
Know Thyself

The Value and Limits
of Self-Knowledge

Mitchell S. Green

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**In memory of my father, Burton Green,
teacher and student**

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Preface

It is an oft-repeated precept that we should know ourselves. Yet it is not clear what kind of knowledge this advice is telling us to acquire, or how to acquire it. We hear a lot of advice not all of which, on closer examination, is particularly plausible. Might the injunction to achieve self-knowledge be over-rated, one of those old pieties that we do better to leave behind? After all, there are many interesting things to know. Why should knowing ourselves be singled out from among these as in any way special? And even if self-knowledge is important or special, doesn't each of us know enough about ourselves already? Like you, I know when I am hungry, or cold, or want to go see a movie. So what is the problem?

In this book I hope to make some progress in answering these questions. In particular I will first elucidate the phenomenon—or better, phenomena—of self-knowledge, and some of the complexity that confronts us when we attempt to come to terms with them. On that basis I will offer an explanation of why striving for self-knowledge is of value, while also keeping in view the barriers to which our attempts to know ourselves are prone. This explanation will not be able to address all possible forms of skepticism: there will likely be some readers left who remain unpersuaded. That is quite okay. I do hope that even such skeptics will be able to appreciate the reasons why someone might take a different approach from theirs. Further, I hope you will find some intrinsic interest in engaging with the ideas of some great thinkers of the past, as well as with some major current issues in ongoing debates about the self and our knowledge of it.

I have written this book with the conviction that virtually anyone with some curiosity about and interest in living a good life might be interested in the topic of self-knowledge: its nature, its value, and also its limits. However, I shall do my best to earn your agreement rather than take it for granted. In so doing I have not presupposed any background knowledge other than the general information about the world that most of us have by about the time we are teenagers. I have also assumed that the reader is able to follow a line of reasoning and think about some abstract concepts, but I have tried to exhibit such lines of reasoning and present those abstract ideas relatively gently. As is characteristic of my field of philosophy, my main aim is not to provide advice or definitive answers as

to how to achieve self-knowledge or attain the kind of life that it might help promote. Some pointers toward self-knowledge will of course emerge in our discussion, for instance when we look into the topics of self-deception and what I call self-misleading. Nonetheless, my main aim is to provide the reader with some tools for making headway on her own, or with friends, peers, or family members, in discussing, thinking through, and learning more about these topics. While I will be showing you around the territory that is self-knowledge—its promontories, valleys, dangerous areas, and curiosities—my main aim is to convey the skills you might find useful in navigating it well after you complete this book.

Academic philosophy in the last two centuries, at least in Western countries, has tended to promote an image of the field as one that is studied in solitude: we are familiar with the image of the professor or student reading or writing in private as she contemplates an ancient problem of mind, matter, ethics, or knowledge. Rodin's sculpture, *The Thinker (La Penseur)*, well captures this sensibility.

This image is, however, at odds with philosophy's ancient origins, whether they be that of the Buddha discussing hard questions in the Himalayan foothills with his disciples, or Socrates debating with acquaintances in the marketplace in Athens. It is also at odds with what I believe to be the most fruitful and enjoyable way to engage with the field: you will probably learn more, and have more fun in the process, engaging with philosophy in the company of others whether you do so in a traditional college class, an in-person or virtual discussion group, or the massive open online course (MOOC) with which the book shares a name. In that spirit I have attempted to write this book in such a way as to give the reader a sense of participating in a conversation, not only with me but with some of the thinkers that I discuss. Here too I hope to incite further conversation rather than end dialogue with any final statements.

I have also written this book in such a way as to make it conducive to classroom use. Each chapter ends with a bulleted overview of the main points, as well as study questions which could be used as prompts for class discussion, examination questions, and paper topics. I have also listed introductory and more advanced further readings for those students interested in exploring a topic in greater depth. In addition, and in light of my experience teaching courses on self-knowledge for about 10 years, each of the first four chapters of this book is associated with one primary text that would be suitable for use in parallel with this one. The associations are as follows:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Socrates and the Examined Life | Plato, <i>Five Dialogues</i> |
| 2. Descartes' Essence | Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> |
| 3. Ryle's Re-Casting of the "Mind-Body Problem" | Ryle, <i>The Concept of Mind</i> |
| 4. The Freudian Unconscious | Freud, <i>Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis</i> |

