

# A life worth living philosophy essay



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The philosophy of Socrates as explained by Plato offers an important concept of what it means to live an ethical and meaningful life. The combination of Socratic irony, the Socratic Method, and Socratic ethics as seen in the *Euthyphro* and *The Apology* helps us to understand what Socrates means when he says that the unexamined life is not worth living. This paper will explain what it means to live an examined life and will also state my view of what philosophy is, and why it is important in a modern world.

In the first section of the paper, I will explain Socrates' philosophy in terms of his use of Socratic irony, Socratic Method, and his notions of ethics. I will then explain how each of these relates to the statement posed by Socrates that the unexamined life is not worth living.

Socratic irony is a technique used in the Socratic method of teaching. Irony is used when someone says something that conveys a message that contradicts the literal words. In the case of Socratic irony, Socrates might pretend to think his students wise or he might denigrate his own intelligence by pretending he is ignorant or that he does not know the answer. Socrates would pretend to be ignorant of the topic under discussion, to draw out the flaws in the arguments of his opponents. An example of this can be seen in Plato's *Euthyphro* (Plato, 2010) where Plato feigns ignorance and asks Euthyphro to teach him the true meaning of piety, to which Euthyphro claims to have absolute knowledge of. Socrates does this to show Euthyphro's ignorance through the use of his Socratic Method. The irony lies in Socrates' knowledge of Euthyphro's ignorance even though Socrates is pretending to be ignorant himself (Plato, 2010).

The Socratic Method is a process of question and answer. Socrates would have an opponent state a thesis and would then prove that it led to a contradiction by asking his opponent questions. It is a basic form of inquiry and debate between individuals with opposing viewpoints based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to illuminate ideas. The method usually involves an oppositional discussion in which the defense of one point of view is matched up against the defense of another. Generally, one participant may lead another to contradict himself in some way, in order to expose flaws in their opponents' arguments. Better ideas are found by identifying and eliminating those that lead to contradictions. The Euthyphro offers a wonderful example of the application of this methodology. Socrates questions each of Euthyphro's definitions as to what piety is, and constantly shows how these definitions fail when examined critically (Plato, 2010). Socrates' contention is that Euthyphro is only giving descriptions and examples of pious things, rather than actually offering an objective answer to the essence of which makes a thing pious (Plato, 2010). Socrates complains that Euthyphro is stringing him along as he is not teaching him what piety actually is (Plato, 2010). It is important to note the way in which Socrates uses his method with Euthyphro. Socrates acts as the student, and elevates Euthyphro to that of a mentor, which allows Socrates to lead Euthyphro through the process of critical analysis, as opposed to simply dictating information directly to him. In this way, Socrates allows Euthyphro to examine his own argument, and realize the mistakes that plague it. This begins to give an understanding of what Socrates meant by his notion of the unexamined life which will be expounded upon later in this section.

According to Socrates, knowledge – and its pursuit – is the method by which we perform, and understand, ethical action. Knowledge is to be understood as virtue, and to have knowledge is to be virtuous. Using this parallel we can infer that because knowledge can be learned, we must also be able to learn virtue. From this it follows that virtue can be taught, and as a result, our actions will have consequences on the virtues of others. Our actions must seek knowledge and wisdom over our own personal interests in order for them to be ethical. The Apology offers a strong example of Socrates' character and ethical philosophy. The Apology deals with the defense offered by Socrates to his accusers – of the crimes of impiety and corruption of the youth of Athens – in which he demonstrates the strength of his convictions (Plato, 2010). Socrates is found guilty of the charges against him, and is sentenced to death by ingestion of hemlock (Plato, 2010). In the face of death – a significant personal interest to put it lightly – Socrates had the option to flee the city of Athens, but refused as it would have been in direct violation of his moral principles. He says that:

“ You're wrong, my man, if you think a person who's of any use at all should take danger into account, weighing up his chances of living or dying, instead of making it the sole consideration, whenever he acts, whether his actions are just or unjust and whether they're what a good man would do or a bad one.” (Plato, 2010, p. 46)

To escape would have been contradictory on the most basic level of his ethics as fleeing would have been an injustice not only to Athens itself, but to his philosophy of ethics as a whole. To Socrates, every action that one

takes should be take knowledge and wisdom into consideration in order to be consider ethical or just.

