

Socratic reproach

The aim of philosophy is to make us better human beings. This fundamental point is too often obscured as we try to put philosophy in line with other disciplines at universities. Biology is the study of organisms; physics of nature's universal forces; economics of the phenomena of the marketplace; and so forth. Philosophy then, it seems, should be the study of *something*: of ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, logic? of concepts? of old and ill-defined ideas? Perhaps: of its own history? But this attempt to mark out some domain and establish philosophy as the study of *it* misses the fundamental point. Philosophy is not about gaining information, but about *cultivating one's character*. Its aim has been and remains something personal and transformative: again, it aims at making us better human beings.

Literally, of course, philosophy is the love of wisdom -- note that it is not *sophology*, or the study of wisdom, but *philosophy*, the *love* of wisdom. There should be no mystery about what wisdom is: to be wise is to understand what is important or meaningful in a human life. A philosopher, then, ardently pursues knowledge of what is important in life, and not merely for the sake of knowing it. The philosopher believes that obtaining real wisdom will bring about a change in lifestyle, a realignment of goals and strategies. The contours of the philosopher's life will become shaped by the knowledge of what is important. One who lives according to this knowledge -- a *sage* --

has become a better human being: a *true* human being, a complete one. According to the ancients, a sage is expert at living a well-led life, and possesses the happiness that comes from such a life -- what the Greeks called "*eudaimonia*," the happiness that comes with living well.

But we will not begin to pursue wisdom in earnest until we are made aware of the emptiness of the goals which until now have consumed our lives. A turning point must be reached: we must realize that, up to this point, we have prized the wrong things, or simply have not made any effort to recognize what is important. This is a crisis of meaning in one's life -- or at least some strong impetus to seek out significance. An individual facing this turning point may be said to experience *Socratic reproach*, since the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates made it his life's mission to make his fellow Athenians aware of their own folly, their own lack of wisdom, and to urge them to examine life and pursue wisdom. He did this by questioning them about their beliefs until they themselves were convinced that they didn't know what they were talking about -- or until their egos could no longer tolerate the assault. Socratic reproach, generally, may take the form of a chance encounter, a conversation, the birth of a child, the death of a friend, or even a single, lonely moment. The reproach tells us, in no uncertain terms: *you must change your life*.

The reproach itself offers no positive guidance. It says, in effect, "No, not what you have been doing, but something else". Like Socrates's own mystical *daimon* -- a voice in his head that occasionally warned him not to do something -- the reproach warns us to go no further, but it recommends no alternative. We are left to pursue alternatives on our own, at our own whim. If the reproach is severe enough, then we will not allow

ourselves to fall back into familiar patterns, comfortable circuits which try to avoid the threat of a second, harsher reproach. If the reproach is deep, then we will actively seek *our own remedy* for our own folly. We seek what is important and, more significantly, we seek *what we believe* to be important. No one else's answers will do, and we must find our own.

So we begin a quest for *epistemic authenticity*, seeking to know for ourselves what is important, gaining whatever assurance we can that we are not being led into blind folly once again. Perhaps, after long doubt, we find something we cannot doubt (like Descartes); or perhaps we freely and arbitrarily decide to take one belief or another as fundamental, and with that choice we create the significance and authenticity in our own lives (like Sartre). Or perhaps we remain agnostic and continue to search for what is important, never quite landing that thing which offers lasting *eudaimonia*; but convinced that the unexamined life is not worth living (like Socrates).

From folly, through Socratic reproach, to epistemic authenticity. This is another way to characterize the pursuit of wisdom. For philosophers generally do not want simply to be told what to value; they want to find out for themselves what is important. A sage, then, along with being someone who has understood what is important, is also someone who has attained epistemic authenticity: this truth about what is important is something they have discovered for themselves, and they do not simply know it on the basis of someone else's authority. Whether the sage experiences the wholesome happiness of *eudaimonia*, however, is not obvious. It depends on just what the sage has embraced. The sage has made his or her life consonant with what is important. Unfortunately, what is found to be important may not yield happiness, but continual

strife. That is one of the risks of the examined life. Think, for example, of the great 19th-century pessimist, Schopenhauer, a man who discovered for himself that human life alternates between boredom and pain -- and suicide is nothing more than a cowardly dodge -- and so our best response is simply to endure our lives with whatever grace and tranquility we can muster. Perhaps Schopenhauer found some solace in this conclusion, but the happiness he felt is surely different in its flavor from the happiness ancient Greek philosophers thought comes to someone leading a well-led life.

