

What is the Good of the “Examined Life”? Some Thoughts on the *Apology* and Liberal Education

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Advocates of liberal education often hold up the Apology of Socrates as a model for how to understand its aims and practice. But what, really, is the good of the “examined life” that Socrates preaches? In the brief essay that follows I offer some reflections about how we might understand the value of knowledge of ignorance.

...of all things it is just this that is most difficult to persuade you ...
that the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being.

The Apology of Socrates 37e4-a6

Thoughtfulness can be paralyzing—so much so that it can bring life to a stop. In his *Confessions*, Tolstoy describes the experience of crippling perplexity that came to him more and more frequently as he grew older, making it all but impossible to complete even the most ordinary tasks:

...five years ago (1874) a strange state of mind—torpor began at times to grow upon me. I had moments of perplexity, of a stoppage, as it were, of life, as if I did not know how I was to live, what I was to do. I began to wander, and was a victim to low spirits. This, however, passed, and I continued to live as before. Later, these periods of perplexity grew more and more frequent, and invariably took the same form. During their continuance the same questions always presented themselves to me: “Why?” and “What after?” ... I became aware that this was not a mere passing phase of mental ill-health, but that the symptoms were of the utmost importance, and that if these questions continued to recur I must find an answer to them. (Tolstoy 1901, 73)

“My life,” Tolstoy goes on, “had come to a sudden stop. I was able to breathe, to eat, to drink, to sleep. I could not, indeed, help doing so;

but there was no real life in me.” Despite his wealth, his consciousness of literary success, and a life in other respects comfortable and pleasant, he began to think of suicide. “Why?” and “What after?” the author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* found himself wondering. In low spirits, it was as if he did not know how to live, he wrote, the experience, one of *stoppage*.

Is it perverse to wonder whether the goal of liberal education is to inflict such *stoppage* on our students? Parents and administrators, surely, would feel unease at any handling of the young that aims to induce “low spirits” and “wandering” (let alone thoughts of suicide). And yet the questions that the older Tolstoy describes himself as paralyzed by are patently Socratic—questions that lie at the center of almost any description of liberal education. Their effect on Tolstoy, indeed, reminds us of Meno’s description of Socrates. Socrates, says Meno, is like a “torpedo fish” (*Meno* 80 a-b), a kind of electric eel that shocks those it comes into contact with, temporarily leaving them paralyzed, torpid regarding matters that they had previously believed they knew with certainty. To be questioned by Socrates, Meno suggests, is to be made to feel one’s own ignorance regarding the most important questions; and it stings.

What value could there possibly be in being brought to a *stop* in this way, one wonders? Especially if reflection turns out to be—as Tolstoy’s words seem to forebode—antithetical to life? As described by Tolstoy, Socratic *stoppage* is the experience of pain and paralysis, of a loss of mental health and even the will to live. And yet, strangely, both he and Socrates considered the experience invaluable, in some sense central to a fully human life. Speaking in the *Apology*, Socrates claims that a life lacking in such self-examination is “not worth living for a human being,” while to “examine oneself and others,” re-raising on a daily basis the question of how one ought to live, is the “greatest good for a human being” (*Apology* 37e3-a8). The characterization is stark, redolent with uncomfortable implications: most human beings, Socrates implies, live lives in which self-examination plays little or no role—and to that extent are “not worth living for a human being.” Placed on trial for his life’s activity, indeed, Socrates identifies the jury’s refusal to accept this claim as the greatest obstacle he faces in winning acquittal,

and *a fortiori* the real reason for his having been convicted.

In truth, parents and administrators need hardly worry: if the chief objection to liberal education were that it induces “wandering” and “low spirits,” we could defend it beautifully by pointing out how seldom it succeeds. The inherent difficulty of breaking through is simply too great, and though made worse by the distractions of technology, the problem is not a new one. Throughout the Platonic dialogues Socrates continually bumps into characters who in one way or another are temporarily struck by him—but ultimately bounce off as though he were a species of slippery rock, unharmed (largely—Socrates had at least two spectacular failures), but also unchanged in any fundamental way. On the other hand, the fact that students are seldom really harmed by it is not a defense for it either.

