

“The Unexamined Life is not Worth Living”: Socratic Dialogue versus Sophist Debate at the Birth of Philosophy

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The article is an analysis of the importance of Socrates in the history of philosophy, with special reference to his renowned dictum: “the unexamined life is not worth living”. The author argues that Socrates’ importance is the result of establishing Socratic dialogue as a manner of interaction, to be distinguished from debate. The differences between debate and dialogue are analysed at length. Whereas debates are engaged into in order to establish already fixed positions, and are only meant to bring opponents around to one’s own position, a dialogue starts with the docta ignorantia, displays a willingness to learn, follows the argument wherever it leads, and is prepared to progress to a position not shared by any dialogue partner initially. The author close-reads the passage in the Apologia from which the dictum in the title derives. He also discusses ways in which the statement has been appraised in the tradition of Western philosophy e.g. in the work of thinkers such as Gadamer and Popper.

1. Introduction

Danie Strauss has been a close friend and colleague of mine for the past 25 years. I have had the privilege of working with him on a number of projects. We worked together on the executive of the Philosophical Society of Southern Africa (PSSA), the *South African Journal of Philosophy (SAJP)* (the publisher of which he became during my tenure as editor) and the selection committee for the Stals Prize for Philosophy of the South African Academy for Science and Arts. We also co-operated on research projects that he initiated and that were concluded with a number of publications (cf. Strauss, 1994; 2005). Danie is not only one of the most prolific researchers amongst philosophers in South Africa and abroad, but is one of the most erudite and versatile thinkers that I know. His interests are wide-ranging, spanning fields as diverse as logic, the philosophy of mathematics, the theory of science and rationality, systems theory, the philosophy of Dooyeweerd,

and much more. In addition, the institutional role that he has played in the philosophical community of South Africa can hardly be over-estimated, including at least two terms as president of the PSSA, member of the editorial board and publisher of the *SAJP* for many years, and the like. That he could, in addition to also being Dean of Arts and Humanities at the University of the Free State, maintain the habit of playing top league squash until well into his fifties, creates the impression that there is also something super-human to this man. That is, until one joins him in late night conversations at philosophy conferences and is overwhelmed by his sense of humour and *joi de vivre*.

One of the aspects of Danie's intellectual make-up that I have always particularly appreciated, is his knowledge and a reliance on Greek philosophy – whether he is writing about rationality (Strauss, 2003), the notion of *synthetic a priori* and the distinction between modal function and entity (Strauss, 2000) or atomism and holism (Strauss, 1999). In honour of his vast knowledge of the Greeks, I would like, in this article, to make a simple analysis of the importance of Socrates in the history of philosophy, with special reference to his renowned dictum: “the unexamined life is not worth living”. My argument is that Socrates' importance is the result of establishing Socratic dialogue as a manner of interaction, to be distinguished from the related (though significantly different) notion of “debate”. Whereas debates are engaged into in order to establish already fixed positions, and are only meant to bring opponents around to one's own position, a dialogue starts with the *docta ignorantia*, displays a willingness to learn, follows the argument wherever it leads, and is prepared to progress to a position not shared by any dialogue partner initially. I close-read the passage in the *Apologia* from which the dictum in the title derives. And I finally discuss ways in which the statement has been appraised in the tradition of Western philosophy e.g. in the work of thinkers such as Gadamer and Popper.

2. Socrates as founder of philosophy

In a way analogous, though not exactly similar, to the way Christians are followers of Christ and Buddhists are followers of Buddha, philosophers are followers of Socrates. He is, as far as I am concerned, not only the first¹, but also the greatest of all the philosophers – and that is an ambitious

1 Thales, who lived a hundred years before Socrates, is often acclaimed as the first philosopher, followed by a score of thinkers like Anaximander and Heraclitus, known as the “pre-Socratics”. However, all of them are remembered for (the little we know of) what they thought, and not for establishing philosophy as a distinct activity. For this reason, although I do not object to calling these thinkers “philosophers”, I personally regard Socrates, as motivated in the argument which is to follow, as “the first philosopher”.

claim, given both the duration of the Western tradition (of which he is a pivotal founder) but also of the genius of so many of its greatest exponents.

