

What the socratic
method is



First, we must understand what the Socratic Method is, and how it applies to the notion that the unexamined life is not worth living. The Socratic Method is a process of questioning in which Socrates would have an opponent state a thesis and would then deconstruct their argument through the use of questioning and critical thinking. 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. 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. Socrates complains that Euthyphro is stringing him along as he is not teaching him what piety actually is. 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.

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 its worth. Socrates argues that living a life where one does not realize their ignorance is a life not worth living because

he views knowledge to be directly tied to virtue. In order to live a worthy life, one must seek knowledge, which is a necessary component of his ethics. Using this parallel we can infer that because knowledge can be learned, it must also be possible to learn virtue. From this it follows that virtue can be taught, and we begin to understand that the Socratic Method is Socrates' attempt to act as a catalyst for others' self-examination. This is exactly what Socrates does with his dialogue in the Euthyphro. He feigns ignorance to elevate Euthyphro to a higher level, and guides him along the path of self-examination with his Socratic Method. Virtue then, becomes the pursuit of knowledge through self-examination. To put this in other words; one finds their life to be virtuous or ethical through the answers to the questions that are brought forth through internal examination. Without asking the questions, one will never receive the answers.

The Apology and Crito offer strong examples of Socrates' ethical philosophy. The Apology deals with the defense offered by Socrates to his accusers – for allegations of impiety and corruption of the youth of. Socrates' usages of the Socratic Method for the purpose of promoting others into self-examination lead him to question those who claimed to have wisdom, and ultimately he exposed them as ignorant. Questioning the beliefs of the wise men led to his charge of impiety, and the admiration he gained by the youth of Athens as a result of his actions led to his charge of corrupting the youth. Part of Socrates' defense in the trial was that through his actions he was simply trying to act as a catalyst for the people of Athens to ultimately find knowledge and gain an understanding of virtue. Socrates is found guilty of the charges against him, and is sentenced to death by ingestion of hemlock.

In the face of death, Socrates had the option to flee the city of Athens, but refused as it would have been in direct violation of his moral principles. In the *Crito*, Socrates discusses why he has a duty to stay and face his charge, as well as why the action of fleeing would be unethical. To Socrates, breaking one law would be an injustice to all laws and would cause great harm to the city of Athens. To escape would have been an injustice to Athens itself. As a citizen of Athens, Socrates was endorsing, and willing to abide by the law, and to break the law now – after 70 years of life – would in effect negate everything that he had advocated throughout his life.

The *Phaedo* discusses notions of life, death, and the soul. With his sentence looming overhead, Socrates contemplates the idea of death and suicide with Cebes and Simmias. He says that a true philosopher should look forward to death, but at the same time however, Socrates also says that though philosophers should be willing to die, it is wrong for them to commit suicide, as he views the gods as the guardians of people and views suicide as a destruction of the gods' possession void of any permission to do so. Because death is the separation of the body and the soul, the philosopher is then able to shed all of the distractions of the body – wants, desires, and fears – which gives them the ability to acquire the knowledge and wisdom that they've been seeking in their lives. The practice of philosophy then, according to Socrates, is likened to a sort of training for dying in which the philosopher is called to remove himself from his bodily attachment. This offers a stark contrast between the philosopher and the layman. The layman has an illusion of virtue, while the philosopher truly becomes virtuous. The philosopher approaches death with courage, gained from the pursuit of

knowledge, while the layman can only have an illusion of virtue as they do not participate in the practice of philosophy, and therefore cannot receive the knowledge and wisdom, and cannot separate themselves from the hindrance of bodily attachments.

The Republic establishes that justice is in the class of things that ought to be practiced for their own good, as well as for the good of their consequences. In order to understand exactly what justice is and what it means to live ethically, Socrates gives an example of a city as a large scale concept, and then examines it on a smaller more specific level. He discusses how the people of a city will have their own basic needs, but that the city as a whole will be shared and will have a structured system of education. Socrates also explains that there are four excellences in the city: wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. Socrates compares the city to a person and says that these four excellences must also exist in a person within the soul. Since they all exist in the soul and can often contradict, it is established that the soul is made up of parts and is not a whole. The soul consists of the rational, which judges truth, and makes wise and knowledgeable decisions in accordance with an examined life. The spirited part of the soul is the source of desires within a person such as love, and honor, while the appetitive aspect of the soul is the source of basic cravings that act as an anchor to the material and menial world. Within the city exists different classes of individuals; the guardians, the auxiliaries and the working class, all of which represent a different aspect or nature of the soul. The guardians are considered to be the rational, and ought to be the rulers of the city as they will be the best suited to attain knowledge and live and act ethically because

the guardians act on their own knowledge and wisdom through their inherent rationality, just as the rational part of the soul should rule over the other three aspects. From this, Socrates says that justice is establishing the parts of the soul so that they dominate and are dominated by each other according to nature and allow for the person and for the soul to pursue wisdom.

In conclusion, it is shown that the ethics of Socrates can be understood by examining the works of the Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, and Republic. Socrates uses the Socratic method as a tool to catalyze self-examination of others so that they may seek out knowledge. From this quest for knowledge, virtue is obtained, and this is the main goal of philosophy in Socrates' mind. Laws must be made in accordance with wisdom by those who practice philosophy, and must seek to benefit the city as a whole. Breaking one law is an injustice to all laws, and is an act of ignorance. Ethics, virtue, justice and morality all stem from what Socrates calls the examined life, in which philosophy is used as a means to gain wisdom and knowledge which act as the basis for these values. Philosophy then, is not just an occupation, but rather an integral part of life, and a necessary component of what it means to be ethical.