In addition, for those offering courses of potential interest to students in the cognitive sciences outside of philosophy (particularly psychology, neuroscience, computer science, or linguistics), Chapter 5 (on the “adaptive unconscious”) is well paired with T. Wilson’s *Strangers to Ourselves*, and with A. Damasio’s *Descartes’ Error*. Finally, Siderits’ *Buddhism as Philosophy* is exceptionally well suited to complement the final two chapters of this book. (Full citations are found at the end of the relevant chapters, as well as in the comprehensive bibliography.) Those familiar with the main current of contemporary philosophical literature on self-knowledge will recognize that this volume is out of the mainstream: our focus is only passingly on such questions as how we know our current mental states, such as one’s belief that the sun is shining outside. Instead, the book is written in the same spirit as that of Cassam, who focuses on what he terms substantial self-knowledge.¹

Thanks are due to many who helped me in bringing this project into being. First to Andy Beck of Routledge who initially suggested that I write the volume; my thanks to him for his guidance and serene patience. I am grateful also to Vera Lochtefeld of Routledge whose good sense and attention to detail saved me from numerous errors. Emma Bjorngard has been a research assistant non-*pareil*, with astute comments on chapter drafts and useful ideas for illustrative examples. Olta Shkempi painstakingly read the entire manuscript and offered myriad insightful comments along the way. I am also grateful to the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, whose course development grant in 2005 enabled me to spend uninterrupted time developing the course that initially inspired this book. Likewise, the Honors Program at the University of Connecticut provided me with further course development support, as well as a steady supply of outstanding students on whom I have been able to test out preliminary chapters.

Finally, my thanks to Lori, Noah, Sofia, and Clementine for being the best family I could imagine having, providing love, emotional support, comic relief, and tolerance for my obsessiveness. Clementine’s and my collective six legs have walked thousands of miles while we reflected on the self and our knowledge of it. If Plato’s argument in *Republic* that dogs are lovers of wisdom (because they are kind toward those they know, and fierce toward those they don’t know) is cogent, then she is the ultimate peripatetic philosopher.

Note

1. Q. Cassam (2014) *Self-Knowledge for Humans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). Unlike Cassam I see no reason to restrict the subject to our own species.

1 Socrates and the Examined Life

Introduction

We begin our exploration of self-knowledge in Athens of 399 bc, where Socrates is defending himself against serious accusations that have been brought against him by some fellow Athenians. Among the many points he makes in his own defense is that his friend Chaerephon has consulted the Oracle at Delphi, who told him that no one is wiser than Socrates. Socrates had long professed ignorance about life's most important matters, so he is perplexed by the Oracle's pronouncement. However, he suggests that perhaps he is at least cognizant of his own ignorance while many of his fellow Athenians are not. We will explore this suggestion and relate it to Socrates' later remark that the unexamined life is not worth living. Although many of us have heard this claim so often as to be nearly complacent about it, it is controversial. As a result, we will consider reasons for thinking the remark unreasonably demanding. We will also consider a reinterpretation of Socrates' dictum making it both more plausible and more interesting than its more typical construal. In light of this reinterpretation, we will be able to discern ways in which people can live lives that would likely be richer and more rewarding if they were to find room for self-examination. Finally, characters from other Platonic dialogues (including *Ion*, *Crito*, *Glaucon*, and *Euthyphro*), as well as some familiar slogans from contemporary life, are discussed in order to illustrate various failures of self-examination.

A Puzzling Oracle

The phrase "Know thyself" is an English translation of the Greek dictum,

Γ Ν Ω Θ Ι Σ Α Υ Τ Ο Ν

These words were, according to legend, carved into stone at the entrance to the temple of Apollo at Delphi, Greece. This temple dates at least as far back as the eighth century bc, and was at the height of its influence between the sixth and fourth centuries bc. The dictum is only one of over 100 that were visible in various parts of the temple. Among the others were "Shun murder," "Crown your

