

Socrates retried (norman mailer edition)

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The unexamined life is not worth living. -Socrates " I would rather die having spoken after my manner, than speak in your manner and live." Those who are familiar with the Apology by Plato would recognize this phrase as belonging to the Greek philosopher Socrates, one of many final statements before willingly submitting to his death; the Apology is equal part defense, equal part personal funeral oration.

Socrates' only crime 'deserving' of this punishment was 'corrupting' the youth of Athens' by sharing his deepest thoughts, religious views, morals, and philosophies. In truth, the ruling parties of the time were fearful over the influence such words had upon the general populace; many people saw the government of Socrates' time as tyrants, and the ethics he taught were a welcome reprieve from daily politics, and this simply could not be. The leaders of our time still realize this threat to reign today, so in today's fast, need-based society, few would be capable of recognizing such a transgression; whereas, long ago, philosophy was the commonplace banter between educated individuals, it is a dead language among our people. Popular culture now decides the ideals of the masses as it accepts its new role as the fountainhead of Knowledge. It alone influences the impressionable minds of what to wear, what to say, even how to think freely, which ironically, strips the freedom from the thoughts themselves. After seeing the horrors such a mindless cult following can produce—such as empty propaganda, biting stereotypes, destructive divisions, war—can we, as a prosperous civilization, continue to believe that individuals such as Socrates are 'heretics' rather than heroes among the tragedies of their time? Our advancements in government—the ancient marble forums—politics—

orators such as Cicero, presiding over the pleas of Sicily– even mathematics—the genius of Pythagoras and his triangles– owe their success to the foundations of ancient philosophy—and yet they receive little credit.

In the end, all contributions to mankind require thought, and that is exactly what philosophy is: thinking. The philosopher Marcus Aurelius summarizes philosophy as something which enables man to “ accept all that happens and all that is allotted ... and finally to wait for death with a cheerful mind, as being nothing else than a dissolution of the elements of which every living being is compounded” At a glance, there is no apparent ‘ evil’ in such a view; to Aurelius, philosophy was a means of understanding. Where many see death as the ultimate fear, the greatest unknown factor of our existence, Aurelius understood, through philosophical introspection, that there was a truth to death, and that it was natural; what wrong is there in seeking to understand what is not known? Yet, Socrates was put to death for the very same mindset. What, then, were the motives for the reaction of the Athenians to the accusations of Socrates’ “ corruption”? They are the same as the reasoning behind those very same judgments cast today: fear. When a mind denying itself of the introspection Socrates promoted is barraged with such unfamiliar views and beliefs, it fears them, and seeks the swiftest way to suppress them.

Even now, some who would read this, after learning it was written by a modern-day youth, would fear the resurfacing of such outdated ideals, and quickly dismiss the words as childhood fancy and ‘ magical’ thinking. This stubborn attachment to such rationalization is a defense mechanism of the human mind, so we are not overwhelmed by what we do not understand.

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However, can the process of slowly eradicating a philosophical outlook on life and replacing it with trivial and materialistic pleasures be excused as mere defensive rationalization? There is a fine line between maintaining thought and achieving progress, and the technological monarchy of the modern world threatens to erase it entirely; the philosophers are becoming a dying breed. Much of the beauty in this ‘obsolete’ lifestyle comes from its lack of material aspects. Though Marcus Aurelius was an emperor—the fabled Philosopher-King—during the reign of the Antonine emperors, philosophy was not reserved for great and powerful minds alone.

Epictetus, a slave from Roman times, is just as revered as the Emperor Aurelius, even containing his own volume in the literary collection produced by the Classics Club. This is because philosophy transcends the realm of wealth and poverty; it cares not for the affairs of flesh and folly. So many individuals lament the tragedies of their niche in life, but very few realize how much of their problems can be attributed to their own lifestyles. Rather than reflect upon their issues, such as Aristotle did in his essay on Pleasure and Happiness—one of the many roots of modern-day conflicts—the troubled turn to almost childish means of ‘resolving’ the problem. They essentially seal themselves within their sphere of troubles because they are not willing to think outside of their normal ideologies.

It would have been easy for Epictetus to resign himself to the life of a owned man, simply following his day to day regiments of basic duties, but he allowed himself to think, and not in a simplistic manner, but one that would be remembered for centuries to come. In The Enchiridion—the ‘handbook’ to Epictetus’s philosophies—he states in entry 17: “ If a person had delivered
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up your body to some passer-by, you would certainly be angry. And do you feel no shame in delivering up your own mind to any reviler, to be disconcerted and troubled?" If one considers Epictetus' condition, this statement is ironic: as a slave, his body was delivered up to some passer-by, but he never let his mind be treated likewise. Through the will of his mind, he freed himself from his unfortunate circumstances. Today, too many people so easily forfeit both mind and body as slaves to whatever power they choose to follow, be it fashion, popularity, or any of the multiple 'slave owners' rampant in the world. Philosophers' treated the mind, body, and soul with the utmost respect, even when another being's views came into conflict with their own beliefs.

