

Socrates: the
unexamined life is not
worth living essay



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After being sentenced to death for his controversial views and teachings of politics and religion to the youth of Ancient Athens, the historical philosopher Socrates was given an ultimatum to spend the remainder of his in exile. To this, Socrates stated “ the unexamined life is not worth living”. [i] Like the subjective nature of philosophy itself, this quote from one of the most famous philosophers of all time can come in an array of interpretations.

What Socrates himself most likely meant was that a life of imprisonment was nothing more than the death to which he was sentenced. A life in which he could not explore and examine the world around him was ultimately useless. As a philosopher, this was Socrates way of life: to observe the world around him— the workings of society, the phenomena of nature, and the ideologies and beliefs of things beyond physical existence— and offer the interpretations of his observations to the rest of the public. Though this way of life ultimately spelled his peril, this was Socrates driving force— his reason for living; for Socrates, living a life unexamined was not worth living at all. Though we, luckily, are not faced with the same life-or-death dilemma presented to Socrates, this quote can relate to those in modern society.

There are an infinite number of questions and answers pertaining to life, and how it is valued. Like many philosophical subjects, these questions and answers are entirely subjective. From a personal point of view, I tie Socrates’ quote with that of famous trainer Greg Anderson: “ Focus on the journey, not the destination. Joy is found not in finishing an activity but in doing it.

” [ii] Socrates stood trial for encouraging the youth to challenge the common beliefs set by Athenian society. He taught people to ask questions and find

answers, have doubts and challenge them, and not to simply believe in what you're taught, but believe in what you think. Life is a journey, and many will agree that one of man's ultimate goals in life is to achieve success. From short-term ambitions to life-long aspirations, most of us continually strive towards the end of some sort of maze. It is through the observations we make throughout this maze that we begin to learn our way. If we traveled the maze without ever examining the twists and turns surrounding us, we would never find our way out.

Every time we reach the end of one of life's " mazes" we deem ourselves " successful". But it is not merely the destination that entails the success, but the course it took to get there. Success exists only through process and progression; it is something that is experienced rather than earned. Without asking questions, taking risks, making mistakes, and truly understanding the world around us, we would never reach our objective. If we were simply told where to go, or dropped directly from point ' A' to point ' B', we could not consider ourselves successful. It is the difference between choosing a winning Lotto ticket and working hard, saving, and eventually reaping the benefits of our frugality.

While we profit from one method instantly, we can only consider ourselves " lucky" rather than successful. Without learning something along the way, what " success" did we really achieve? Another of Socrates many famous quotes states that " there is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance". [iii] While it may help to follow what we are told, we are only dooming ourselves to believe that there is never more to learn. It is when we

question what we're taught that we gain more knowledge, and through this knowledge we put ourselves on the path to the end of the maze.

When presented the choice to spend his life in exile rather than face the penalty of death, Socrates, being the philosopher he was, probably considered the ideas of life and success as well. If he were to spend the rest of his life confined with a prison cell, would he be conquering death, or simply avoiding it? How much success over death could Socrates claim when he has been stripped of his entire means of success itself? If he made his living observing and interpreting the world around him, how could he be living if that was no longer an option? While the theories vary infinitely, there must be a reason why we are born into the world. Some may believe that reason has been predetermined in the prefaces of our destinies, while others believe it is a story we write along the way. Regardless of how you read it, it is human nature to discover and fulfill that reason. If we weren't meant to, then why exactly were we born? Why do many of us make it to our 16th birthday? Our 21st? Our 50th? If life wasn't meant to be lived, explored, and learned from, then what would be the point of existence at all? The likes of Beethoven and Mozart didn't compose music for us to close our ears and hear nothing. The works of Van Gogh and Monet don't hang in prestigious art museums for us to stare blankly at the tile on the floor. Roses don't have thorns if we weren't meant to be pricked, and we didn't invent band aids if we weren't meant to scrape our knees. The world is full of questions to be asked, lessons to be learned, and, most simply, really wonderful things just meant to be appreciated. If we can learn to do those things by the time we

reach the end of our maze, then we truly have lived a life worth living.[i]

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