ancestors,” and “Control the eye.” However, the injunction to know oneself is probably the most famous of all of them. This is partly due to the association of this phrase with Socrates and his student Plato. To understand this association, it helps to appreciate the role of the Temple at Delphi in Greek life in the fourth century *bc*. According to Greek legend, Zeus released two eagles at opposite ends of the world, and they met at what is now Delphi, which as a result came to be called *omphalos* or the navel of the world. According to one archeological study, on the site of the temple an intoxicating vapor flowed out of a subterranean cavern (Spiller et al. 2003). A priestess known as the Pythian would inhale this vapor and enter an altered state of consciousness through which she was believed to serve as the mouthpiece of a deity. As a result, it was thought that the priestess could not be in error in answering questions put to her. However, perhaps due to her intoxication, the Pythian’s utterances required interpretation. Consequently, (male) priests would act as intermediaries between the Pythian and the public. But even with the aid of their interpretation, the priests’ words had to be construed carefully. Leaders of city-states (or their emissaries) from all over greater Greece would come to Delphi seeking the Pythian’s advice. One legend has it that King Croesus of Lydia consulted the oracle to determine whether he should attack Cyrus the Great and his Persian army. The oracle replied that if he attacked the Persians, he would destroy a great empire. Croesus took this reply as advice to attack, but when he did so, his army, and consequently his own empire, were destroyed.

Socrates (469 to 399 *bc*) was the son of a midwife and a sculptor, and he spent the great majority of his 70 years living in Athens. Most days he could be found in the agora, which in Athens served as marketplace, social venue, and locus of much politicking. Rather than work in a job such as sculpting or sandal-making, Socrates could usually be found here engaging in conversation with a respected Athenian citizen or one of the city’s many visitors. In these conversations, Socrates would typically raise a question about the nature of justice, virtue, piety, or knowledge. More often than not, Socrates would show his interlocutors that their answers to his questions were unacceptable in some way, for instance as a result of being either inconsistent or not cohering with something else that they professed to believe.

This way of conducting himself had two consequences. First, it gained for Socrates a small band of followers who found these conversations fascinating. These followers were aristocratic young men who had the leisure to spend their days in discussion rather than at work. Among the young men in his entourage are Crito, Xenophon, Cratylus, and Plato, who came to write down many of the dialogues he witnessed between Socrates and others.

Second, Socrates’ way of conducting himself, and the entourage of aristocratic followers it generated, over time provoked the ire of some of Athens’ more prominent citizens. Some of them might have been parents of the aforementioned young men; others might have been among those whose conversations with Socrates showed that they knew less about virtue, wisdom, and the like than they thought they did. This ire grew over the years until a

formal accusation was lodged against Socrates. According to this accusation, Socrates has been corrupting the youth of Athens; he does not believe in the gods accepted by society, and he “makes the better argument seem the worse,” which apparently was a way of saying that he tends to confuse people with complicated lines of reasoning. Shortly after this, Socrates finds himself on trial in front of a jury of his peers. (In Athens at the time, such a jury would have consisted of 501 male, landholding Athenian citizens.) His aim is to defend himself against these charges in an effort to show that none of them is accurate. (Our primary source of information about this event is the description written down by Socrates’ student Plato. This description is known as the “Apology,” but do not be misled by this term, which is just a transliteration of the original Greek term. In defending himself, Socrates is not apologetic in the least. Instead, he aims to explain and justify his actions, and to show his fellow Athenians that he is innocent of the charges that have been leveled against him.)

As part of his self-defense, Socrates denies that he knows much of anything. To explain what he means by this, Socrates contrasts his own lifestyle with that of sophists, who travel from one polis, or city-state, to another charging a fee to anyone wishing to hear them profess on topics of interest. One such sophist is Evenus, whose fee is 500 drachmas (one drachma being about what a laborer earned in a day). Socrates tells his audience that he would be very proud of himself if he had the knowledge that Evenus professes to have. Unfortunately, however, he has no such knowledge. But then, in a move that may seem to contradict what he had just said, Socrates relates the tale of his old friend Chaerephon, who had gone to consult the oracle at Delphi. Chaerephon asked the oracle whether anyone is wiser than Socrates. The oracle replied that no, no one is wiser than Socrates!

How could Socrates be speaking the truth about his lack of knowledge if no one is wiser than he? Keeping in mind the legend about the trouble that came to Croesus from his hasty interpretation of the oracle’s words, let’s be careful about the oracle’s answer to Chaerephon’s question. If no one is wiser than Socrates, that might simply be because everyone is equally unwise. (So too, it may be that no one in the room is taller than Yael, not because she is taller than everyone else, but rather because everyone in the room, including Yael, is exactly the same height.) In spite of this, Socrates interprets the oracle’s answer as indicating that he is wiser than others, if only by a slight margin. Further, Socrates tells his audience that he found the oracle’s answer unbelievable. Surely someone out there must be wiser than he is! So, Socrates tells the jurors, after Chaerephon reported the oracle’s answer, he set about trying to prove that the oracle was mistaken by finding someone wiser than he. However, after many years of talking to others from various walks of life (including poets, artisans, and politicians), Socrates concluded that all these people believe themselves to be wise, but are mistaken in that belief. For instance, Socrates went to the poets to ask them to explain their works. They were, however, unable to do so. As Socrates recalls, “Almost all the bystanders might have explained the poems better than their authors could” (*Five Dialogues*, p. 27). Similarly,

