

Topic:

In the Apology, Socrates claims that “the unexamined life is not worth living”. What does he mean? Do you agree? Justify your views.

Response

Socrates concluded that “the unexamined life is not worth living for men” (Plato, Apologia) in his famous



defense prior to his execution. Socrates literally believed that an unexamined life is worse than death; this can be derived from his beliefs about morality and death stated in the *Apologia* and *Phaedo*. However, Socrates’ conclusion is incomplete and predicated on the assumption that the soul is immortal. It is not relevant to a person

who does not believe in the immortal soul and an afterlife.

An examination of Socrates’ beliefs about death and morality reveal his priorities, which lead him to make the conclusion that life is not worth living. Socrates stated that “death is something [he] couldn’t care less about” (Plato, Apologia) and that his whole concern was “not to do anything unjust or impious” (Plato, Apologia). He valued his ethics more than he valued his life, and upheld his ethics at risk to his life on occasions previous to his trial. He also believed that the “soul is evidently immortal” (Plato, Phaedo) and that it is far preferable to “[ignore] the pleasures of the body [...] and [adorn] his soul [...] with moderation, righteousness...” (Plato, Phaedo) and so on. The purpose of life is to enrich the immortal soul; consequently, a life is not worth living if it does not enrich the soul in some way. Socrates did not fear death because he dedicated himself to adorning his soul. However, Socrates did not believe that one can adorn the soul by unquestioningly follow ethical beliefs; they are so often incorrect or incomplete. He made himself distinctly unpopular by demonstrating that most men who claimed to be wise did not, in actuality, have any basis for their beliefs. In an attempt to fulfill his belief of the purpose of life, Socrates attempted to discover their true meaning. He stated that it is “the greatest good to

discuss virtue everyday” (Plato, Apologia), and through discussion uncover the true meaning – or as close as one can get – of virtue. Socrates would (and did) choose death over living an unexamined life, for he believed that the unexamined life violated the purpose of life itself.

While Socrates’ conclusion is consistent with his beliefs, it is flawed when you dispense with some of his assumptions. Socrates’ conclusion depends on the assumption that some sort of afterlife exists, for he measures the worth of life in terms of how well one has ‘adorned his soul.’ In fact, he believed that earthly pursuits “[do] more harm than good” (Plato, Phaedo), and so should be avoided in favor of virtue and learning. Essentially, Socrates believed that a certain way of life was best, and the extent to which one achieves that determined how ‘good’ one is. Referring to his conclusion, the worth of a life is determined by how ‘examined’ it is. However, if we dispense with the premise of an afterlife and the immortality of the soul, Socrates’ conclusion becomes less than convincing. If we can prove that an unexamined life is worth more than the death of an unexamined life, Socrates’ conclusion is false.

Assuming that the soul does not exist, we can conceptually measure how ‘good’ or worthwhile a life is in two ways: internally or externally (neither is practical in real life). An internal evaluation would determine the extent to which the person conforms to his ethical beliefs, and an external evaluation measure the degree in which the person’s life benefits his family, friends, and neighbors (collectively ‘society’). The internal measurement is flawed because the existence of an ethical belief does not make it good or worthwhile. For instance, an ethic that states you should not interfere with other people out of respect can be taken to the extreme of ignoring or overlooking signs of child abuse; something which benefits no one (not even the parents of the abused child). Conforming to the ethic would be measured as a worthwhile choice under the internal evaluation, where it should clearly be negative. In contrast, the external examination would measure it as a negative choice because the choice negatively affects society. Using the external evaluation, a life is worthwhile if it has a net benefit to society. This largely invalidates Socrates’ conclusion that an “unexamined life is not worth living for men” (Plato, Apologia):



the only way that an examined life would be worth more than an unexamined life is if the life examined contributed more to society; and in every respect, an unexamined life is worth living if it contributes to society. There is the possibility that an examined life is less beneficial to society than an unexamined life, if examining life makes one less productive and less beneficial to society than otherwise. This leads us into direct conflict with Socrates on another aspect – he believed that “the pleasures of the body and its ornamentation [...] [do] more harm than good” (Plato, *Phaedo*). However, as long as those pleasures benefit society it is worthwhile continuing to live. We know from modern economics and that consumption of goods and services raises the quality of life in nations due to supply and demand; a net benefit to society. Additionally, while it’s impossible to ascertain whether or not an unexamined life will positively benefit society or not, we know absolutely that no life at all cannot benefit society. Life is worthwhile as long as it has a net benefit on society – examined or not.

Socrates’ conclusion that an “unexamined life is not worth living for men” (Plato, *Apologia*) is one of the most famous phrases in philosophy. However, like all conclusions it is dependent on the premises that underlie the conclusion. One of Socrates’ premises is that the soul is immortal and that life should be spent enriching the soul for its “journey to the underworld.” (Plato, *Phaedo*) If we dispense with that belief, we can determine that Socrates’ argument is incomplete; substituting his premise that the degree to which a life is worthwhile depends on how much it adorns the soul for measuring how worthwhile a life is depending on how beneficial it has been to society invalidates his conclusion.



Bibliography

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