That ability—the pure open-mindedness— is hard to come by now, and it grows scarcer and scarcer by the day. Instead of wallowing in the sadness brought on by our daily shackles, instead of striking others with our heavy chains, should we not focus more on finding the keys to the locks, especially when the answer lies so easily within our reach? Often, many question the practicality of philosophy. When asked what philosophy is, the picture of men dwelling alone comes to mind, heads buried in a book or a stack of yellowing papers. My 11th grade Psychology teacher once told us, " A degree in Philosophy is something people work for, but, in the end, what can you really do with it?" True, philosophy may not be a material art like Chemistry, where you learn how to handle aspects of the physical world, or English, where you are educated in the concrete structures of the English language, but, when you truly dwell on what make all those studies possible, one conclusion comes to mind: Thought. A degree in philosophy will not likely land someone

the perfect job, or create a steady flow of income; it may not be a title that many understand, and it may not have its own school in the real world, but philosophy never claimed to be something so practical. Epictetus, in his short essay—aptly titled *What Philosophy Promises*— gives the ideal statement of what philosophy does: No great thing is created suddenly, any more than a bunch of grapes or a fig.

If you tell me that you desire a fig, I answer you, that there must be time. Let it first blossom, then bear fruit, then let the fruit ripen. Since, then, the fruit of a fig tree is not brought to perfection suddenly, or in one hour, do you think to possess instantaneously and easily the fruit of the human mind? I warn you, expect it not. How could the mission statement of philosophy be any clearer? It is not a practical or technical art, but one of cultivation.

Humans seek more and more to utilize the world around them in new and innovative ways, but, we have always realized that, in order to develop the raw materials of the earth into an idea, we must first ensure that our creative processes are not stagnant.

If we had kept the same basic structure of the candle in mind when creating the light-bulb, then tungsten wire would never have replaced the wick. The stereotypical opinion on the philosopher is that he or she has no beneficial role in the large society; because they are constantly entrapped within a mire of thoughts, they must exist in their own inner world, apart from external events. On the contrary, a philosopher has a very essential part in the play of human development: they enrich those around them. In the same way that fertilizer prepares the soil for the future planting of seeds, so the philosopher paves the way for the inevitable processes of the human mind.

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Un-enriched soil, prepared with only water, may yield crops after a time, but it will be with much effort, and the soil will crave those life-giving nutrients that quicken its functions.

True, the fertilizer may not be the seed, or may not be the profitable outcome, but it was still a vital component of growth. A philosopher may not be a specialist in every area of thought, but he takes it upon himself to dabble in the realm of knowledge, freely sharing what he learns in the hope that he can spur the growing process for others. A degree in philosophy has no ‘tools-of-the-trade’, they have no government-sponsored school, no ‘practical’ application, but, as we are all creatures of growth, so does the philosopher enrich us, glad to cultivate the Garden around them, preparing the ideal world for themselves, and others. For those who would further debate the practicality of philosophy, and who demand a label to be slapped upon its practice—for men seem to fear things which do not have names they are familiar with—let us tentatively call philosophers’ ‘artists’. An artist’s job is to employ a wide array of media, in order to create a result both beautiful visually, and in its meaning.

For the cartoonist, the simplistic pencil is all the inspiration that is needed. For the Da Vinci or Van Gogh, a palette of pastels and oils is required; for the more spatial sculptor, only bronze, marble, and other concrete materials will do for their expressions. For philosophers’ to be considered artists, they require a media, and it is this: thought. Thoughts are like crayons, found in a variety of colors, shades, names, and associated moods. As the artist, it is the philosopher’s task to take up a handful of those colors—overlooking

whether or not those colors are correctly matched by the color-wheel—and take them to the infinite canvas of the human mind.

There is no single technique of art employed, but a wild queue of actions: cross-hatching, diagonals and parallels and perpendiculars; angles, center points, and intersections; borders, fillings, and negative space. At first, there appears to be no coherency to the picture; it seems as if the artist took to the canvas blindly, unaware of the colors chosen or their placement in the scheme of the visual. However, as the eye takes in more of what lies before it, a masterpiece comes to fruition. It has nothing to do with its aesthetics, or its organized color scheme; on the contrary, to many, there may appear no semblance of order. The beauty of the creation is its novelty, the sense that the result is new, set apart from all other works of its kind, and that is because it is.

