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Political Theory Essay – The Defense of Socrates

Class Section 3010

What is an examined life and why is an unexamined life not worth living?

“Socrates' claim that the unexamined life is not worth living makes a satisfying climax for the deeply principled arguments that Socrates presents on behalf of the philosophical life. The claim is that only in striving to come to know ourselves and to understand ourselves do our lives have any meaning or value” (SparkNotes Editors, 2018). This description of an examined life is what I feel that Socrates meant. He shows that we better ourselves when we really question who we are. We become people with a greater understanding that there is not always an answer to every question. An examined life is when one attains wisdom; the wisdom to understand that in this world, one has no greater value than the next person (SparkNotes Editors, 2018). Socrates lived in the wrong time period; his knowledge was so advanced for the era he lived in. I feel that his knowledge would have been more appreciated during a later period where he could conversate with other great philosophical thinkers. He wanted truth for the polis and for the people; not lies and persuasion tactics taught by the sophists (Cahn, 2018). He showed us the first ideas of philosophy and continued to do so until his death. He did not fear death. He claimed that we do not know what death is truly like and why should it be feared if only the Gods know what death truly holds (Cahn, 2018).

Socrates will not live an unexamined life. He is asked to propose his own ideas of discipline for his crimes, but he will not choose the banishing or the ending of his practice because this is what he feels he was put on this earth for. If he cannot live doing those tasks then he will die. ““Again, if I said that it really is the greatest benefit for a person to converse everyday about goodness, and about the other subjects you have heard me discussing when examining myself and others- and that unexamined life is no life for a human being to live.” *The Defense of Socrates* (as cited in Cahn, 2018).” This is a quote from Socrates in his final hours in front of the court. As you can see, the way he speaks does not change whether he’s in front of the court or not. He claims to not speak the language of the court, which is persuasion. He will not live an unexamined life because that for him would mean disobeying the Gods. The Gods told him his duties and those are his teachings. Which ironically, he is being put to death for. Also, he is being put to death for corrupting the children; but what sounds more like corruption is the sophist receiving pay to teach the children persuasion for no further reason than the money that is promised to them. Socrates chose to live his life in poverty which proves he would have no incentive to teach corrupting things to the children because there would be no benefit of that for Socrates. Why should one suffer for living an honest life? “You have tried to kill me for now, in the belief that you will be relieved from giving an account on your lives. But in fact, I can tell you, you will face just the opposite outcome” (Cahn, 2018). It feels like in this quote from Socrates he almost knows that he will create an impact so great on the society that he will not be forgotten. His life was taken from him too early. The society he lived in was affected by his death because they lost the first true philosopher of the time period. Whether the people of the time liked it or not, he forced them to think deeper. His responses in questions forced the person to leave pondering on the question; especially if his respondent could not find an answer. The society should have praised him instead of undermined him. During the rest of the sophist’s lives, the thought of Socrates unjust death will live on through their mind in grief, through the children, and in society.

If you understand Socrates and study his work, you should easily be able to come to the conclusion that he would choose death over an unexamined life. He might as well be dead if his life would turn into mere nothingness, without a purpose. This is why an unexamined life is not one worth living; due to it not being a life at all. If you are going to commit to silence, you are then giving up your life. In these times, the polis was part of your everyday life as well as religion. “Some may say: ‘Socrates, could you not be so kind as to keep quiet and remain inactive, while living in exile?’ This is the hardest point of all of which to convince some of you. Why? Because, if I tell you that would mean disobeying my God, and why I cannot remain inactive, you will disbelieve me.” In this, Socrates points out that living in banishment for him would mean disobeying the law. By committing to silence, you are giving up your freedom since you could not participate in the actions necessary to remain a good citizen of Athens. He would have to leave his sons behind and the rest of his family; things like this are very painful. He imagined that death would be a better choice since death would lead him to one of two things, he would be in an eternal sleep without dreaming, or he would be onto the new beginning of his next spiritual life.

In conclusion, an examined life is one where you strive for wisdom and a greater knowing of oneself. An unexamined life is one not worth living because that would leave one with no purpose. Humans live to have a purpose…to be needed. Once we come to understand these points, it is easy to see why Socrates chose death over any other of his offered punishments. The sophists and jury who trialed Socrates will forever be seen as villains for the decision to kill an innocent man for purely being truthful. Socrates still lives on being the wisest man, simply because his understanding to know that he is not wise. Anyone who can come to this realization, like Socrates, has a truly deeper way of thinking.

Work Cited Page

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