

The Unexamined Soul

The ideal of the examined life is noble for precisely this reason. It sounds unobjectionable: an encouragement to be fully human, to use our highly developed faculty of thought to raise our existence above that of mere beasts. For if we don't think, we are no more than animals, simply eating, sleeping, working and procreating. And though it may be a bit strong to say such lives are not worth living, all but a minority of ethical vegetarians would agree that they are much less valuable than fully human ones.

However, there would be no need to exhort us to examine our lives if we did not think that there were human beings who do not, and so have valueless, bestial lives. The noble ideal has a harsh implication: some in the herd of humankind may as well be animals, or dead.

Socrates believed that philosophy - *the love of wisdom* - was the most important pursuit above all else. For some, he exemplifies more than anyone else in history the pursuit of wisdom through questioning and logical argument, by examining and by thinking. His 'examination' of life in this way spilled out into the lives of others, such that they began their own 'examination' of life, but he knew they would all die one day, as saying that a life without philosophy - an 'unexamined' life - was not worth living.^{[3][4]}

Socrates believed that living a life where you live under the rules of others, in a continuous routine without examining what you actually want out of it is not worth living. This illustration of a lifestyle is what Socrates would describe an unexamined life. Hence Socrates' renowned statement "The unexamined life is not worth living". Declaring that humans must scrutinize their lives in order to live a fulfilled one isn't agreeable to any extent.

Socrates' statement does instigate discussion, but it doesn't necessarily apply to everyone's way of life and what makes or doesn't make their life worth living. The theory that all lives that are unexamined don't have a purpose and should not be lived is unreasonable and simply not true. There is a lot more that contributes to a person's happiness and well-being besides "examining their lives". Factors such as life experiences, being with family, things to be thankful for, memories, and reaching success in life. Everything that makes one happy, and a happy life should most definitely be lived whether its examined or not.

Epicurus' philosophy on happiness, is composed of three things; good companionship (friends), having freedom (being self-sufficient and free from everyday life and politics) and an analyzed life (meaning to have time and space to think things through). Epicurus and Socrates have different approaches to the phrase "analyzing life". Epicurus would advise not to spend money as temporary relief for a bad day but rather take time out and reflect and contemplate. Socrates on the other hand has a different stance.

Epicurus believes that analyzing your life is one third of what it takes to have a happy life whereas Socrates believes that if you are not constantly reviewing and examining every aspect of your life just so you can get the best out of it, it's not worth living in general.

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“The unexamined life,” Socrates declared in his trial, “is not worth living.” His student, Plato, wrote down those words in his account of Socrates’ trial and death, in the book, Apology.*

Simon Longstaff wrote in the [New Philosopher magazine](#):

Socrates obviously knows the burden of being free – especially in conditions of radical uncertainty where values and principles might compete with equal ‘weight’. If he cannot convincingly claim that an examined life is necessarily more pleasurable (or even useful) then he is left to suggest that is, in fact, the only life worth living if to be fully human.

Socrates took his own life in accordance with the sentence passed on him. That seems a somewhat extreme response but I imagine he would have taken the same route today. Would you rather live a life, I imagine the judge asking him, not questioning life, but instead watching TV, playing video games, reading inane bloggers, eating frozen pizza and drinking beer on the sofa, or would you rather drink this hemlock?

Socrates' claim that the unexamined life is not worth living makes a satisfying climax for the deeply principled arguments that Socrates presents on behalf of the philosophical life. The claim is that only in striving to come to know ourselves and to understand ourselves do our lives have any meaning or value.

Socrates: I tell you that virtue is not given by money, but that from virtue comes money and every other good of man, public as well as private. This is my teaching, and if this is the doctrine which corrupts the youth, I am a mischievous person.”

“If I tell you that I would be disobeying the god and on that account it is impossible for me to keep quiet, you won’t be persuaded by me, taking it that I am ionizing. And if I tell you that it is the greatest good for a human being to have discussions every day about virtue and the other things you hear me talking about, examining myself and others, and that the unexamined life is not livable for a human being, you will be even less persuaded.”

- All human beings naturally desire happiness
- Happiness is obtainable and teachable through human effort
- Happiness is *directive* rather than *additive*: it depends not on external goods, but how we *use* these external goods (whether wisely or unwisely)
- Happiness depends on the “education of desire” whereby the soul learns how to harmonize its desires, redirecting its gaze away from physical pleasures to the love of knowledge and virtue
- Virtue and Happiness are inextricably linked, such that it would be impossible to have one without the other.
- The pleasures that result from pursuing virtue and knowledge are of a higher quality than the pleasures resulting from satisfying mere animal desires. Pleasure is *not* the goal of existence, however, but rather an integral aspect of the exercise of virtue in a fully human life.

"What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Asked by the early Christian Tertullian, the question was vigorously debated in the nineteenth century. While classics dominated the intellectual life of Europe, Christianity still prevailed and conflicts raged between the religious and the secular. Taking on the question of how the glories of the classical world could be reconciled with the Bible, Socrates and the Jews explains how Judaism played a vital role in defining modern philhellenism.

Plato in Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai's Cave

Indeed, both the Greek and rabbinic literatures have their own cave traditions. More fundamentally, it is the fact that both stories are meant to articulate the fraught relationship of the philosopher or sage with civic life and the *polis*. Here, the parallels between Plato and the Babylonian Talmud are related to what both perceive as a tension between the philosophical life or the life of the sage of Torah, on one hand, and the political life and the sage's obligation to the public, on the other. Reading the talmudic narrative in light of Plato's analogy of the cave and its embeddedness in the *Republic* will allow us to add a political dimension to it that would otherwise remain hidden. That is, my claim is that the talmudic narrative does not merely attempt to negotiate the tension between the life of Torah or the devotional life and the practical or mundane life. Rather, if read as a talmudic version—or rather inversion—of Plato's analogy, the differentiation appears to be between the devotional and the *political* life. This distinction is an important one. Thus, I agree by and large with Rubenstein's reading of the story as thematizing the tension between “Torah and the Mundane Life,” as in the title of his chapter.⁷ But whereas Rubenstein presents this issue mostly in theological or generic “cultural” terms, I wish to emphasize the political substratum in the Bavli's text, which is highlighted if we read the story as an inversion of Plato's political philosophy.⁸ A comparison of the two mythic narratives and their respective framings will allow us to draw out more clearly the underlying politics of the rabbinic text.

By way of introduction, it should be acknowledged that the connection between the story of Rashbi's retreat into the cave and Greek mythology in general has been remarked on before. In his careful comparison of the Palestinian and Babylonian versions of the story, Lee Levine suggested as early as 1978 that some elements of the rabbinic story may indeed have been inspired by a Greek philosophical myth, namely the myth of Epimenides (sixth century BCE) and his purification of Athens.⁹ Noting what he considers striking parallels between that episode and the story about Rashbi,¹⁰ among them the sojourn in the cave