

SEEKING THE TRUTH OF THINGS

confessions of a (catholic) philosopher



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PUBLICATIONS

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I

HOW I FELL IN LOVE WITH PHILOSOPHY



Know thyself.

Socrates

In days of old, when knights were bold, and dragons still roamed the earth, I went off to college. I was only the second person in my family to graduate from high school and the first to attend college. Because I had no idea what I wanted to major in or do with my life, my academic advisor wisely suggested that I get the basic core requirements out of the way and worry about declaring a major after I had a few semesters under my belt. While going over the class options for my first semester in school, I came across Philosophy 101, and immediately registered for it. I thought it was a perfect choice: It fulfilled a requirement; it fit into my schedule; and, in my naïveté, I mistakenly thought I was signing up for Psychology 101. I figured that the class would be all about sex. Boy, was I wrong. And in retrospect, how lucky for me that I was.

On the first day of philosophy class, the professor walked in and, without a hello or a nod to any of us, marched to the front of the room. His hair and tie were completely askew, and, even though it was a very hot September day, he was wearing a wool tweed sport jacket, corduroy trousers, and a scruffy pair of thick-soled wing tip shoes. After depositing his stack of books and papers on the podium, he took out a Zippo lighter, a pack of imported French non-filtered *Gauloises* cigarettes, and lit up. (Remember, this was the early 1960s.)

The professor smoked and stared out at us without saying a word for

what, at the time, seemed interminable. He inhaled his cigarette with a ferocity and intensity I had never witnessed before. My father smoked, but not like this man. At some very basic level that I was unable to understand at the time, my professor seemed to be totally involved in the act of smoking. To him, smoking seemed to be more of a passionate desire rather than a mere addiction. It was as if smoking was some form of religious ritual. He seemed to consume the smoke, absorbing it into his system, converting it into some weird sort of energy or fuel. It was as if he was using the smoke as a catalyst for his thinking. (I would come to find out that my first professor wasn't the only philosopher that smoked. In the 1960s and 1970s, smoking was part and parcel of playing the role of being an intellectual—or as they then preferred to be called—the *cognoscente*. There seemed to be a direct correlation between philosophical disputation, coffeehouses, and smoking. Full disclosure requires me to confess, that I too fell vulnerable to the smoking mystique and puffed away for over twenty-five years. *Mea culpa*. Being a catholic, however, I know that I have been forgiven already.)

After finishing an entire cigarette and speed inhaling half of another, the professor suddenly began to speak to us in a calm and pleasant manner. “This class is officially listed as ‘Introduction to Philosophy,’” he said. “And as titles go, it’s accurate. That’s exactly what I’m going to try to do this semester—introduce you to philosophy.

“But, I’m not going to do it by making you read bits and pieces of all the major Western philosophers over the last twenty-five hundred years. That would make this class a history course, which it’s not. The history of and the doing of philosophy are different things. Philosophy cannot be taught in the same way as geography or astronomy, because it is not primarily concerned with knowledge of specific facts. Rather, he said, “it’s concerned with knowledge as reflection, knowledge as criticism, and knowledge as value awareness. Such concerns cannot be easily codified into a list of theorems or truisms, or by reciting all the basic facts and dates of all the major philosophical theories.”

He paused, lit yet another cigarette, and then said to us, almost in a

lover's whisper, "Philosophy is about *sapientia*: the pursuit of wisdom, values, meaning, and a careful examination of the purpose of life. To do this, we don't need to read history, we just need to read Socrates and try to figure out for ourselves what he meant when he suggested that the goal of life is not to escape death, suffering, or inconvenience. The goal of life is to escape doing wrong and to live well with others."

With that, the professor tamped out his cigarette, handed out a stack of syllabi, said that we should read *The Apology* for our next class meeting, and walked out without saying another word. Some of the students were stunned by his unusual performance. Others were confused or intimidated by it. I was fascinated and hooked for life.