artisans certainly know better than Socrates how to cut and shape wood to be used in the bow of a trireme, or how to fashion an urn. However, all too often such people take their skills to qualify them to pronounce on great questions of justice, virtue, and the like; and here Socrates found that their views on these matters are not well supported.

These experiences helped Socrates to see how the oracle might have been right after all. For while others lack wisdom, but think themselves to be wise, Socrates acknowledges his own lack of wisdom. He appreciates his own limitations, whereas others are too self-confident, or complacent, or both to even notice their own. Socrates narrates his conclusion as follows:

So I withdrew and thought to myself: "I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know."

(*Five Dialogues*, p. 26)

Socrates' conclusion seems to vindicate the oracle's pronouncement, while still making sense of why he tells his jurors that he does not have knowledge that could be used to corrupt the youth of Athens. After all, if you know nothing, or nothing of importance, then merely being aware of this fact does not exactly qualify you to go around Greece charging people 500 drachmas to hear you speak!

We may see the idea behind the Oracle's pronouncement even more clearly once we note a distinction between knowledge and wisdom. To prepare for that distinction, first consider the concept of knowledge as the Western philosophical tradition has primarily understood it since the time of the Greeks. According to this tradition, what we know are propositions (such as that $2 + 2 = 4$, or that Windhoek is the capital of Namibia). This type of knowledge is thus known as *propositional knowledge* (It will be contrasted with another kind—ability knowledge—in Chapter 3.) Further, if we are to know a proposition it must, first of all, be true. (One cannot *know* that $2 + 2 = 5$; the most one can do is be, for whatever odd reason, certain that it is true.) Second, if we are to know a proposition, we must also believe it to be true. (One cannot know a proposition on which one is, say, entirely agnostic.) And finally, even if a proposition is true, and one believes that it is, that does not guarantee that one knows this proposition. To see why, suppose that the town in which I live is having a contest to see who can guess the number of marbles in a large jar sitting at the center of the town square. Without even going to inspect the jar, I mail in my guess: 43,297. Lo and behold, I was right! That is exactly the number of marbles in the jar, and as a result I win a pair of free airline tickets to Namibia. This is wonderful news, since that is a country I've wanted to visit since I was a teenager. However, in spite of being glad that I won the contest I do not think others should say that I knew how many marbles there are in the jar. A mere lucky guess is not sufficient for knowledge.

Matters would be different in this case had I gone to the town square with a tape measure and calculated as best I could the number of marbles in the jar on the basis of my measurements. Or even more dramatically, suppose I crept into the town square under the cover of darkness, emptied out the entire jar, counted each one of the marbles that fell out, and then refilled the jar's contents and crept away without being detected. Here it seems clear that if I had then sent in my answer (43,297) on the basis of that painstaking counting, I did know how many marbles were in that jar. Socrates in other dialogues would say that in order to have knowledge one must make not just a lucky guess, but also have an account, that is, some basis for the thing that you believe. Present-day philosophers would put the point by saying that knowledge requires not just truth and belief, but also *justification*: you must be able to give reasons for the things you take yourself to know. It is common nowadays to crystallize the result of this line of thought by referring to the "jtb" account of knowledge: propositional knowledge requires **justified, true belief**.¹

With propositional knowledge roughly characterized, we may now see that one can be (propositionally) knowledgeable without being wise. One can, that is, absorb a great deal of information (and do so by reliable means in such a way to achieve justification) and still not make use of it in a way that benefits oneself or others. Someone with extensive knowledge of the causes and varieties of disease would hardly seem wise if she does not use this information to help keep herself or others from falling ill. Conversely, one who is not well-informed may still exhibit wisdom by acknowledging that fact. Otherwise he is liable to do something rash based on what he *thinks* he knows to be the case. King Croesus, for instance, *thought* he knew what the Delphic oracle meant in saying that if he attacked the Persians, a great empire would be destroyed. But he did not. Had he instead acknowledged that the oracle's answer could be construed either as a suggestion that he go to war or as a warning against doing so, he might have refrained from attacking the Persians and thereby saved his kingdom from destruction. So too, Socrates would seem after all to be wiser than his fellow Athenians: although all in the polis lack answers to life's important questions, Socrates alone acknowledges his ignorance and so is less likely than his compatriots are to do rash things presupposing such unjustified answers.

