim that an examined life is enjoyable, he claims that it is worth living. Perhaps, in some cases, people have moral or ethical responsibilities to do things which they do not enjoy. Socrates claims that exercising virtue makes life worth living. Few truly believe that a life of base pleasures is comparable to a life of deep meaning. Only through examination, only through exercising the virtues, can meaning be found in life. It may not always be

fun, but life has no obligation to provide fun. Those who focus only on increasing their own pleasure will alienate others and slowly pull all meaning and relationships from their life. In the end, they will find that the unexamined life is not worth living.

Socrates has been a leading figure in philosophy for more than two thousand years. The perseverance of his ideas is evidence of their continuing utility. He will continue to remain a leading force in intellectualism for as long as human culture endures. His arguments are clear, comprehensive, and overall compatible. They bring immense value to our culture, and they will continue to do so.