Philosophy allows its artist to construct a thought process completely unique to their own experiences, although it is composed of the same basic elements of those around them. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “ Plato is philosophy, and philosophy Plato,”, but Plato is also Camus, and Camus, Rand, Rand, Aristotle, Aristotle is Socrates: Philosophy is one endless painting that each philosopher adds to, but never completes. While every other endeavor of mankind seeks to out-do the work of the man before it, philosophy thrives off of its unity, off of the knowledge that it is lasting, and shared, and that there is no harm in its colors blending, because, whether or not the first spectator of its results gains nothing from it, someone, somewhere, will, and the moment that philosophy teaches something, then its purpose is fulfilled; it’s coursework is completed, its degree is obtained.

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Philosophy is thought, and in a time when a lack of thought creates rifts between man and women, country and country, everyone could use one of these ' impractical' degrees. Albert Camus—a more recent philosopher of the times—once wrote, “ We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking.

In that race which daily hastens us towards death, the body maintains its irreparable lead.” Camus' choice of words—using ' irreparable' rather than a word such as ' undeniable'—is no accident. When something is irreparable, it is damaged beyond the point of being restored to usefulness. Camus, like Socrates, understood that “ The unexamined life is not worth living”.

Thought and life are two inseparable components of the same being, but allowing the body to move before the mind is a critical error.

Our mind guides our movements, our vitals, how to eat, how to sleep, how to feel. When we move without thinking, act without thinking, feel without thinking—what becomes of us? As Camus says, we give our body the “ irreparable” lead, one that denies our thoughts the chance to keep speed, and, inevitably, leaves them behind in the race. When we deny our thoughts influence in our life, we are no better than the animals we domesticate; we fall back upon animal instincts and actions. Thought is one of the few privileges humanity has been given, and we have not had to create. It is our responsibility to nurture that ability, to use it to its fullest potential.

To do otherwise is an insult to our human capacities. Now more than ever, it is beyond a necessity to maintain our logical processes, the faculties that allow us to create and innovate. Tragically, it takes little thought to destroy—

we can knock a glass to the floor with nothing more than a spasm of the hand—but it takes a deep concentration, a drive, a thought, to create. If we see philosophy as a remnant of a bygone age, as something we have surpassed, then our bodies have continuously overlapped our thoughts in the race of life. Whether or not we see it, each one of us has our own philosophy; what proper conduct is in a relationship, how to treat children, the reasons for war, why we die, why we live, our political views—all of these fall under the realm of philosophy.

Contrary to popular belief, philosophy is more than just shoving your nose in some dusty volume and meandering along some long-forgotten road prattling on to yourself; it is more than an unending string of million-dollar phrases and inconceivable thought processes. Philosophy is what makes someone an I, not an it. It is the ego in all of us—not the narcissistic archenemy we all try to overcome, but the pride we are able to draw upon as we address ourselves as I. I think, I feel, I am. If you leave thought behind in Camus' race, then when does the thought of -I- come to mind? Of course, some would look at this literary piece and say, "Where are the statistics? Where are the media quotes? Where is the current day relevance?" That is the problem, though, isn't it? There is no careful documentation of this topic, no interviews, no spotlight. The essence of philosophy is the use of thought-processes and personal beliefs.

There is no need to cite numbers and super-stars—they are the reasons that this era of thinking is dying. No one wants to reach back to the streets of Rome or the pillars and shrines of Greece to reflect upon the marvelous and beautiful ideas and truths that those people upheld. We are all too busy

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immersing ourselves in the readily available playthings of today. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, in his essay titled Happiness and Creativity, writes: “Twenty-five centuries ago, Plato wrote that the most important task for a society was to teach the young to find pleasure in the right objects. Plato.

. . . had rather definite ideas about what those ‘right things’ should be. We are much too sophisticated today to have strong feelings on the matter.” If we view the civilization that Plato dwelt in, and even Plato himself as sophisticated by our standards, then what right have we to believe we are sophisticated after discarding those systems that made those people sophisticated in the first place? This is only another paradox in the torrent of paradoxes that we humans have created: Joining the masses that believe in non-conformity,—which is conformity—waging wars to find peace, and making progress by stripping away that which allowed us to progress.

Maybe this is the simple cycle of life that we are cast into to live, but, as Epictetus saw, limitations of the person by no means need apply to the mind. The philosophers of yore constantly sought to fight away the chains of ‘unexamined lives’, as Socrates put it, and if we but took a moment to examine that concept alone, we might see the value in doing such a thing. Sadly, the era of such introspection is taking its last gasps and philosophers such as I flail in its death-throes. Our minds, invisible to our eyes, come second to our hands, and we are only capable of dwelling upon what we can make. On a level of base happiness, the individuals of ancient times must have been exponentially happier, because they needed only to live in the happiness available to them.