Philosophy's central command -- *Know Thyself*, inscribed above the door of an ancient temple -- is really a dare. It urges: strive to know who and what you are, *if* you think you are up to it, and *if* you think you can live with the answer. Try to discover for yourself what is valuable -- but be always ready to uncover the possibility that there is nothing of value under the sun, and, as Ecclesiastes observes, whoever increases knowledge only increases sorrow.

Because philosophy is an individual's pursuit of epistemic authenticity, it does not enjoy the sort of development available to other fields of inquiry. Other disciplines divide their own domains and conquer them through an organized campaign of research. Historically, of course, some philosophers have tried to do the same; particularly, German philosophers, of whom Hegel is the most obvious example. But in philosophy these grand campaigns seldom survive more than a generation. The reason is that the plan for the campaign is itself a product of some individual's attainment of epistemic authenticity. When Hegel charted the grand architectonic of human knowledge, although he took himself to be constructing a multigenerational research agenda, he was in fact only putting the world as he found it onto sheets of paper. It was, as it can only be, an

expression of the structure of his own mind, not the inevitable *telos* of the Spirit, not a proposal for human endeavor to be taken seriously by anyone other than himself and a few slavish disciples. Each philosopher must, as an individual, create the world anew. Each great work of philosophy begins with the observation that, until now, no previous philosopher has managed to get things right because they have not realized that X; and now, with X firmly in mind, we may begin again. Such a beginning is the beginning of an individual, a philosopher's baptism into authenticity. Philosophy develops through philosophers; and philosophers develop by parting with tradition and establishing the world anew. The result is that the history of philosophy is nothing but a history of individual beginnings, stories of the progress of individuals as they set out to find for themselves what, if anything, is real and significant.

For at the center of life we find a clearing. We stand apart from the forest of our experience and ask about its value, its significance. There we stand alone. We are trained through our experiences, perhaps, and our skeletons have grown out of tradition -- we have no radical independence from history and culture -- and yet we find within ourselves and within our lives the free space in which we may examine and question ourselves for our own sakes. It is in such a space that we begin to decide, and begin to construct for ourselves an interpretation of our origins and our destinations. The surrounding forest becomes oriented with respect to the decisions we now make -- that becomes our north, and so this our south, and so on. We do not measure ourselves against our inherited tradition; if anything, we measure that tradition against ourselves, and the decisions we make in the clearing.

The clearing, this open space for philosophy, is not a place visited at a single time in one's life. We return to it continually, and must do so, once we become convinced that the significance of our lives is our own making, and that we must always confirm our orientations, or revise them in the light of our mistakes. The clearing at life's center is not just equidistant from cradle and grave (though it is there that the clearing often first appears). It is a clearing available at every moment, and we need only turn to it. We turn to it when we engage in philosophy; i.e., when we seek to become better human beings.

Now we may see a little more clearly what "better" means. It may mean more wholesome, healthier, happier -- but more centrally it means *more authentic*; honest; clear in self-knowledge. As a philosopher, I seek to be a better human being by knowing myself more completely, by discerning what is important to me, and by letting what I discover shape my life. It may be that I find Jesus Christ or the Buddha at the clearing; or it may be that, like Dostoevsky's underground man, I discover only spite, confusion, and rebellion. But what I find I confront with authenticity, honesty, and a demand for clarity. This is true even in the case of Dostoevsky's underground man, who finds in the clearing the tragic *impossibility* of thorough authenticity, honesty, and clarity, and who taunts himself "with the spiteful and utterly futile consolation that it is even impossible for an intelligent man seriously to become anything" (Dostoyevsky, 5). Does such a genuine confrontation make anyone a better human being? It does, in the sense that through such a confrontation, at least we no longer serve the folly we once did.