The Examined Life, Take I

Although Socrates makes a vigorous case in reply to the charges that have been brought against him, the jury votes and finds him guilty as charged; what is more, after further discussion the jury sentences him to die by drinking the poisonous nectar of the hemlock plant. To the amazement of many modern readers, the record of the trial does not describe Socrates as terribly upset by this verdict. He does not attempt to plea for mercy from his fellow Athenians. Nor does he beg to be sent into exile in another city-state such as Thebes or Megara. His reason for refusing exile is not that he will be terribly distraught over missing his friends and family in Athens. Rather, his reason seems to be

that to avoid being put on trial yet again in his new home, wherever that may be, he would have to keep his mouth shut rather than spending his days asking philosophical questions of whomever might be willing to listen. But, Socrates suggests, that would be no way to live. He sums up this line of thought with words commonly translated as the

Socratic Dictum:

The unexamined life is not worth living for men.

This turns out to be one of the more famous statements in the Western philosophical tradition. What does it mean, and is it true? The first thing to consider about this dictum is that it refers to the notion of an examined life. Modern readers might understand this idea of an examined life in terms of *introspection* into one or more of our psychological states. According to this modern approach, I engage in self-examination by focusing on my thoughts, emotions, or experiences and perhaps also attending to their features. Thus I might notice that the sour taste in my mouth is a bit less intense than it was a few minutes ago, or that the irritation I am feeling toward the airplane passenger in the seat behind me is gradually increasing. However, the ancient Greeks seem to have had a conception of an examined life in which introspection plays a marginal role at best. At least as Socrates understands the notion, living an examined life seems to involve spending time trying to understand fundamental concepts such as virtue, justice, knowledge, and piety. Further, because virtue, justice, knowledge, and piety must characterize any life that is lived well, self-examination would seem to be a necessary step to living a good life. But how does one understand such a thing as virtue? Socrates' answer is not that one does so by introspecting on one's concept of virtue (even supposing that such a thing were possible), but rather it is by engaging in debate with others about how best to define virtue. Is virtue something that can be learned, for instance; can a successful city-state be led by a leader who is not himself virtuous, and so on. Further, in taking every opportunity to discuss with others the nature of virtue (or justice, or knowledge, or any other central facet of a life well lived), we are also examining ourselves, for it is in debate on these topics that we are forced to elucidate, and often revise, our own views in response to the questions and challenges of others. By contrast, an unexamined life is one in which we do not engage in conversation with others or even ourselves about the nature of these fundamental concepts, but rather behave in accordance with our unreflective grasp of those concepts.

Another aspect of the Socratic Dictum is that strictly speaking it refers only to men. Ancient Greece was a profoundly sexist society, with women having a social status only slightly higher than that of slaves. As a result, it might not have occurred to Socrates or his jurors to ask whether the unexamined life is worth living for women. While acknowledging this disturbing shortcoming of the Socratic Dictum and the society in which it was espoused, we may now see that restricting it to one gender only is arbitrary at best. For our purposes, even

if we interpret the Dictum as applying to all persons regardless of gender, we will still have good reasons for doubting its accuracy.

Why is that? Well, as we have seen from Socrates' understanding of the examined life, in spending his days going around the agora and elsewhere in Athens interrogating others about concepts that are fundamental to a life well lived, Socrates is living an examined life. (He may also be examining other people's lives by asking them questions about their own views, but that is compatible with his examining his own.) Accordingly, in claiming that the unexamined life is not worth living, Socrates is in effect telling his audience that his life would not be worth living if he were to spend the rest of his days keeping his mouth shut, neither questioning others about their views, nor trying out his own ideas on his conversational partners.