Socrates is great, not so much because of what he said, taught or wrote. To the best of our knowledge, he wrote nothing, and what we know of him, we only know on the basis of what was written about him by his great pupil Plato, in whose dialogues he mostly is the main protagonist. Socrates, the greatest of the philosophers, is not great because of one or other philosophy that he invented or proposed. His greatness rather stems from the fact he is the *father of philosophy as an activity and, indeed, a way of living*. In fact, as the father of philosophy as critical conversation, about which I shall say more in due course, Socrates is, ironically, also in an important sense the *enemy* of “philosophy”. By that I do not mean that he had anything against philosophy as such, but that his ironic questioning of whatever accepted or established opinion or wisdom he came across, is the ultimate demonstration of the heart of the true philosophical disposition, which is the relentless insistence on examining whatever ideas, beliefs or ways of life people tend to get hooked on. It is first and foremost in this sense that his famous dictum “the unexamined life is not worth living” is to be understood. The first thing we need to understand about philosophy, is that it is always necessary and prudent to be critical of whatever is presented as philosophy itself. Socrates, the greatest of the philosophers, was great exactly because, for him, the question and the argument were more important than the answer.

I have been introducing students to the discipline of philosophy for the past 20 years. It remains a daunting task, and one that I probably will never fully master. The biggest embarrassment one is up against when trying to teach students what philosophy is, is that there is no satisfactory one or two or three liners to supply in response to the simple question: what is philosophy? In fact, I even find it quite difficult to answer that question within the ambit of one or a few lectures; I spend a whole semester on a course where I try to, more comprehensively, answer this question. Why is it so difficult? One possible, and to me quite plausible answer, is the fact that I, as the teacher, am simply too stupid to create a short and satisfactory answer. But there are other reasons too. One of them is the simple observation that the question “what is philosophy?” turns out to be itself a philosophical question, and, at that, one of the most difficult, but also one of the most important such questions that one can ask. When addressing this question, one is, inevitably, already engaged in the process of philosophising.

That is why I find the question “what is philosophy?” not a very fruitful question. It is very like asking: “what is language?” and, then, having to rely on the use of language to answer that very question. The better question to ask in my book, is “what does one do when you are philosophising?”, or better, “what kind of activity is the activity of philosophy?”. To answer this latter question, the point to start, always, is the memory of Socrates. While it is too difficult to find a common denominator in all the multiple positions and theories that have been offered in the name of “philosophy” in the course of history, the one constant that we do have recourse to, is the engaging conversation produced by Plato’s mentor on the market place of Athens. Therefore, when introducing students to philosophy, the best way of doing it is always to introduce them to Socrates and to the Socratic dialogues that are immortalized in Plato’s works, of which the *Republic* is probably the best known.

3. Debate and dialogue

Let me, in what follows, first make a few remarks about why the Socratic dialogue is the starting point of all philosophy. His greatest achievement was indeed the institutionalisation of a certain kind of conversation as the distinct manner of philosophical reflection. What is remarkable about Socratic dialogue, is the way in which it differs from other forms of interaction that were well known in Socrates’ time. The one other form of conversational interaction that I want to distinguish dialogue from, is *debate*. *It was only when people started to realize what the differences between dialogues and debates are, that philosophy, as the commitment to the persistently examined life, came into being as we know it.*

There were, in the time of Socrates, a number of “teachers” (some would say “philosophers”, but I would dispute the appropriateness of that title) operating in Greece. These men (women were not yet part of it!) were called the Sophists – like the word “philosophy”, derived from the Greek word “sophia” which means wisdom. The Sophists therefore were regarded as “wise men” – that is until Socrates appeared on the scene and showed us a manner of conversation that was infinitely superior to that of the Sophists. The Sophists were itinerant teachers who roamed all over Greece and often, in a manner apparently akin to that of Socrates, engaged people in conversation. But that conversation was a debate. In their debates, there was never any doubt as to what the position of the Sophist was and would remain. The point of the engagement with others was to either persuade the interlocuter to accept the position of the Sophist or, if

that failed, to ridicule the opponent and his views. This is typical of a debate: when engaging in a debate, like a politician in Parliament, one already has a clear-cut position, and the issue is to let that position prevail, at whatever cost. The rhetoric employed has only one purpose, and that is to persuade my opponent to “come over to my side”. Debates are therefore always essentially *won or lost*; do we not all remember the high school debates of our youth, at the end of which, typically, a vote was always taken to determine “who won” the debate! In real life, such as in Westminster styled parliaments, the ultimate demonstration of winning a debate is the situation where an opponent is so thoroughly “brought on board” of a certain view, that he or she literally “crosses the floor”, i.e. comes over to the side of the protagonist of the debate. This is what the Sophists did: they had views that they tried to, in an apparently conversationalist manner, impose on their interlocuters by engaging them in debates, the purpose of which was to be won. Some of these views were quite implausible, like the radical relativism of the Sophist Protagoras who claimed that “man is the measure of all things” and that the distinction between true and false knowledge is therefore invalid². This view is, of course, highly implausible because it is incoherent: if the statement “there is no true knowledge” is true, the statement itself cannot be true and therefore cannot be taken seriously.

