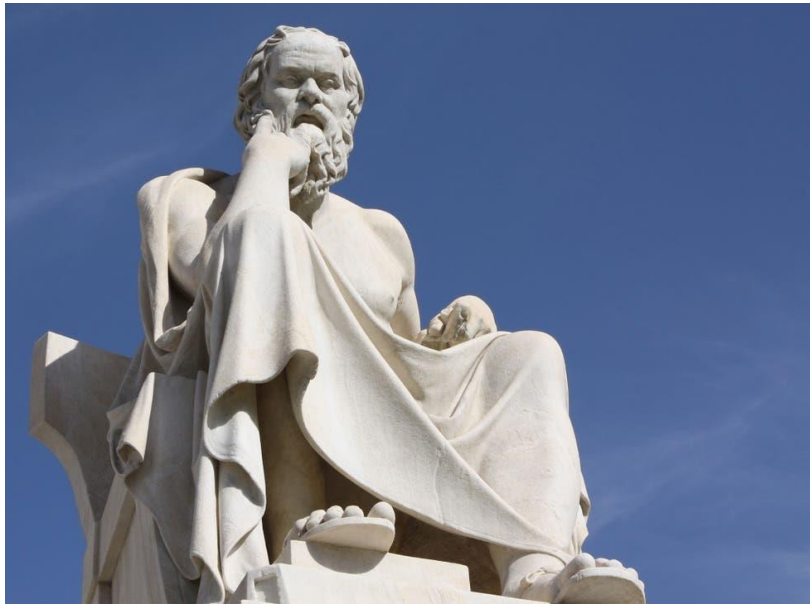


Why Do We Think the Way We Do about Ethics?

The Beginning Point for all Philosophical and Ethical Thought: The Examined Life



Socrates of Athens 470-399 BCE

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 know precisely what the historical Socrates had in mind. After all, he is glimpsed but darkly through myriad competing lenses framed by the thoughts of others who followed him. So, instead, here is an attempt to develop a plausible understanding of what the claim might mean.

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. So, 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.

That said, being fully human, as Socrates demonstrated in his own life (and death), 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. This explains the allure of those who offer to provide clear answers, simple directions, precise instructions, 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 it is, in fact, the only life worth living if we are to be fully human.

Some Questions to Stir the Mind

1. Socrates is regarded as the Greek Jesus before Jesus appeared. This is largely due to two things: first, both were executed for disturbing the peace, although drinking hemlock was considerably more agreeable than being crucified. Second, both questioned and challenged not just people, but particular interests. Do you think this parallel can be sustained?
2. It could be argued that philosophy and theology attract quite different methods of thought and indeed people. Philosophy encourages a spirit of questioning where nothing is sacred, while theology encourages conformity to the Christian tradition. Do you agree or disagree?
3. Is there a relationship between philosophy and theology? If so, how would you explain it?