The defensibility of liberal education looks even worse when one considers that it has no obvious products: where technical education can point to skills or information successfully transmitted and acquired, the effects of liberal education are largely invisible, difficult to measure. One can usually tell from essays whether a student can think, or write; and from conversations whether someone is familiar with good books. But the bare utility of these skills is doubtful. And if the goal were simply to prepare students to win employment, the passing on of minimal communications skills could probably be accomplished adequately in other ways.

What, then, does one respond to a student who asks, perhaps not even closed-mindedly, but with real failure to understand, “Why would I want to do that?” The very question bespeaks a set of attitudes, of course, a confidence, bordering on certitude, that the basic suppositions by which they live are adequate. Not infrequently, this certainty is accompanied by an unarticulated mistrust of reason, a deep reluctance to believe that it could interrogate or even evaluate conflicting teachings about how to live well. Even more fundamentally, such students tend not to see themselves as products of any particular teaching or tradition which might have shaped them in ways that are not easy to see, but instead regard their choices as wholly their own.

And yet, the question deserves an answer: what good does one get from the “examined life”? The phrase itself is suggestive—if problem-

atic. It suggests that the primary task of philosophy, or at least Socratic philosophy, is to examine or interrogate the fundamental standards by which one lives. In that sense, Socratic philosophy differs from pre- and much post- Socratic philosophy in that it aims, not to give an account of the whole, but of how men ought to live. Even so, "examination" could mean a number of things. As one of my students pointed out last semester, the Catholic practice of confession is one kind of examining one's life. At regular intervals it requires one to hold up one's actions to scrutiny, acknowledge one's failures, repent sincerely, receive forgiveness, and then resolve to "go and sin no more." A morally serious life, the Church fathers concluded, is impossible without regular and unflinching self-assessment.

It is likely that Socrates would have concurred in the importance of such self-examination. Time and again, in both Plato and Xenophon, he is depicted as calling people to account for their failures to abide by standards that they themselves recognize as authoritative. An Alcibiades, a Critias, or even Socrates' own sons, if we are to believe Plato and Xenophon, were the frequent targets of stinging rebukes in which he exhorted them to live up to their own notions of virtuous behavior.

And yet, in the end, it does not seem that this is what Socrates meant by "examination." Rather, he seems to have meant, not only that one should assess how one is doing in relation to standards that are recognized as authoritative, but that these standards themselves should be interrogated. "Has one, under a given set of circumstances, behaved justly?" is a question incumbent upon a morally serious person. "What, for that matter, is justice?" is a question for the philosopher.

The two do not obviously go together. One can be morally serious, one might think, without being philosophical. A man who has never reflected systematically can nevertheless perform actions of heroism, justice, or self-sacrifice. Even simple—which is to say unreflective—decency properly compels respect. Equally, one can be inquisitive, even a brilliant inquirer, without evincing any particular concern for the morality of one's own behavior.

And yet, perhaps the two are not as separable as they first appear. The morally serious man can, at times, be guilty of horrors, all the worse for being principled. Zealots and fanatics are, in one sense, serious people

in that they can be prepared to sacrifice their lives in the service of goals larger than themselves. And yet, the goodness of the goals actually matters; in that sense, it is essential for moral seriousness, if it is even to be what it is, that it be joined to a degree of reflectiveness. Skepticism, doubt—*stoppage*—may, in that sense, be no more than proof of sanity or humanity. Indeed, in one place in the *Apology* Socrates says plainly that those politicians he encountered who were not disposed to believe that they knew were “more decent” (*Apology* 22a).

Conversely, it seems that inquiry that is not morally serious is unlikely to be genuinely inquisitive. One must, in effect, have some sense that the questions that we are asking have real import for how we are to live before we are likely to take them seriously. “What is truth?” asks Pilate; it is doubtful whether any character in the history of literature can have been sketched so completely in three words.

Even if one is prepared to accept the proposition that moral seriousness and authentic philosophical inquisitiveness are not even what they are apart from one another, however, their union is a problem, both theoretically and practically. The point is demonstrated, as Hegel pointed out, in Socrates’ efforts to transmit philosophy: having set his students the example of morally serious inquisitiveness, he was unable to transmit their conjoined-ness. It was, thus, no accident that Socrates became the father of the Stoics on the one hand, and the Skeptics on the other. The Stoics, seeing only his ethical side, interpreted his legacy as one of ethical and moral practice—of philosophy as *therapeia*, meaning tending of the soul in the light of criteria not themselves subjected to doubt. Most of the time, the Stoics appear to have concluded, we already know what needs to be done; the problem is that we fail to do it. The Academic Skeptics, on the other hand, lost sight of Socrates’ essential concern with moral questions, setting aside moral seriousness in favor of suspensions and doubt, “*ephexis*.” When we use the phrase “it’s academic,” we pay them tribute.