Socrates, I said, is great, and is generally regarded as the father of philosophy exactly because he introduced a manner of engaging people in conversation that differed radically from the debates of the Sophists. What Socrates introduced, was *dialogue*. Dialogue is, like debate, a form of conversational engagement of other people. Its purpose is to reach some new knowledge about some matter. But that is where the similarity with debate ends. The first significant difference between debating and Socratic dialogue, is the point of departure. This is known in the literature as the so-called *docta ignorantia*, the admission, when starting to engage in dialogue, that I, who talk to you, know as little about the matter at hand as anybody else. For Socrates, all that he knows with certainty, when the discussion starts, is that he knows nothing. That assumption must in principle be shared by all participants in true dialogue when the process sets out. Of course, in practice we rarely know nothing about a matter when we engage in a conversation about it. The Socratic claim to ignorance has therefore also been criticized in the literature as

2 Plato, in his *Thaetetus*, submitted Protagoras’ views to this, as well as other devastating criticisms.

disingenuous; it seems hard to believe that someone who “knew nothing” about a matter, could reach the heights that Socrates, according to Plato, indeed reached in the course of his dialogues.

However, I disagree with these critics of Socrates. The *docta ignorantia* is not so much a factual claim as a logical claim. What Socrates means when claiming ignorance, is that we bracket whatever knowledge we may have of a subject when starting to engage in true dialogue. That is required not only of Socrates, but also of the partners in dialogue. The next important disposition in dialogue is the willingness to learn from the interlocuter. Socrates genuinely opens himself up to new insights. That can never happen in a debate; the Sophist, as we saw, knows what he knows and is not in the least interested in learning anything new; the only purpose of the engagement is to bring the other around to one’s own position. In dialogue, on the other hand, we engage in the process on the basis of, if not genuine ignorance, then at least a genuine commitment to the possibility that I might learn something from my partner that I did not know.

A further characteristic of the process of dialogue, is the commitment of both participants (there may obviously also be more than two participants at once) *to follow the argument wherever it leads*. This is the essence of the process of “examination” alluded to in the title of this paper. To live a truly examined life, is to commit to dialogue, i.e. to a process where one is prepared to distrust one’s own insights sufficiently and is generous enough to seek the merit of the opponent’s argument as far as possible, in order to see and to go wherever it leads. Ideally in dialogue (although we might not often see it in practice) no force other than the force of the more persuasive argument leads or persuades me to reach a position. The partners in Socratic dialogue are full equals; what matters is the *argument*, not *who* makes the argument nor *what external forces* the maker of the argument can muster in support of his views – forces like money, beauty, wit, rhetoric, status or political power.

And, finally, the outcome of a Socratic dialogue is a position that mostly (albeit not necessarily) *differs from the positions held by the conversationalists at the outset of their interaction*. Such a new position is a reflection of the fact that both learned something new in the process, and very possibly learned it from the other, either directly, or in view of mistakes made by the other or myself. Dialogue, in other words, *ends in a new consensus*, or, if that is too ambitious (as many would claim) in at least some agreement about a new basis upon which the dialogue may be continued – a basis that now avoids unwarranted assumptions that were operative earlier.

This insight is powerfully formulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the 20th century's most persuasive advocates of the Socratic dialogue, also as model for the process of interpreting texts, in the following passage:

Coming to an understanding in conversation [i.e. dialogue] presupposes that the partners are ready for it and that they try to allow for the validity of what is alien and contrary to themselves. If this happens on a reciprocal basis and each of the partners, while holding to his own ground simultaneously weighs the counter arguments, they can ultimately achieve a common language and a common judgment in an imperceptible and non-arbitrary transfer of viewpoints...What steps out in its truth is the Logos, which is neither mine nor yours and which therefore so far supersedes the subjective opinions of the discussion partners that even the leader of the discussion always remains the ignorant one (Gadamer, 1975: 348, 331).

