

On the meaningfulness of socrates life



To someone in modern society who does not study philosophy, the name Socrates is synonymous with the image of a well-known philosopher. Some will recognize him as a significant figure and contributor to ancient Greece's reputation as a cornerstone of philosophy. There are also many who disagree with his views, whether that be in his time, in ours, or in between.

It's what ultimately resulted in his sentencing and execution (Plato 40). Were his actions during life meaningful enough to justify his death as a bold defense, or was it a mere shell of purpose and contribution? Answering this requires a description a meaningful life. Recently, Susan Wolf has provided such a description in her essay, *The Meanings of Lives*. Under her definition, it seems that Socrates' life has meaning after all.

To be considered meaningful, life cannot be inactive, as described by Wolf's description which of a person whose life is lived in hazy passivity (Wolf 3-4). The entire basis of his trial was that he was a bit too active for many Athenians' liking. In opposition of what a normal citizen of Athens would occupy themselves with such as working, Socrates has chosen to question those around him, as he went to one of those reputed wise thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not approached another man (Plato 25). The sheer number of encounters and their nature brought him a myriad of unpopularity. A significant portion of the jury that was trying Socrates gave the verdict of guilty, then proceeded to also give him the death sentence (Plato 38, 40). Had he not engaged with and offended so many citizens of Athens, it would have been unlikely if not impossible for so much of the jury to vote against him. Some may be inclined to think he lived an inactive life because of his lack of economic contribution

to Athens. To do so, however, would be to suggest that intellectual contribution is worthless in the face of material, which would be absurd given how much intelligence helped elevate the status of humanity to be the planet's dominant species.

Being active does not necessarily mean that Socrates' life is meaningful if it can be characterized as [a life] whose dominant activities seem pointless, useless, or empty. (Wolf 4). There are arguments on both sides on whether what he did had any point, although there are indications of some resemblance of a goal or purpose. He sees his questioning of those that are less wise than him as a duty that has been enjoined upon [him] by the god, by means of oracles and dreams (Plato 36). He has a reason to do what he is doing because of what he believes to be divine compulsion. Outside of what only he believes in, Socrates also testifies that there are those that enjoy hearing those being questioned who think they are wise, but are not (Plato 36). In this sense, his activities were not empty because it was supposed to spread his ways. Because at least one purpose for his actions was identified, his life cannot be entirely pointless, even if the purpose is controversial.

Still, it's not enough for Socrates to have a goal. His actions must manifest in actual results, it will not do to be engaged in just anything...one must be engaged in a project or projects that have some positive value (Wolf 5) After Socrates' trial, his close friend Crito tries to convince him to escape. One of the points made is that there are many who are willing to help him and would be distraught to see him die, including Simmias the Theban [who] has brought enough [money] for this very purpose. Cebes too, and a good many others (Plato 45). He has spread his way of thinking to others, and to such

success that a significant number of people are willing to assist in this dire time. His very legacy is also a testament to his actions having positive value. In modern times, he is recognized as one of the most influential philosophers, giving rise to the tendency to question. This behavior is widespread in philosophy and is responsible for many future cultural and technological advances, such as the rejection of the church's absolute authority. Some might disagree that he contributed positively because questioning is not inherently good. However, it would be wise to recognize that positive values do have moral properties, and thus do not have to be good.

Although Socrates' life fits Wolf's definition of a meaningful life, the definition itself can also be examined. The basic elements of Wolf's definition include an active life that engages in projects of positive value. The definition itself is sound in that, to be meaningful, a life should be making some sort of difference. This corresponds to positive value, and it trickles down from there. To have positive value, it must be the result of a project, and to engage in a project, one must be active enough beforehand to start one. The vagueness of the overall definition to include many interpretations is intended, because there is no one way to define meaning or this would be answered long ago quite easily. At the same time, the existence of a definition allows some, but not total, guidance to an answer. As such, the definition is integrally and logically sound.

Socrates, in a simple view, was just a man who walked around and frustrated or baffled citizens around him. He was not the most exciting figure in history.

However, to dismiss his life as meaningless despite his consistency and legacy would be erroneous.