And yet, is it so clear that the moral standards by which we live and call for, even *require* philosophic reflection? In a recent article in the *New York Times* entitled “The End of Philosophy,” David Brooks argued that everything we really need to know—about right, wrong, good and bad, we learned in infancy.

Moral judgments are like that. They are rapid intuitive decisions and involve the emotion-processing parts of the brain. Most of us make snap moral judgments about what feels fair or not, or what feels good or not. We start doing this when we are babies, before we have language. And even as adults, we often can't explain to ourselves why something feels wrong. (Brooks 2009, A29)

The moral standards by which we judge, researchers are concluding (claims Brooks), are probably innate, the product of evolution. We do not reflect rationally when we make decisions; we judge, acting on the basis of beliefs that we have internalized since infancy. Moral vision, to that extent, is largely intuitive; and philosophy, Brooks claims, is thereby rendered unnecessary.

Brooks's main point is silly, of course. Even if what he is saying about evolution were true, it would not remove the phenomenon of the ethical dilemma, nor would it account for the fact that in making big decisions people actually do sit down and think hard. Though he is loathe to admit it, even the most thoughtless life has a role for rationality. And yet Brooks does make one worthwhile point: that most of what we do is guided by internalized ethical assumptions. It is, however, a point that was known to Aristotle before it was "discovered" by "evolutionary researchers"; for as Aristotle understood, ethical dispositions (*hexeis*) are not rote habituations; they are *seeing* and *judging* dispositions.¹ To be morally virtuous requires not only habituation through action; rather, through familiarity with ethical actions one's vision for the ethical—especially the noble (*to kalon*)—is sharpened.

The question, thus, is not whether our actions are largely guided by implicit accounts—of course they are—but rather how good, or bad, those accounts may be taken to be. The fundamental assumption of students who do not want to reflect (or Brooks) is that their starting assumptions are good enough. There is, they seem to feel, little danger that they could waste their lives, or again, be guilty of really catastrophic missteps.

This position—that conventional wisdom is sufficient for the recognizing of good and bad—deserves, I suspect, more respect than Socrates gives it in his mid-Apology exchange with Meletus. For Socrates' villainous characterizations of Meletus aside, it is not clear whether we

know enough about Meletus to dismiss him as a trivial human being, as does Socrates; or again, that Socrates' "demonstration" that Meletus "doesn't care" succeeds. Put on the spot by Socrates, he claims, first, that the laws of Athens improve the youth, and subsequently, that ordinary Athenians do. And what Meletus seems to mean is that average Athenians know enough about just and unjust, good and bad. These are not fundamentally matters of expertise, but learned in childhood (perhaps in much the same way that children learn to speak a language). Is this such a bad view, then? Or is it rather the view behind our own penal laws, as well as the moral censure that we deal out so freely? When someone has murdered, stolen, or cheated, we are prepared to say of the guilty person, not that he was insufficiently philosophical, but that he ought to have known better. The difficulty is similar with Socrates' "demonstration" that Meletus has not reflected on the question of who improves the youth; is it at all self-evident that someone who has not reflected on precisely this question does not care?

To suggest—as Socrates does in his reply—that such questions are fundamentally a matter of expertise, on the other hand, raises disquieting, seemingly absurd possibilities. For if questions of just and unjust, good and bad, are subjects for experts, then most of us, not being experts, are likely to get it wrong. While we are perfectly prepared to recognize expertise in other fields, however, something in us strongly resists doing so in questions of this kind—not least because of the scope of the consequences. Could it really be the case that most human beings lack the knowledge necessary to live well? And—as the necessary corollary seems to demand—that to take one's bearings by the conventional opinions on such a question would be to make of one's life a disaster?

Students have a hard time with this proposition. It takes a certain amount of effort, for instance, to wrest from them any acknowledgement that it is possible to waste one's life. "How can you ever judge another person's life wasted?" is a typical response. "Well, stop thinking about others for a moment," is my own. "Would you agree that you could waste your own life, say, by becoming a drug addict, squandering your talents, never loving another human being, and in one way or another, destroying yourself, slowly or quickly?" For most, this is a possibility they can envision; and once they can acknowledge it in their

own case, they are at least sometimes willing to pay others the courtesy of setting aside blind tolerance.