It is because Socrates is the founder of this kind of conversation or dialogue that he, in my book, is to be regarded as the first and the greatest of the philosophers. The tradition of philosophers that have followed him since Greek times have not all been an unqualified blessing to the world. Some of them have taken us forward in ways that can hardly be appreciated enough. One of these is John Locke, the father of the modern democratic idea, whose ideas eventually pitched up, even in Namibia and South Africa when democracy came to us in the 1990's. Some, like Karl Marx – not so much he himself, but some of his followers, and particularly the socio-political systems bearing his name that were created in the course of the 20th century – showed us how risky and prone to misapplication the translation of some philosophical ideas into practice can be. Much of what has been produced in the name of philosophy is not only highly contestable but also dangerous. How can value be distinguished from error and even danger? I know of no better measure than its submission to the rigours of unfettered Socratic scrutiny. Karl Popper, one of the previous century's most eloquent champions of liberal (he preferred the term "social"³) democracy as well as of critical dialogue or *Conjectures and refutations*³, writes in this regard:

We all have our philosophies, whether or not we are aware of this fact, and our philosophies are [often] not worth very much. But the impact of our philosophies upon our actions and our lives, is often

3 Title of one of Popper's best known books.

devastating. This makes it necessary to try to improve our philosophies by criticism. This is the only apology for the continued existence of philosophy which I am able to offer (Popper, 1979: 33).

Popper also argues persuasively that Socratic dialogue was the pivotal event in Greek history that established and solidified the idea that, whenever we disagree, it is "better to let our theories die in our stead". Socrates was an heir of the Ionian school in ancient Greece where pupils had the right to criticize their masters. This stood in stark contrast to the Italian school, founded by Pythagoras. Popper writes: "The story that a member, Hippasus of Metapontum, was drowned at sea because he revealed the secret of the irrationality of certain square roots, is characteristic of the atmosphere surrounding the Pythagorean school..." (Popper, 1963: 149). Socratic dialogue is our best protection against the vicissitudes of irrationality, power and violence. Nothing is more responsible for entrenching the idea that it is always better to engage our differences in conversation and dialogue, rather than from behind the barrel of a gun, than the way Socrates taught us to engage in philosophical argument.

4. Philosophy as a (dangerous) way of life

Let me return to the statement in the title of this article. What strikes us, not only about the statement as such, but about what has just been argued, is the relationship between philosophy and life. Philosophy clearly is not simply a small part of the many things that philosophers engage with. Philosophy, for Socrates, and for all true philosophers, is a way of life. That way of life, is a life examined, i.e. submitted to the consistent critical scrutiny of the Socratic dialogue.

Socrates makes the statement that an unexamined life is not worth living towards the end of Plato's *Apology*, the famous book in which Socrates' defence at his infamous trial shortly before his execution occurs. Socrates, as we all know, was tried for two crimes: heresy (it was claimed that he did not believe in the gods, which, according to most experts, was not the case), and misleading the youth of Athens. In the *Apology*, Socrates defends himself eloquently against these charges, but to no avail; he is found guilty, although by a narrow margin of 59 (280 to 221) votes⁴. As was apparently customary, he was then asked to suggest a penalty, and he

4 In the text Socrates says the margin was 30 votes, but, according to Tredennick in his notes on the text, this was merely to suggest a round number [Tredennick, 1969: 192 (note 34)].

probably infuriated the meeting by suggesting 100 drachmae, which, according to Xenophon, would have been the equivalent of one fifth of all that he owned (Tredennick, 1969: 192, note 38). He was consequently sentenced to death. According to James Rachels, the sentence was not necessarily that harsh, since, according to custom, Socrates had the unofficial option of exile in spite of the sentence. Means were even made available to him to escape while awaiting execution, and his friends encouraged him to flee (Rachels, 2005: 3). Yet, he did not take that option and decided to stay and face death by drinking a cup of hemlock. In Plato's dialogue *Crito*, he presents an argument for why he chose to stay.⁵

The most compelling argument that Socrates gives for staying, however, we find in the *Apology*. Socrates starts off by dismissing the idea of exile, since he sees no point, at his age to "spen[d] the rest of my days trying one city after another and being turned out every time!". Even if a city accepts him, he will start talking to the young people, and the older people will soon be sufficiently irritated to drive him away. Then comes the pivotal passage that I quote in full. Plato makes Socrates say:

"Perhaps someone may say 'But surely, Socrates, after you have left us you can spend the rest of your life in quietly minding your own business'. This is the hardest thing of all to make some of you understand. If I say that this would be disobedience to God, and that is why I cannot 'mind my own business', you will not believe that I am serious. If on the other hand I tell you that to let no day pass without discussing goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking and examining both myself and others is really the very best thing that a man can do, and that life without this sort of examination is not worth living, you will be even less inclined to believe me" (*Apology*: 71-72).

