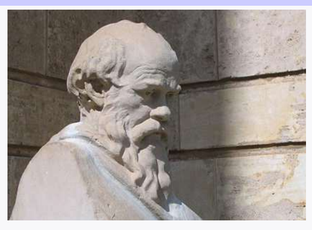
The unexamined life is not worth living

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

"**The unexamined life is not worth living**" is a famous dictum supposedly uttered by Socrates at his trial for impiety and corrupting youth, for which he was subsequently sentenced to death. The dictum is recorded in Plato's *Apology* (38a5–6) as ὁ δὲ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ (*ho dè anexétastos bíos ou biōtòs anthrṓpōi*, literally "but the unexamined life is not livable for a man").

Part of a series on
Socrates



"I know that I know nothing" · "**The unexamined life is not worth living**" · Gadfly · Trial of Socrates

Eponymous concepts

Socratic dialogue · Socratic intellectualism · Socratic irony · Socratic method · Socratic paradox · Socratic problem · Socratic questioning

Category

V · T · E

Rationale [edit]

This statement relates to Socrates' understanding and attitude towards death and his commitment to fulfilling his goal of investigating and understanding the statement of the Pythia (i.e., that there was no one wiser than Socrates). Socrates understood the Pythia's response to Chaerephon's question as a communication from the god Apollo and this became Socrates' prime directive and *raison d'être*. For Socrates, to be separated from elenchus by exile (preventing him from investigating the statement) was therefore a fate worse than death. Since Socrates was religious and trusted his religious experiences, such as his guiding daimonic voice, he accordingly preferred to continue to seek the truth to the answer to his question, in the after-life, than live a life not identifying the answer on earth.[1]

Meaning [edit]

Socrates believed that a life devoid of introspection, self-reflection, and critical thinking is essentially meaningless and lacks value. This quote emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and questioning one's beliefs, actions, and purpose in life.[2]

The words were supposedly spoken by Socrates at his trial after he chose death, rather than exile. They represent (in modern terms) the noble choice, that is, the choice of death in the face of an alternative.[3]

Interpretation [edit]

See also: Trial of Socrates § Interpretations of the trial of Socrates

Socrates believed that philosophy – *the love of wisdom* – was the most important pursuit above all else. For some, he exemplifies more than anyone else in history the pursuit of wisdom through questioning and logical argument, by examining and thinking. His "examination" of life in this way spilled out into the lives of others, such that they began their own "examination" of life, but he knew they would all die one day, saying that a life without philosophy – an "unexamined" life – was not worth living.[4][5]

As part of Plato's continued relevance to philosophy throughout the history of philosophy as well as contemporary philosophy, Socrates' dictum also represents the continuing import of philosophy as a self-reflecting activity, including reflecting on the activity of philosophy itself. Yafeng Shan writes in "The unexamined philosophy is not worth doing: An introduction to New Directions in Metaphilosophy" that "[o]ne of the most distinctive features of philosophy is self-reflection. Philosophers are not only concerned with metaphysical, epistemological, conceptual, ethical, and aesthetic issues of things around us, they also pay serious attention to the nature, value, methods, and development of philosophy itself."[6] These areas of philosophic inquiry are also seen in this context as a further "examination" of life without which, in line with Socrates' dictum, one's life is not worth living.

See also [edit]

- Know thyself

References [edit]

1. ^ Brickhouse, Thomas C.; Smith, Nicholas D. (1994). *Plato's Socrates*. Oxford University Press. pp. 201–. ISBN 978-0-19-510111-9.
2. ^ "Socrates: 'The unexamined life is not worth living.'". *The Socratic Method*. Retrieved 2024-10-30.
3. ^ Julian Baggini - Wisdom's folly *The Guardian newspaper* (Guardian News and Media Limited), Thursday 12 May 2005
4. ^ Spivey, Nigel; Squire, Michael (1 March 2011). *Panorama of the Classical World*. Getty Publications. pp. 230–. ISBN 978-1-60606-056-8.
5. ^ D.M. Johnson - Socrates and Athens (p.74) Cambridge University Press, 31 Mar 2011 ISBN 0521757487 [Retrieved 2015-04-25]
6. ^ Shan, Yafeng (2022). "The unexamined philosophy is not worth doing: An introduction to New Directions in Metaphilosophy". *Metaphilosophy* (53): 153–158. Retrieved 1 June 2025.