Even bearing firmly in mind Socrates' way of understanding an examined or unexamined life, should we really go so far as to agree that staying silent about these questions would make one's life not worth living? Come to think of it, could a life ever not be worth living? After all, many people will agree that all life has value. But having value, and being worth living, are different things. Consider that according to some ethicists, some lives might fall below what they term the "zero line" and thus not be worth living (Glover 2008). Imagine for instance a baby named Mia born with a congenital disease that causes her to be in relentless pain. Mia seems to be forever uncomfortable, crying constantly, and never seems to acknowledge the existence of others, including her parents. After numerous failed operations to correct her condition, Mia passes away at age six months. You may understand why someone might feel that this baby's life was not worth living even though she had value for the entirety of her brief life.

The idea of a life not being worth living seems, then, to make sense. However, it is a huge leap from this admission to the conclusion that an unexamined life in Socrates' sense of that notion is not worth living. Even if he were to spend the rest of his days not debating with others the nature of justice, virtue, and the like, Socrates could still enjoy the company of others, eat good food, listen to beautiful music, and enjoy watching horse-races at the Piraeus, the port city serving Athens. This seems a very different case from Mia's brief life full of suffering.

Indeed, if we were to accept Socrates' dictum we would have to conclude that a vast number of people now or in the past live or have lived lives not worth living. Yet some people have what appears to be an unreflective sense of right and wrong that they are able to act on without having to engage in debate about the concepts being presupposed. Pallavi, for instance, has known since childhood that she wants to devote all her efforts to the protection of animals who have been abused, and she works tirelessly to find homes for these creatures rather than having them euthanized in the "kill shelters" where they are temporarily housed. Abdul, by contrast, wants to do all he can to locate sources of unpolluted water for villagers in his native country, for it simply seems obvious to him that without clean water his compatriots will never be able to achieve

a decent standard of living. Both Pallavi and Abdul, we may further imagine, work very hard, and have precious little time or energy left over at day's end for debating about the nature of justice, virtue, wisdom, or the like. But both of them do a great deal of good: Pallavi has saved the lives of hundreds of animals and brought happiness to those who have provided homes for them, and Abdul has enabled countless families to drink water without being in danger of falling ill. Saying that Pallavi and Abdul live lives that are not worth living seems not just implausible, but even elitist. Is Socrates just mistaken in claiming that the unexamined life is not worth living?

A Reinterpretation of Socrates

The philosopher Richard Kraut has taken up this question in his essay, "The Examined Life" (Kraut 2009). He agrees that as we have interpreted it, Socrates' dictum seems unrealistic: too many people whose lives seem eminently worth living do not engage in self-examination as Socrates understands that notion. On the other hand, Kraut suggests, the original Greek formulation of the dictum may be read in more than one way. In addition to the construal of the dictum we have so far assumed, the Greek phrasing may also be read as

Socratic Dictum, Revised

The unexamined life is not to be lived.

Just a little reflection reveals how this differs from the original Socratic Dictum. Some years ago I was listening to a late-night jazz radio station, and between tracks the DJ said, of the piece he had just played, "Man, if you don't dig that, you got a hole in your soul!" As I reflected on his words, I realized that he was implying that your life is missing something of value if you are unable to appreciate the music, or at least the *type* of music, he had just played. And regardless of your opinion about jazz, I suspect that you may well agree that a life lived with no music at all is missing something of value. That life may still be worth living, but it is incomplete. We may even imagine a

Musician's Dictum

The unmusical life is not to be lived.

According to the Musician's Dictum, one who lives her life without music is missing something important even if her life is still worth living in its absence. We may readily think of similar dicta about friendship, love, exercise, and good food. Similarly, according to *Socratic Dictum, Revised*, we may say that if Pallavi or Abdul refrain from self-examination in Socrates' understanding of that activity, they may still live lives that are worth living, but those lives are missing something of value. What is more, this seems independently plausible: Pallavi does great things, but if she has never reflected on the reason why it is important to save animals from being euthanized, we may feel there is something hollow,

perhaps even dogmatic, in her way of thinking. So too, while it may seem obvious that providing safe drinking water for people is a worthwhile activity, if Abdul cannot say why doing so is worthwhile, he would seem to be missing something of value.

Richard Kraut has given us a key to making Socrates' pronouncement about the unexamined life more reasonable. If we use it in an effort to unlock Socrates' point of view, it enables us to grasp why he might prefer to accept his penalty of death rather than go into exile. At the time of his trial, Socrates is 70 years of age—quite an advanced age for his time. Imagine another person—call him Ravi—who instead of being a philosopher is a 70-year-old music aficionado who has been accused by some of his compatriots of caring too much about music. Powerful officials put Ravi on trial, and find him guilty as charged. He is given the choice between death, on the one hand, and living, on the other, but only on the condition that he never listen to or play music again. One can understand why Ravi might choose death over a music-free life for the time that remains to him. So too, now that we have given it a closer look, Socrates' choice to accept his penalty of death rather than go into exile does not seem so absurd.