Such possibilities are, however, nowhere near as terrifying as the ones that Socrates seems to have in mind. For while utter dissipation—through drug addiction or whatever—is an obvious path to self-destruction, the paths he has in mind are more horrifying, because they are more insidious. The most horrifying possibility of all, for instance, is that one could live out an entire life without sensing that something is wrong—only to discover on one's deathbed that one had gotten it completely wrong, that one had thought one was living well, but in fact doing everything backwards. Could this ever really happen? Students, being young, have a hard time believing it, tending to think that one knows immediately and infallibly whether one is happy. To combat that mistake I have found the Tolstoy novella, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, helpful.

Short, but remarkably powerful, the novella was written after Tolstoy had his crisis, and has all the hallmarks of a man who has been asking himself "Why?" and "What after?" It tells the story of an unreflective man, a judge, who has lived a life that is in all outward respects solidly successful. Married, the father of children, he has had an impressive career, and built a home both elegant and comfortable. Had he been asked, he would have said—and without hesitation—that he was happy, having achieved everything that a successful life should aim at. Climbing a ladder one day, he stumbles and bumps his hip. And—as my nursing students have told me can happen—the bruise develops into a cancer. From the peak of health, Ivan Ilych begins to waste slowly, dying before his own eyes. The result, as Tolstoy tells us, was that something in him—his soul—began urging questions on him:

"What is it you want?" was the first clear conception capable of expression in words, that he heard "What do you want? What do you want?" he repeated to himself.

"What do I want? To live and not to suffer," he answered.

And again he listened with such concentrated attention that even his pain did not distract him.

"To live? How?" asked his inner voice.

“Why, to live as I used to—well and pleasantly.”

“As you lived before, well and pleasantly?” the voice repeated.

And in imagination he began to recall the best moments of his pleasant life. But strange to say none of those best moments of his pleasant life now seemed at all what they had then seemed—none of them except the first recollections of childhood. There, in childhood, there had been something really pleasant with which it would be possible to live if it could return. But the child who had experienced that happiness existed no longer, it was like a reminiscence of somebody else.

As soon as the period began which had produced the present Ivan Ilych, all that had then seemed joys now melted before his sight and turned into something trivial and often nasty. (Tolstoy 2004, 294)

The voice of Ivan Ilych's soul is horrifying because it speaks truth—not propositional truth that elicits premises and deductions, but the truth of the mirror. It does not argue; it refutes by sounding Ivan's own words back to him, making their full emptiness evident. Even alone, sick, and armored by a lifetime's habits of evasion and self-protection, Ivan cannot fail—once he has been pushed to articulate what he really wants—to hear the hollowness in it, and rethink.

For us, thinking about the question of whether it is possible, even easy, to waste one's life, Ivan Ilych offers one powerful illustration. Just taking the conventional views of things at face value, Tolstoy suggests, will all but guarantee a wasted life, because the conventional opinions necessarily arise out of falseness and inauthenticity—out of a host of social hypocrisies, and especially what Tolstoy characterizes as the innate human desire for *comfort*, the desire not to be shaken up, bothered, embarrassed, or hurt. To strive for success, to live for what the world considers good and names “correct,” is the surest way to shut down the authentic voice of the soul—and we get better at it with time. For Tolstoy, adulthood is one long education in hypocrisy. The further Ivan Ilych departed from childhood, Tolstoy writes, the more and more he now realized how worthless and doubtful were the things he had believed to be joys. “It is as if I had been going downhill while I imagined I was going up. And that is really what it was. I was going up in public opinion, but to the same extent life was ebbing away from me. And now it is all done and there is only death.” What might he

have done differently? A thought occurs to him:

“Maybe I did not live as I ought to have done,” it suddenly occurred to him. “But how could that be, when I did everything properly?” he replied, and immediately dismissed from his mind this, the sole solution of all the riddles of life and death, as something quite impossible.

(Tolstoy 2004, 295)

It is hard, of course, to know what such an amended life might have looked like. Perhaps, given a second chance, Ivan might have pursued a more genuine love with his wife and children, greater seriousness in religion, work that would allow him to live more humanly. But one thing is certain: such a life could never have come into being as long as the habits of complacency and self-protection, the love of comfort, both physical and psychological, had governed his soul. In some ways, the worst tragedy of Ivan Ilych's life was that he never experienced the kind of life-changing tragedy—*stoppage*—that might have led him to assess his life anew. A life without such suffering might be the worst deprivation of all.