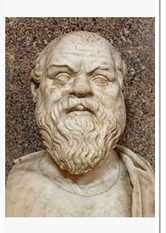
External links [edit]

- Plato. *Apology* 38a. Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 1 translated by Harold North Fowler; Introduction by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1966. via Perseus Tufts
- J. O. Famakinwa – IS THE UNEXAMINED LIFE WORTH LIVING OR NOT? Think / Volume 11 / Issue 31 / Summer 2012, pp 97–103 *The Royal Institute of Philosophy 2012*
- J. M. Ambury – *Socrates (469—399 B.C.E.) -2biii - The Unexamined Life* in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

V · T · E **Socrates** [hide]

Bibliography · Cultural depictions

Life	Trial of Socrates · Socratic problem		
Concepts	Social gadfly · Socratic dialogue · Socratic intellectualism · Socratic method · Socratic paradox · Socratic questioning		
Phrases	"I know that I know nothing" · "**The unexamined life is not worth living**"		
Family	Sophroniscus (father) · Phaenarete (mother) · Patrocles · Xanthippe (wife) · Lamprocles (son) · Menexenus (son) · Myrto (wife)		
Works that include Socrates	**Art**	*Double Herm of Socrates and Seneca* (3rd-century sculpture) · *The Death of Socrates* (1787 painting) · *Socrates* (1950 sculpture)	
	Stage	*The Clouds* (423 BC play) · *Der geduldige Socrates* (1721 opera) · *Socrates* (1759 play) · *Socrate* (1919 oratorio) · *Socrates on Trial* (2007 play)	
	Literature	*De genio Socratis* (1st-century essay) · *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates* (1841 thesis) · *The Plot to Save Socrates* (2006 novel)	
	Other	*Serenade after Plato's "Symposium"* (1954 serenade) · *Barefoot in Athens* (1966 film) · *Socrates* (1970 film)	
	Dialogues	**Plato**	*Apology* · *Axiochus* · *Charmides* · *Clitophon* · *Cratylus* · *Critias* · *Crito* · *Demodocus* · *Epinomis* · *Eryxias* · *Euthydemus* · *Euthyphro* · *First Alcibiades* · *Gorgias* · *Hipparchus* · *Hippias Major* · *Hippias Minor* · *Ion* · *Laches* · *Lysis* · *Menexenus* · *Meno* · *Minos* · *On Justice* · *On Virtue* · *Parmenides* · *Phaedo* · *Phaedrus* · *Philebus* · *Protagoras* · *Republic* · *Rival Lovers* · *Second Alcibiades* · *Sisyphus* · *Sophist* · *Statesman* · *Symposium* · *Theaetetus* · *Theages* · *Timaeus*
		Xenophon	*Apology* · *Memorabilia* · *Oeconomicus* · *Symposium*
		Other	*Halcyon* · Socratic Letters
Related	Euthyphro dilemma · Form of the Good · *Peritrope* · Religious skepticism		



Category

Categories: Aphorisms | Socrates | Philosophical phrases

This page was last edited on 24 September 2026, at 19:50 (UTC). Page was rendered with Parsoid.

Text is available under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 License; additional terms may apply. By using this site, you agree to the Terms of Use and Privacy Policy. Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., a non-profit organization.

Privacy policy About Wikipedia Disclaimers Contact Wikipedia Legal & safety contacts Code of Conduct Developers Statistics Cookie statement Mobile view

a WIKIMEDIA project Powered by MediaWiki