

THE EXAMINED LIFE?

Glenn Braddock

An introductory course in philosophy begins with Plato's *Apology*. Here Socrates famously states that 'the unexamined life is not worth living for man'. The professor lingers on the idea. In this first week of the course they have already struck upon a justification for all of the torturous analyzing, arguing, and thought-experimenting that will follow in the next few months. Without these vehicles of 'examination', our lives are not worth living! The students may have experienced enthusiastic defenses of the value of academic disciplines from other professors, but this guy is selling the idea that philosophy is necessary for a meaningful life.

And this is the perfect audience, as the students are mostly of traditional college age. The issue strikes at a fundamental tension brewing within them. On the one hand, their minds are wide open to all of the exciting new ideas that are being offered to them early in their college careers. They feel that Socrates may be on to something because, as they open their own lives to ever more penetrating examination, they find the experience fascinating, at times even exhilarating. On the other hand, they are pleasure-seeking missiles, as a colleague of our professor once called them. When not exploring new theories and thinking new thoughts, they are drinking, partying, 'hooking up' and in general pursuing whatever feels good. Occasionally heartbreak results, but mostly it's a lot of fun. A life filled with these diversions, with or without any rational examination, seems pretty damn good.

So the professor has them. They are invested in the debate. This will be their first case study in philosophical interpretation and critical evaluation. What is an examined life anyway? What's the connection between an examined

life and a life that is worth living? Does Socrates have an argument here? Is it a good one?

Various answers to these questions are proposed, some with more basis in the textual evidence than others. A student suggests that Socrates is thumbing his nose at Athens and refusing to live any other way than just how he sees fit. Another thinks Socrates wants to be a martyr. There may be some truth in these replies, the professor assures them, but then gently reminds the class that the primary aim is not to psychoanalyze Socrates but rather to make sense of his stated views. Let's not try to find some hidden motivation, as interesting as that may be, but instead focus on the case Socrates actually makes in his speech. The professor emphasizes that Socrates seems to be making a universal claim about what is required for a worthwhile human life. This is not just a statement of Socrates' personal preference, as if he is merely indicating that he prefers death to a life without examination. No doubt this is true of Socrates, but his claim is supposed to reveal something about any human life, no matter a person's distinctive beliefs and desires.

A third student, more helpfully now, observes that morality seems to be playing some role in Socrates' argument. Consider the complete sentence in which the famous claim is embedded: 'On the other hand, if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for man, you will believe me even less'. It is the nature of virtue that is the main topic to be questioned in an examined life. If acquitted of the bogus charges against him, Socrates promises to confront any juror he should meet with a challenge: 'Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power, are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honours as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible

state of your soul?' Socrates says that he will scold any citizen who 'attaches little importance to the most important things and greater importance to inferior things'. He will keep encouraging the Athenians to care less for their bodies and superficial goods like money and power and more for their souls, which are nourished by justice and truth.

So the broad outlines of the debate begin to take shape. Is Socratic dialectical examination of moral concepts necessary to live a life of virtue? Might it even be sufficient? Is morality really an essential component of a significant human existence? What about happiness? What's the relationship between happiness and morality? And where does Socrates get off making judgments about which lives are worth living? Doesn't each individual get to make that decision for him or herself?

It's the first week, so students and professor are still getting comfortable with each other, but an encouraging conversation follows. Many points of view are offered, critiqued, and defended. In the course of the discussion, Socrates is challenged, but despite some lingering doubts, he has clearly cast his spell. He convinces by the sheer power of his personality. Yes, he is arrogant, sarcastic, and fanatical, but it is easy to admire him. He is the rebel, the gadfly, standing up fearlessly against the forces of ignorance and injustice, on a mission from the gods to rescue Athens from its decadence. He is the philosophical evangelist and willing martyr for Reason, gladly welcoming death if it is his only alternative to an unexamined life.

Many of the students leave the classroom thinking about the next class on their schedule, or their plans for the evening, or whatever. But a handful leave thinking about the examined life and the compelling old man who defends it so vigorously.