With this, the whole of philosophy takes on a form different from the form traditionally imposed upon it. Philosophy is no longer humanity's search for wisdom, a science of matters logical, epistemological, metaphysical, ethical, or aesthetic. It cannot

be an organized campaign of research, dividing a shared domain into specialized subfields. No progress as a discipline can be discerned in its history. Instead: philosophy is *my* pursuit of what is important; it is *my* effort to become a better human being. Others become, at best, my allies in the struggle to help one another to become better human beings. And the history of philosophy becomes important to my efforts only to the extent that it helps me toward my goal. Philosophy is necessarily an individual's pursuit, since each stands alone at the clearing, and where each goes from there must be decided with authenticity, and not as a member of an organized campaign of research.

But who are *we*, the ones who are supposed to attain such authenticity? Are we supposing that there is a soul, primed to realize its own potential; or can the self be nothing other what tradition and education make it?

If we are right about the nature of philosophy, then we should not be able to settle this question once and for all. Within philosophy as a whole, there must be the possibility for all philosophical positions to develop. All we can do is note the phenomenon of epistemic authenticity, leaving the full metaphysical account of the authentic self to each individual. Still, some general things can be noted about philosophical selves.

It would be bad faith, indeed, to maintain that we have a clear and distinct a notion of our selves in their entirety. On the one hand, we are not entirely alien to ourselves. But on the other, we also are never fully aware of all the causes generating our behaviors. Even Descartes, who claimed to have a clear and distinct notion of himself as a thinking thing, would also admit that when this thinking thing is conjoined to a complex body, outfitted with rich imaginative capacities, the resultant entity may well be

practically unknowable to itself in its full complexity. I introspect; I find largely what I expect to find, and rarely what is really there. This lesson has been especially familiar to us since Freud, though of course we find it rediscovered in every age. Contemporary scholars offer a “pandemonium” model of the mind, in which the mind is a cathedral filled with many choirs, each vying to command the melody. The choirs are responsive enough to one another so as not to produce cacophony (except in cases of mental illness), but there is no single director orchestrating the result. Our mental lives, as wholes, are thus the result of disparate forces, alien to one another and yet adjusting to one another in such a way so as to produce the illusion of a *wholeness*.

When I stand in the clearing, I *decide* who I am and what my life is about; it is not a discovery. The “I” and “my” are decidedly in question. I know I do not know myself well. But I also know further that what I come to know about myself depends in large part upon what I *decide* to come to know about myself. Will I come to understand myself as a “piano key” (Dostoevsky’s underground man, again), responding in the same way whenever I am pushed in the same way? Will I attribute a mysterious freedom to some of my actions (and then pray that neuroscience comes up short in its explanations)? The point is that such decisions presume a *self* who makes them. The self may be a fleeting melody, an artifact of grammar, a substantial soul, or a social construct; but the self, whatever it is, is presumed by the space of the clearing. As Heidegger wrote: “Even if one rejects a substantial soul, the thingliness of consciousness and the objectivity of the person, ontologically one still posits something whose being retains the meaning of objective presence, whether explicitly or not” (Heidegger, 108). *The meaning of objective presence* -- or rather its possibility -- is what the clearing presumes: we presume

in the clearing that I am a being who can stand apart from my experience and pronounce upon it.

What legitimates this presumption? *The fact that we do it*, and that in doing it we assign the priorities of all philosophical explanations. This is one way in which to understand Sartre's claim that "existence precedes essence" -- "man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence" (Sartre, "Humanism of Existentialism"). When we stand in the clearing, and begin to make existential commitments to what we find to be important in life, it is then that we decide who we are and what we are. I may decide to commit myself to Christianity, or agnosticism, or scientism, or Buddhism; each commitment will lead me to adopt a different metaphysics of the self. Every philosophical position is open to me.

But couldn't I be wrong? Couldn't I decide that I have an immaterial soul, distinct from my body, and be totally wrong? Yes, of course. But so what? That is, if I decide that Christianity is the *only* means by which I can restore meaning to my vacuous life, then I have no real choice but to adopt it. When truth and meaning struggle, meaning wins. And that is as it ought to be -- since truth (and anything else) has value only to the extent that it contributes to the meanings of our lives.