Today, we create trivialities daily to keep us occupied, but soon enough, we're on to the next toy in a desperate attempt to maintain the frail happiness we have created for ourselves. Still, our mind works on, not as an entity, but as a machine, systematically producing ideas without real thought. Technology hands us the blueprint to the gun, but we do not think on the lasting repercussions such a thing will make, beyond the need to protect ourselves; because we did not think, the gun draws an invisible thread through the gallons of blood and shattered dreams, tirelessly to a door that is barred—the door that represents the finish lines our bodies crossed first, leaving our thoughts as the loser. As lucrative as a well-oiled machine sounds, it is still a machine unless it has a heart. The most intricate computer shall never be an adequate substitute for a mind, because an algorithm is not a philosophy; it is just a program. This is the reality our world is carrying us into, whether or not it hears our say.

Our 'brilliant minds' create more and more innovations that take over such remedial tasks as reading—tasks that were meant to enrich the mind during the time it took to complete them. Our well-oiled machine is insatiable, devouring things that were meant to be indestructible—thoughts, true thoughts, untouchable by the outer world—because the machine does not have the ability to think. We are again fulfilling the role of the Athenians, acting as a mob-mentality eager to condemn that which we do not fully understand. It is not a comprehensive textbook that we can read, or an appealing tool with a user-manual; because it is not capable of providing instant gratification—the fig we expect to grow within an hour of its planting—we wish to discard it without a second thought. We have put something on

the Guilty stand that has no voice loud enough to reach the jury. We expect this old mindset to defend itself, to give us reasons why it is necessary to keep it in our New World—just as the Athenians asked Socrates' to defend himself when he had done nothing wrong.

Author Ayn Rand has been repeatedly placed upon the Defendant's stand for her Objectivist philosophy—which denounces God, determinism, altruism, and the supernatural—because many saw it as a heartless way to live. I applaud Rand for having the courage to advocate her philosophy in a world that seems to believe that it does not need the term. It is not our duty to believe every philosophy, but to believe in philosophy itself. We may not all be a Rand, or a Camus, or a Socrates, but we are all an I, and, when it comes down to the fine point, each one of these individuals came to that conclusion: I have a view. To the world, though, a view means nothing if it is not shared.

When one gear runs counterclockwise to the system around it, the surrounding gears do not all come to a halt in the hopes that the problem will resolve itself. They continue to spin, and as they spin, they wear the counter-gear down harshly. That is why, if we choose to become that one gear—that Rand, that Socrates—we must be willing of and accept the consequences that choice entitles. We must come to terms with the fact that, in a world determined to create a Utopia, more Dystopias will occur before we find our Eden, our Nirvana. We, who advocate this life of philosophy—a life of contemplation, of thought, of diversity and unity—must do so knowing that, one day, we may be forced to stand trial again, to stand alone against the multitude who fear thought, who see only 'corruption' and <https://assignbuster.com/socrates-retried-norman-mailer-edition/>

revolt in the eyes of those who seek only to sow greener gardens around them. Philosophers' are not rebels rallying beneath a flag of bloodshed; they are revolutionaries seeking a quiet change, one that begins in each of us and travels outward, like a ripple.

This train of thought is nothing to fear, to condemn, to blame; it is not some violent onslaught of forcible ideas, eager to subdue dissenters. Socrates did not seek to turn the population of Athens against the rulers, against the magistrates and lords; he sought to turn them inward, to look inside themselves, to seek the solution to the outer calamities inside them.

Introspection was his god, his ethic, his prayer. If he seemed at times to turn his eyes from the gods, it was only to look deeper within himself, and yet, he was labeled a heretic and corrupter. Socrates died by poison, but the poison that killed him was far more than the one fed to him. The poison that killed him was that of ignorance, of an unwillingness to confront that which we fear: ourselves.

It was a poison of hypocrisies, of false knowledge and false accusations, of condemnation and a failure to learn. Socrates' may have died by the poison, but he lives on in papers such as this, or thoughts such as these; philosophy is the spirit of all those who have tasted it through the ages. Philosophy is a painting-in-progress, a science half-learned, a practice obscure. There is still much we need to learn from this ever-developing place we call home, and that development will require the fullest extent of our thoughts: What better way to move on than through philosophy? If this essay is to stand trial before the Neo-Athenians of today, those who are just as judgmental as the jury of Socrates, those who continue to isolate the free thinker before the crowd and

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sentence the diversity of thought to death, those who would seek to condemn a part of us that we have never been without; if this mind that lives on through me, through Socrates', Camus, Rand, Plato, Aristotle, Aurelius, Epictetus, through each and every individual who dares to think; if the words found here are seen as corrupters, defilers of the gods, rebels against what is; if the sentence concluded is poison, than before philosophy is asked to take that final drink, let Socrates' final words ring above the cries of sentence: " The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways—I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows."