

The Examined Life  
By Michael R. Jones

When Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living,” he was speaking of the importance of finding meaning in life. This meaning is found by examining one’s life to make sure that one’s manner of living is consistent with what one believes to be true. While such an examination process may force one to examine areas of life that one might prefer to leave unexamined, one must not be afraid to examine his beliefs and practice in light of his principles and gauge not only the consistency of their practice but also their value in relation to the principles one holds to be true.

One also must not be afraid to examine the life-guiding principles themselves in light of discovered truth. This is especially important because a life lived according to the wrong principles or presuppositions may at least be consistent but may very well be misguided and is not an examined life. As one grows and matures in their thinking they may very well discard old principles or beliefs in favor of ones they have newly discovered or they may find as they live life that the principles they used to value are inadequate or even useless in light of their experience or new beliefs. Examining long-held beliefs and principles is difficult because often those beliefs and principles tie us to our family, culture, religion, etc., but this examination must be diligent and complete despite its discomfort or even painfulness so that one can lead a life of consistency and coherency, in other words, an examined life.

Only a life that is internally and externally consistent and founded upon well-informed and well-reasoned principles is truly meaningful and only that life can be truly satisfying to a person who cares. Not everyone cares, however, and many are content to breeze through life thinking only of what is in front of them rather than considering their existence, their world, and how those two coincide and should coincide. Those who do not live the examined life do not truly live life to the fullest; they merely exist and do not even realize that their lives are deficient, much less realize how deficient their lives are.

So then, one may say that this famous sentence expresses the essence of philosophy, which seeks to find truth and then live life in a manner consistent with that truth so that life has meaning and one finds fulfillment and satisfaction. Philosophy asks hard questions about the core issues of life, questions that deal with subjects such as the nature of existence and God. Philosophers also ask these questions with diligent scrutiny. One need only read the dialogues of Plato to see an example of such scrutiny. Socrates asks questions others do not think of about things that many only take for granted. For example, Socrates often asks what a word means before he even begins asking about a particular topic and thus forces one to

begin at the beginning. This is an example of examining one's core beliefs and principles, which people often define only in muddy, vague terms. Through questioning, Socrates forces others to examine their life and he teaches us the manner in which we engage in philosophy even today, proving that not all new things are better and some old things have not lost their edge.

Such an examined life, however, may lead one to answers or conclusions that are unpleasant. Socrates sometimes questions people who leave in dismay or disgust because their foundations have been shaken and they are unable to cope with the revelation that some of their dearly held beliefs do not measure up to such scrutiny and examination. One who engages in the task of philosophy must be willing to find their beliefs shaken and must be willing to continue searching beyond that shaking to find the truth that will endure such examination. One who seeks to live the examined life is prepared for that shaking and may even welcome it because it puts them closer to living the life for which they are searching.

But philosophy does not end with an examination of core beliefs, it also seeks connect principle and practice. This is why philosophy examines areas of life such as politics and art. Socrates was not afraid to draw necessary conclusions from his examining and this got him into trouble. His examined life forced him to ask and answer difficult questions and carry them out to their logical conclusions. The conclusions he reached were not always welcomed by those around him and those citizens, who made up the state, not to mention the jury that would condemn him, were not willing to question the status quo but went along with whatever was given to them without question. Socrates points out in his apology that more voted to sentence him to death than voted to find him guilty. Such people do not live according to principle and so one is not surprised to find that they had difficulty with a man who asked pointed questions about sensitive subjects.

But it is only when life is lived with consistency between belief and practice can life be lived to the fullest. The only way one can live in such a manner is to examine and ask the hard questions of one's self and society. So philosophy cannot be mere discussion, erudite but meaningless, about simple questions, it is search for truth that can and must be lived out, providing meaning to one's life, this Socrates demonstrates in the manner in which he lived and died. He could have lived but would have had to surrender his principles and to do so would not have been a life of fulfillment, so it is better to die, than to live a life devoid of meaning, one not worthy of examination.

This all sounds strikingly similar to Christianity in that Christians also seek truth and meaning. Christians seek truth through reason and the senses but they also judge the information gained by the word of revelation from God contained in the Scriptures. Christians hope that such judging by a

sanctified mind will lead to truth even if they must confront the hard questions about human nature and human destiny and they hope to find the right answers even if they are painful.

Christianity, however, is not simply a belief system; it is a way of life and so seeks to reconcile the truth with practice and behavior so that the believer can live a life of satisfaction, meaning and fulfillment. Christianity addresses all areas of life in light of certain foundational principles and Christians believe, or at least teach, that those who do not understand and embrace these principles and put them into practice live lives of futility with no lasting value. Christians judge the value of an action in light of eternity and so they look to God who is eternal and the Judge of all as the standard by which their lives and actions are judged.

Sadly, the church of today is characterized by disconnect between truth and practice. Christians today often ask what to do, but they do not ask why this is the way it is. They are like the people of Socrates' day, or Jesus' day, who did what they did but failed to understand or even to ask why things were so and how they could be different. Not only that, what we claim as truth is not examined anymore. Christians today are afraid to search the Scriptures and examine their tradition and lifestyle. They are afraid to ask a question of God or about God for fear such questioning will lead them to sin, faithlessness, or atheism, when in reality; such examination can strengthen one's faith. Christians can learn much from this pagan, Socrates, and Christians must consider that while Jesus was the Son of God, he, questioned in the same manner as Socrates, provoked anger in the hearts of people, and ultimately was killed by society for persistently pointing out the inconsistencies and wrongs of his day. Thankfully, though, Jesus, unlike Socrates, is risen from the dead and by his resurrection we know that his word is true.