In reality, few of us are in places where we find we must buck all the empirical evidence and grasp at implausible doctrines as the sole means of salvation. We make preliminary decisions; we negotiate, we revise; we explore. For example, suppose I decide in the clearing that I must follow whatever my heart tells me is true. My heart

tells me that there must be more to life than this existence in the flesh. I explore religion -- and, at the same time, cognitive psychology. Now suppose my brain and heart together tell me that a personal immortality is impossible. But what then? Perhaps an impersonal immortality? And so I read and think further; I meditate. And gradually I land upon a view that seems right -- my heart, my head, and my life all endorse it. And, for now, I am done. But next week I may run into a book or a teacher who forces me to reexamine my conclusions in a different light. Again, I may revisit the clearing -- commune once again with my heart -- and continue with the construction of my self. We are forever works in progress.

Selves are not discovered, nor are they constructed by whims and fancies. They are *worked out*, with some elements being given and not negotiable, other elements purely optional, and most elements falling between the two -- shadowy figures in the mists of plausibility. We must try out views, feel for them, think through them, and discover, in the end, whether they are really parts of us. All along the way we presume we *are* selves -- perhaps we think we are finding ourselves, uncovering our true selves, or becoming who we are (in Nietzsche's phrase). We gradually *settle upon* who and what we are, just as we settle upon life's meaning -- with guessing, learning, discussion, feeling, and thought, all the while with eyes wide open.

Here is where we might think philosophical arguments ought to play a role. Philosophers, after all, are famous for providing arguments for one view or another about God, the soul, the world, and everything. These philosophical arguments are typically seen as thoroughly rational, at least in the ideal. An argument is a set of reasons for adopting a conclusion; when you and I argue, we try to determine whether the reasons

compel us to adopt the conclusion. It is supposed to be a matter of sober reflection, intellectual honesty, and dispassionate sifting of evidence and validity. Ideally, philosophers are supposed to detach themselves from their own particular prejudices and biases and make an objective judgment about which conclusion, if any, it is rational to adopt.

But this view of philosophy is deeply wrong, and it is wrong not because it is impossible to be detached or because humans cannot treat disagreements fairly or because pure reason by itself is barren. All of these things may be true, but the deeper problem with thinking of philosophy as a swap-meet of rational arguments is that it mistakes a single tool of the philosopher (and a relatively minor one at that) for the whole workshop. I am not a philosopher because I love to scrutinize arguments; I scrutinize arguments because I wish to discover for myself what is important in life. And as I try to make this discovery and settle upon the meaning of my life, sifting through arguments plays a relatively small role. I explore my own emotions and experiences and respond creatively and intuitively to what I find. Arguments play *some* role, to be sure; when I discuss my views with others, or even just present them to myself, I need to put them into some rational order so that I can communicate them. And as others challenge me, I expect them to find gaps in my logic, since that is a good way of discovering when wishful thinking has carried me away. But the charge “You’re inconsistent!” may not be a cause for greater concern than the charge “You’re inhuman!” or “That view of yours is *ugly*: it is flat-footed, plebian, and mean!” I do not want to be inconsistent; but I want even less to be providing tight fits among meaningless shards of beliefs. When Emerson charged that “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,” one thing he meant

was that satisfying the requirements of logic is not everything , or even the main thing. The main thing, of course, is meaning and value. Rational arguments serve that end; there is no value in them by themselves.