What Socrates was trying to convey with his notions of the unexamined life was not that one must examine their own life for it to have worth, but rather that if one would claim that their life is worthy, they would need to examine it themselves to understand it's worth. In *The Apology*, Socrates discusses his attempt to get Athenians in positions of authority to realize they don't know what they're talking about (Plato, 2010). He subjects their beliefs to critical scrutiny and embarrasses them when it turns out they aren't as knowledgeable as they've claimed. This is exactly what Socrates does with his dialogue in the *Euthyphro* (Plato, 2010). He feigns ignorance to elevate Euthyphro to a higher level with Socratic irony, and guides him along the path of self examination with his Socratic Method. So, the examination that is being discussed is actually the questioning of people in authority who claim to have knowledge. Socrates himself doesn't claim to know anything, but does claim to realize that he doesn't know anything. This realization is the knowledge, and truth, that was produced through Socrates' own self-examination. Socrates argues that living a life where one does not realize their own ignorance is a life not worth living. When Socrates discusses "life", we are not to consider an individual life, but rather the life we live as if it were a kind of skill, or rather a kind of thing that we all do together. In a sense, we are all living life, but it has no worth if we do not examine it for soundness. In a way, it might be a better translation to say the unexamined world is not worth living in. To put this in other words; finding one's life to be meaningful is an answer to the questions that are brought forth through

internal examination, and without asking the questions, one will never receive the answer. This is why the offer posed by the jurors in *The Apology* for Socrates to stop philosophizing was a non-option for Socrates (Plato, 2010). To give up the ability to question and to examine, would be to give up on a life worth living. To Socrates, death – in contrast to this offer – would have been the better and more ethical option.

In the second part of the essay, I will explain that philosophy is not just the study of open questions, but an application of the skills gained by process of questioning and evaluating these questions.

Simply put, philosophy – to me – is the need to understand. It is a genuine interest in the pursuit of knowledge, and is – at the core – the driving force of my curiosity. Obtaining an answer isn't a necessary corollary to the pursuit of an answer, and as such is not necessarily the important aspect. It is in the process in which one makes an attempt at finding an answer where the importance lies. To me, the ever evolving understanding of the world is enough for philosophy to be important. It allows me to grasp forms of comprehension that I could have never conceived. It is invaluable solely because of the critical thinking it requires. However, I find it hard to articulate why the content of philosophy matters. At least, I find it hard to suggest philosophy is relevant in a more general or practical sense. I argue there is a need to find a place for philosophy within the world outside of academia. Perhaps it does not necessarily have to be in terms of finding a way to turn the profession into capital, but rather finding a way to make the content of philosophy relevant. One may argue that philosophy forms the foundations of most sciences and it allows theories and ideas to be

extremely clear and extremely powerful. The question to ask then is how useful is this? Can we not simply settle for the former answering the latter? I argue that the issue we face is that we are trying to form a direct link to the modern world. For instance, it's quite understandable that the practice of philosophy may not be as practical or directly applicable to an electrician as the knowledge of electrical engineering. It would however, be erroneous to think that the practice of philosophy in a general sense could not benefit such a person. The ability to analyze, to be critical in examination, and to view problems in a different perspective is where the benefit lies, and that is applicable to all aspects of life. Heidegger offered an opinion on the matter when he said:

“ It is entirely correct and completely in order to say, ‘ You can't do anything with philosophy.’ The only mistake is to believe that with this, the judgment concerning philosophy is at an end. For a little epilogue arises in the form of a counter question: even if we can't do anything with it, may not philosophy in the end do something with us, provided that we engage ourselves with it?”

- (Heidegger, 2000, 9-10)

I argue that while it may not be the case that philosophy itself will have any direct or practical application, the practice of philosophy will impact the way we view and approach the world, and affect everything we do in the most basic form, so long as we participate in the constant pursuit of knowledge.

Socrates' philosophy - and his concept of the unexamined life - is a guideline for how one should act and live. Despite the difference in time this concept is still applicable to today's modern ideals. The pursuit of knowledge is

important to Socrates as a means of establishing what is ethical, and establishing what it is to live a life worth living, just as it is important to how we approach our world view with contemporary mindset.