The English philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead once said that "all philosophy is but a footnote to Socrates/Plato." Plato, of course, was a student of Socrates for 20 years and served as the chronicler and creator of the Socratic dialogues. What Whitehead meant by this statement is that Socrates and Plato laid the groundwork for what Western philosophy was to become. Certainly, they were not the first philosophers; they were preceded by Thales, Anaximander, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Zeno, and others. However, Socrates and Plato were the first "students of wisdom" who left behind a set of writings, and within this body of work we can find most if not all of the basic philosophical questions asked, even if they were not satisfactorily answered or resolved. It has been argued, by better minds than me, that after Socrates and Plato, the rest of the history of philosophy has been an attempt to unpack, embellish, and formulate answers to the questions, topics, and problems they raised.

Students of classical Greek history have long debated exactly where Socrates' thoughts and ideas left off and where Plato's began. Though there is no unanimity on the matter, most scholars agree that the dialogue *The Apology* is a reflection of Socrates' most fundamental philosophical beliefs.

In *The Apology*, Socrates argues that the first principle and the first job of philosophy is to be able to grasp and understand the admonition of the oracle of Apollo at Delphi: *Gnothi seuton*, “Know thyself.”

Socrates was “curiously unscientific” about his outlook on life.¹ He said of himself that he had “nothing to do with physical speculations.” Nor was he especially interested in one of Aristotle’s primary preoccupations, metaphysics, which is the study of the ultimate cause(s), purpose(s), and meaning(s) of life. Rather than questioning the nature and structure of the cosmos, Socrates believed we would be better off questioning the cosmos within—our inner nature, our most intimate selves. For him, the first question of philosophy is the self: Who am I? To answer the question, Socrates believed we must ask questions that disturb, provoke, anger, challenge, and confront us. We must be willing to ask questions that shake and shift the ground under our feet.² For Socrates, the question of self (Who am I?) precedes all other considerations, including the related question of self and others (What ought I to do with others?). As Socrates clearly stated in *The Republic*, “He who would rule the world must first rule himself.”

In *The Apology*, Socrates argues that the first step toward wisdom is the discovery and acknowledgement of our own ignorance. He tells the story of his friend Chaerephon, who climbed up the slopes of Mount Parnassus and asked the oracle if there was a wiser man in all of Greece than Socrates of Athens. The priestess replied that there was no one wiser, and Socrates was shocked by the oracle’s answer. “What can the god mean?” said Socrates. “I have no claim to wisdom, great or small.” So Socrates decided this was a test, and he set out to find the wisest man in all of Greece. He talked to politicians, poets, skilled craftsmen, and many others thought to be wise. But although they all appeared or claimed to be wise, they were not. Moreover, Socrates said, even when they obviously did not know something, they denied their ignorance and asserted their wisdom. In the end, Socrates decided that the oracle was correct: He was the wisest man in all of Greece. Or at least he was wise to this small extent: “I do not claim to know what I do not know.” It is also in *The Apology* that Socrates declares, for all Athenians to hear:

*I spent all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and your chief concern not for your bodies or your possession, but for the highest welfare of your souls.... Wealth does not bring goodness, but goodness brings wealth and every other blessing, both to the individual and to the state.... Let no day pass without discussing goodness.... [This] is really the very best thing that a [person] can do, and...life without this sort of examination is not worth living.*³

For Socrates and his modern successors in the “study of the mind,” the discipline we now call *psychology*, including Abraham Maslow and Sigmund Freud—the “examined life” is the result of self-awareness, self-reflection, and ultimately self-knowledge. It is only in coming to know ourselves, both our strengths and weaknesses, that we can begin to have sympathy, care, and concern for others. As Maslow so elegantly phrased it, “What we are blind and deaf to in ourselves, we are blind and deaf to in others.” For Socrates, the art of living together in the *polis* (the city-state) and the science of human behavior and conduct start with self, but they are lived out with others. For Socrates, the good life for self and the good life with others (an ethical life) are the same. Both constitute a life lived “according to what is reasonable” (*kata ton orthon logos*).