When Plato turned toward and revered the holy faculty of human reason, it was not because the patient examination of premises and argument form was the reliable method for finding truth. It was because he thought reason was itself *holy* -- there was something divine about it, and some special insight was available to the sages which allowed them knowledge of the Good -- the Valuable, the Beautiful. Plato's arguments, as elegant as they are invalid, still have the power today to move us precisely because they convey the sort of *feeling* Plato experienced when he felt in touch with the deepest elements of his own being. The arguments are delivered with cool patience and grace, and they often inspire love in beautiful people and infuriate or scare away those with ugly souls. One of the deeper messages Plato conveys is that the very act of philosophical inquiry provides an important and valuable bond among us as human beings, and there is nothing finer than to sit in soft grass beside a cool stream and listen to Socrates's philosophical interpretation of old stories, or even the origins of certain words. If one of us were to interject, "That's inconsistent!" or, more likely, "Let's separate that into several distinct theses which are being conflated," the value of our interjection would depend upon the grace with which it was delivered -- in short, whether we spoiled the mood Plato so artfully constructed. The difference in mood between Socrates next to the cool stream, on the one hand, and expert examinations of Plato's philosophy in contemporary journals, on the other, is exactly the difference between Plato and his opponents. It's that *mood* which is Plato's deeper and pervasive methodological point:

this is the way life is to be lived, in *this* sort of examination. He appeals to our aesthetic sensibilities more so than to our logical discrimination.

The point is that philosophy is a full-body, full-mind, full-heart exercise. It reaches beyond reason and into art, love, faith, hope, and fear. The pursuit of wisdom requires a fully human being, not merely a reason machine. Philosophy demands the full range of human living. And this is not for some strange metaphysical reason, as if we are grounded in a primal unity of Dionysian ecstasy. It's simply that philosophy is a matter of finding meaning in a human life, and drawing upon anything less than life is bound to fail.

It is for this reason that art can be an extremely important medium for philosophy. Art can present us with aspects of living that can't quite be captured by the sort of bloodless writing of which this essay itself is an example. A poem of a few dozen words can tell more than a tome of philosophy, and it speaks of just those things we confront as we face the task of living. One might then object: why not study or create art rather than philosophy? But the question is misguided in presuming that art and philosophy are distinct domains. I say again that philosophy is the pursuit of what is important -- the active effort to find meaning in life -- and whether we do this through art or science or canonical philosophy or dancing makes no difference. We must not let the traditional divisions of the academy obscure the fact that the great artists and philosophers are all after the same thing, while adopting different approaches and styles. In this sense, Shakespeare was a greater philosopher than Bacon, though it is Bacon and not Shakespeare who will be found in modern anthologies of philosophy.

But now we might take the time to wonder whether philosophy is really all that important. I have claimed that it is the pursuit of wisdom, the attempt to understand what is important in being human. There is an implication that if people are not devoted to the task of philosophy, they are wasting their lives. Is this so? Is “ordinary life” -- life without Socratic reproach and philosophy -- so meaningless as to be worthless? Do humans need to settle upon meanings for their lives in order to lead good lives -- or, at any rate, *happy* ones?

The answer is obviously *no*: a person can amble along the narrow path from cradle to grave without a bit of art or philosophy, without a bit of wonder as to the meaning of it all, and have a wonderful time. And -- so long as they have caused no great harm to others -- we should say: bless you, good show, and well done. It is Plato who said that the unexamined life is not worth living -- and he was just plain wrong. Many conceivable and actual unexamined lives are eminently worth living. Imagine someone who loves deeply, and is loved in return, and experiences the full range of human emotions, and in the end rejoices in the life that has been led -- and never once questions its value, examines its meaningfulness, or pursues epistemic authenticity about what is important. We can be clever and invent all manner of ways in which such a life is deficient or even not worth living -- but we are deceiving ourselves if we actually believe any of these fabrications. The life is eminently worth living -- philosophy is no necessary condition for having a worthy life.

But such lives are so rare. A great many of us suffer Socratic reproach at one time or another: a crisis of meaning which tells us something must change. This is simply because almost everyone is condemned to folly -- there is no escaping it. And if

we are lucky, we will recognize this folly, and embark upon philosophy. Thus as a matter of fact we are drawn into a state to which philosophy is the only authentic response. If we come to seriously question the value of our mode of life, and decide not to probe further, and pretend that the question was not serious, then we may well end up living a disaster. Philosophy is for those of us banished from Eden -- and that is just about everyone -- and that is what lends general value to the examined life. The examined life is valuable because most of us lead lives in need of examination, reproach, and change.