Key to such a reassessment, Tolstoy seems to be suggesting, is the awareness of death. And again, the sentiment is hardly a new one. “Teach us to number our days,” says the psalmist (Psalms 90:12)—the point being that to live a worthwhile life requires keeping before the mind's eye an acute consciousness of its brevity and finitude. To be aware of its shortness is to invest our living with new demands for meaningfulness, an impatience of the trivial, the distracting. These demands are potentially manifested in everything that we do. “Whatever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest” (Ecclesiastes 9:10). Paradoxically, and as all of the great teachers appear to have concluded, living well is the practice of learning to die.

That it is possible, even easy, to misspend one's life is a sobering proposition; and if Tolstoy—or the Bible, or indeed, almost any of the books in the Western canon—is right, it is not only easy, it is the natural way of things. Left to themselves, denied the experience of being brought to a halt, human beings seek the way of least resistance. Man may be born to trouble as the sparks fly upward; but left to himself he would generally prefer to roll downhill. If liberal education provided

the context for rethinking when it comes, it would have done much. If it provided the experience of being brought to a halt—of *stoppage*—early and hard, it would have done more.

And yet, in the end the overlap between Socrates and Tolstoy is only partial; for to say that the reason for examining one's life is not to mispend it is to miss the more problematic dimension of Socrates' claim; it is to transform Socrates' practice into an essentially utilitarian activity, good because of its possible benefits or outcomes. It is to trivialize Socratic philosophy by turning it into a species of self-help. Having reflected and come to better views of what one ought to aim at, it implies, we should set aside reflection and examination, and get on with leading our new, more meaningful lives. So seen, reflection may be a necessary preliminary—especially in corrupt places and times—but it is ultimately only preparation for life, not life itself.

Socrates' own words are more challenging, and for two reasons. The first is that thinking things over seems to be, for Socrates, not a means to an end, but an end itself. It is, he says—astonishingly—not the *practice* of virtue that is the greatest good for a human being, but *talking about* virtue in the course of every day. This proposition is only defensible, I suggest, if talking about virtue *is* virtue. Virtue, Socrates seems to be suggesting, is necessarily actively self-reflective, the eye seeing itself seeing. Something about this tends to stick in the craw of students. For not only do many of them not see themselves as especially interested in thinking, but the demands that Socrates seems to place on them—that they suspend concerns for advancement, family, and personal lives while they enter upon a course of questioning that will ultimately prove inconclusive—seem extreme, even perverse. The natural tendency is to dismiss by becoming “reasonable,” temporizing. Sure, some reflection is good; but Socrates takes it too far. “Shouldn't he be supporting his children?” is a common question.

Reinforcing this objection is a second: if Socrates himself is a model of the kind of examination that he urges on others, his lifetime of inquiry appears remarkably unsuccessful. Having constantly engaged in discussions about virtue, he seems by the time of his trial to have learned nothing. All he has achieved, on his own account, is knowledge of his ignorance. The prospect of spending one's life in unpleasant (as

students think) and fruitless inquiry—inquiry which does not even pretend to hold out the possibility of answers—is disheartening. And some, understandably enough, lose interest as soon as it becomes clear that there is no concrete prize or reward at the end. The natural question of the student—“what am I going to get out of this?”—has no answer that the soul disposed to ask it in the first place is going to recognize as satisfactory; reflection and self-knowledge are not products, but processes, or rather activities. One does not, in thinking about Socratic questions, typically get a final answer; one gets—at best—understanding of possibilities.

Is there, then, no way to communicate the goodness of the “examined life” to someone who does not already understand? At bottom, I doubt whether any better answer can be given than that thoughtfulness, awareness, and understanding—even where these are of unsettled questions or problems—are choiceworthy for their own sake. However unpleasant, even antithetical, to easy, comfortable living such consciousness may be, it is the fullest expression of our human being. To persuade every student that that consciousness is not some aberration is not going to happen; the forces of self-love, complacency, and simple laziness are too human. What one can do is show them the stake—and hope they respond.

Notes

1. My colleague, Dr. Jonathan Yates, points out to me the remarkable similarity with Hebrews 5:14.

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