Many scholars believe that one of the central features of the Socratic dialogues is their lack of doctrinaire ideology. Socrates did not preach “a system.” Rather Socrates was a teacher, and what he taught was not so much a full-blown, comprehensive philosophy as it was a way of looking at the world and of looking at self. The essence of his lesson plan was an elegant one: Let us all talk and reason together. For him, philosophy was a communal event, not a singular activity. Truth, as a way to achieve good behavior, is the result of thinking with and talking to others. It is the end product of dialogue. Thus we call it this kind of dialogue the “Socratic” or the “dialectical” method.

This method requires us to enter into conversation with others in order to examine or debate an idea or a subject matter. Theoretically, the dialogue proceeds from a less adequate definition, or from a consideration of particular examples, to a more general definition. (Metaphorically speaking, the dialectical method is the practice of holding a problem out at arm's length to better see it and gain a modicum of objectivity. In so examining the problem, alternative solutions are applied until the best possible one is hit upon.) Socratic scholar Gregory Vlastos described Socrates' method of inquiry as "among the greatest achievements of humanity." Why? Because, says Vlastos, it makes philosophical inquiry "a common human enterprise, open to every [person]." Instead of requiring allegiance to a specific philosophical viewpoint or analytical technique or specialized vocabulary, the Socratic method "calls for common sense and common speech." And this, says Vlastos, "is as it should be, for how a [person] should live is [everyone's] business." ⁴

Christopher Phillips, author of the charming and insightful *Socrates Café*, argues that the Socratic method goes far beyond Vlastos' description. The method, says Phillips, does not merely call for common sense in our lives, but it also examines and critiques what common sense actually is in our lives. The method asks: Does the common sense (conventional wisdom) of our day offer us the greatest potential for self-understanding and ethical conduct? Or is the prevailing common sense in fact a roadblock to realizing this potential? According to Phillips, the Socratic method forces people to confront their own dogmatism by asking basic questions such as: What does this mean? What speaks for and against it? Are there other ways of considering the issue that are even more plausible and tenable? In compelling us to explore alternative perspectives, says Phillips, the method forces us to think outside the box and be open to the opinions of others.⁵

For Socrates, we are "questioning beings," and it is only through questioning life and others that we begin to have a better understanding of self. In fact, he suggests that the process of questioning is more important than the answers arrived at. When Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not

worth living,” what is implied is that even if we question life we still may not come up with an answer, much less the right answer. Or we may simply generate a series of new questions. Or, worse yet, we might arrive at an answer that we cannot or will not accept. Nevertheless, Socrates seemed convinced that the greatest error, the biggest danger, lies with not asking any questions at all. In asking questions, we say and assert something about ourselves. In asking, we have hope, but we also recognize that there are no guarantees. And, in asking, we reveal a great deal about who we are and who we would like to be.

In *The Apology*, with his very life in the balance, Socrates retains his conviction that the greatest danger of all is to dispense with the questioning and examining of our lives:

*As long as I breathe and have the strength to go on, I won't quit philosophizing. I won't quit exhorting you and whomever I happen to meet, in my customary way. Esteemed friend, citizen of Athens, the greatest city in the world, so outstanding in both intelligence and power, aren't you ashamed to care so much to make all the money you can, and to advance your reputation and prestige—while for truth and wisdom and the improvement of your soul you have no care or worry?*⁶

For Socrates, philosophy was a way of life, a way of approaching and seeing the world, a way of thinking. Philosophy is something we live out with others. And in this “living out” we are constantly asking ourselves three fundamental questions: Who am I; what do I owe others; what ought I do? In the end, the Socratic method is as much about the process as the product, as much about the journey as the destination. In fact, I think it is fair to say that what Socrates left us was not a series of answers but a series of questions and a purposeful way of thinking. In the words of Ludwig W. Wittgenstein, “Philosophy is not a theory but an activity.”



If I had to put this all together so I could come up with a nicely gift-wrapped conclusion, it would sound something like this. Philosophy is a way of looking at the world. It is a method that is more concerned with teaching people *how to* rather than *what to* think. If I'm right in this, philosophy more closely resembles an unending search than it does the acquisition of a fixed prize or singular answer. To put it yet another way, the Socratic tradition does not require that we all reason alike, but rather that we all reason together.

What could be more catholic (with a small "c") than that?