Back in his office, the professor allows himself to feel satisfied. His throat is a little sore, an indication that his teaching muscles are out of shape from the long summer break, and maybe that he talked too much. But it was

a nice class. The students were attentive and active. There was a good feeling in the room. It was an auspicious beginning to the semester.

Then the guilt creeps in. He had let the old man win the day again. While he had welcomed criticisms, and even suggested a few of his own, it was to his advantage to implicitly endorse the examined life as some sort of ideal. Philosophy was not an abstract academic discipline for Socrates, he had argued, but rather a way of life – a good way of life, perhaps the best way of life. This class you have registered for, dear students, is not just an opportunity to earn three credits, satisfy a college core requirement, read some occasionally interesting old books, and strengthen important academic skills. It may also reveal to you a whole new way of thinking about your life, an approach that could leave you wiser, more just, and more authentically happy.

But the professor believes none of this. Not anymore. The examined life had become for him more of a burden than a vocation. In the *Apology*, we find Socrates mocking the poets whom he had spoken with because they 'do not compose their poems with knowledge, but by some inborn talent and by inspiration, like seers and prophets who also say many fine things without any understanding of what they say'. The professor, unlike Socrates, envies anyone like this. To be able to say or do anything important and rewarding without fully understanding it, or rather without needing to fully understand it, seems like a great blessing to him. He knows that there are people who are far too absorbed in the actual living of their lives to subject them to any serious rational evaluation. At some fundamental level, they know that their lives are good and meaningful. So they just live. Just live.

But he, our professor, just thinks way too much. There is a constant running commentary in his mind, like a soundtrack without music or poetry. It consists of questions, criticisms, arguments, suspicions, objections, defenses, definitions, and analyses directed at almost everything.

This habit of mind is the result of his training and practice as a professional philosopher. It seems to prevent him from total immersion in any activity or relationship that he finds valuable. It began as a useful disposition or talent and was honed through education and experience. He has directed it at his most pressing questions about the world and his place in it. But now he often feels that it has outlasted its purpose and worn out its welcome. To be able to act with full conviction, without crippling analysis, or to love with the full force of his passion, without doubts and fears, or even to become lost and transformed by playing or listening to music, without the inner voice and all of its judgments – these and many other aspects of an unexamined life, or at least a far less examined life, are the objects of his most earnest hopes. To just live. . .

All of the damned thinking, it often seems to the professor, has already served its purpose, and for some time now. As he urges to his Introduction to Philosophy students on the first day of every semester, there are answers to philosophical questions, despite some of the students' initial suspicions to the contrary. And these answers, while important and in some sense 'deep', are not so difficult to grasp. In fact, the answers to the most significant philosophical questions are right there before our eyes, if we only learn to see properly. They are not to be found in some other world of metaphysical facts or values. They are all right here, in this everyday world and in this everyday life. Indeed, the most fundamental philosophical truth is that there is just one world. As a young student, he envisioned himself creating a vast, systematic worldview, a philosophical theory of everything that would include his many profound reflections about the world behind the curtain. But now he knows better. There is nothing behind the curtain. There isn't even a curtain. And that's fine and good, because all of the meaning we need can be found in the closest things.

His thoughts turn back to Socrates and the examined life. It occurs to him that this is just one of many possible

good lives. Philosophical examination of one's beliefs and values is neither necessary nor sufficient for a worthwhile human life. Some people, like the professor, have fairly specific questions that they want answered and this leads them down a path of reflection, conversation, and rational argumentation. Others seem to view the examination as valuable in itself, or perhaps their curiosity is very difficult to quench. Each question and answer propels them further, deeper, and wider into all manner of obscure and technical philosophical minutiae. But our professor started down this path because he had basic existential questions about God, morality, the soul, death, and the meaning of life. He doesn't now know everything about any of these topics, but he knows enough to understand his place in this world. He understands it, but will he ever be able to take it?

There's a knock on his office door. It's a student from his Introduction to Philosophy class, a little nervous, but radiating a sense of purpose. He wants to speak with the professor about majoring in philosophy. . .

Glenn Braddock is a Lecturer in Project Renaissance, University at Albany, State University of New York.