If I understand him correctly, Socrates, in this passage (from which the statement in the title of the article is also derived) is saying that he prefers death to a life barred from continued philosophical reflection. This is not only a statement about a very strong, yet possibly idiosyncratic preference of Socrates as an individual. That the unexamined life is not worth living, is, for Socrates, not only an individual whim, but a *moral demand*. What is being claimed, is that *life itself*, for all those privileged enough to share in it, is at bottom the *obligation to examine*.

5 See Rachels' excellent discussion of the three arguments that Socrates proposed in this regard in the *Crito*. These arguments are: 1. the argument about destroying the state, 2. the analogy between the state and one's parents, and 3. the argument from the social contract. Cf. Rachels, 2005: 4-9.

Put differently in terms of a well known distinction in the German language (certainly not unfamiliar in this part of the world!): life is both *Gabe* and *Aufgabe*; we might, in English, say: "gift" and "task". What is the sense or point of life? On the one hand, we may note that we all arrive in life without choice; the fact that we are here, is the doing of our parents, and we as individuals had no say in the matter; in that sense, life is *Gabe*. Yet, that is not all to be said of our lives, because life is also *Aufgabe*, a task at hand, an agenda of things to do and things to avoid. Life only has meaning if we live differently from the animals who simply exist without reflection on what the sense of it all is. Life, in short, is something we do not only have, but also something that we have to accomplish; *we have to make something of it*.

That, I think, is what Socrates meant when he insisted on living the examined life. Without accepting that responsibility and engaging in that adventure, life is really not worth living.

My last remark is to point out that this kind of life, the examined life, the life of reflection and dialogue can be, and very often is, a dangerous business. Philosophy concerns life itself, sometimes so seriously that, because of it, life itself is imperilled. Nothing illustrates this better than the plight of Socrates himself. He had the choice of avoiding the hemlock by flight and, as a result, living less dangerously. But that would mean living unexaminedly, and therefore in vain. In this way, ironically, he imposed final meaning to his life by choosing, but thus also creating or designing his own death. Life is serious, exactly because it is finite. And death is part of life; to learn how to live is, essentially, also to learn how to die. As Freud says somewhere: "We recall the old saying: *Si vis pacem, para bellum*. If you want to preserve peace, arm for war. It would be in keeping with the times to alter it: *Si vis vitam, para mortem*. If you want to endure life, prepare yourself for death". A statement of the famous Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev is also pertinent in this regard: "Death is the most profound and significant fact of life, raising the least of mortals above the mean commonplaces of life. The fact of death alone gives true depth to the question of the meaning of life. Life in this world has meaning just because there is death; if there were no death in our world, life would be meaningless ..." (Berdyaev, 1948: 249).

The examined life of the philosopher is dangerous because in the examination of life, everything is available for discussion and critique. A philosopher following in the footsteps of Socrates is not someone who cannot have deep convictions, like the rest of us. But the difference between philosophers and the rest of us is that *no conviction is too sacred*

to become the target of Socratic scrutiny. To scrutinize beliefs in the Socratic manner is not of itself to abandon them. It is only to examine them, and thus to make sure that their continuation is worthwhile.

I conclude with the story of Simon, a beloved, elderly assistant that worked in the psychology department of Stellenbosch University when I was a student. He was not a formally educated man, but he was a profoundly wise man – someone, who, for example, not only distributed lecture notes to students before each class, but also read those notes and knew them almost by heart. He lived in awe of the many mysteries that we don't know the answer to. One day one of my philosophy professors, who told us the story himself, ran into Simon in town, and, in a half-jocular, half serious fashion enquired whether Simon would not consider to switch the psychology department for the philosophy department as his work area in future. Simon reflected on this briefly, and then firmly declined the offer. When asked why? by my professor, he asserted with conviction: "I will not do it because I have learned that philosophy is a subject that imperils one's existence".⁶

When telling us this story one day in our honours class, the professor stared at us strictly, and then said: "Simon knows this, but I wonder whether any of you fully realize this"! It is a lesson well worth learning for all people who make a life of philosophy.

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6 The actual statement was in Afrikaans: "Filosofie is 'n vak, dit weet ek, as jy hom neem, dan kom jou eksistensie op die spel"!