A Pluralist Challenge

We have now seen a fairly extreme, as well as a more moderate formulation of the value of an examined life. On the extreme interpretation, one who does not engage in self-examination might as well never have been born, while on the more moderate formulation, a life without self-examination may still be worth living but is still missing something of value that any complete life would contain. Might there be a basis for challenging even this more moderate point of view as expressed in Socratic Dictum, Revised? Once we remind ourselves how much variation there can be among people's preferences, we may begin to discern a source of skepticism about even the more moderate approach. For many of us live lives that are missing something of value, even though we might take issue with the suggestion that we are living lives that are not to be lived. Why is this? One reason is that, at least for those not living in extreme poverty or under repressive regimes, contemporary life presents us with so many possibilities of fulfillment that no one could pursue them all with enough consistency and commitment to achieve the value that all these sources have to offer. Although many of these activities would have been inconceivable in Socrates' time, just consider a few of the things that people find today to provide great value:

International travel, photography, helping children with special needs, ballroom dancing, inventing energy-efficient technologies, yoga, rock climbing, training service animals to help those with special needs, friendship, romantic love, raising children, composing music, collecting vintage comic books.

This is a brief portion of a very long list. By any reasonable standard, even a full life could not achieve all the things on the entire list, assuming that such a

list could be written down. As a result, no one should accuse a person who does not do everything on the list of living a life that is not to be lived.

A lesson we may draw from these observations is that living a life that is missing something of value should not be equated with living a life that is not to be lived. Simply because our time and resources are limited, all of us live lives that are missing something of value. It is only if, among the enormous list of worthwhile activities, some are of greater value than others, that we might have a chance of concluding that certain ways of living are to be avoided. It seems clear that Socrates would say that self-examination (in his sense of that term) is one of the things of greater value; I am confident he would say it is more important than travel or dancing, for instance. But should we believe him?

Consider Ella, who is happy spending her days surfing the legendary waves off the coast of Cape Town, South Africa. Ella is such a good surfer that she can make a living at it, and regularly wins large sums of prize money in competitions. Ella has no interest in self-examination, but she also has little interest in music, fine food, or anything else that gets in the way of her pursuing her passion for surfing. Imagine Socrates telling her that she is living a life that is not to be lived because she is failing to engage in self-examination. Ella might reply that she has everything she needs, thank you, so long as there are wind, waves, and sunshine. Further, if her health ever fails and she has to give up surfing, perhaps she will take up another pursuit instead. But that doesn't mean she should start worrying about that now. So long as her legs are strong and the waves are good, she'll keep searching for the next great barrel ride.

Ella is expressing a view that we might call *pluralist*. She does not say that self-examination is without value. However, she challenges us to explain why it has greater value than any of the many other things that one might spend one's time doing. Further, she might tell us, given that there are far too many things worth doing to do them all, no item on the list of things that are worth doing has the feature that, if someone fails to do that thing, then she lives a life that is not to be lived.

Socrates might reply to Ella as follows: although Ella might get very lucky and surf every day until her very last, chances are good that well before then she will need to find other ways of spending her time. Perhaps weather patterns will change, causing the waves to become too dangerous to surf, or maybe she will tear some cartilage in her knee and be unable to repair the damage with surgery. Engaging in Socratic self-examination can serve as a kind of insurance against such events. It won't prevent such unfortunate events from occurring, but it will help Ella negotiate them with a minimum of trauma. For if she can start thinking sooner rather than later about what it is about surfing she likes so much (the exercise? the scenery? the sense of adventure? etc.), that can help her decide what to do with herself if she is ever forced to pursue something else.

More generally, we may see that the pluralist about what makes life valuable will reject both the Socratic Dictum as well as its weaker alternative, Socratic Dictum, Revised. However, we have also argued on Socrates' behalf that the pluralist is choosing not to insure herself against the dangers that all too often

confront us: accidents, failing health, environmental change, and the like can all make it harder to do the things we love. Rather than just giving up on life after such upsetting events, one who has engaged in Socratic self-examination stands a good chance of knowing how to proceed from there in a way that will still enable her to live life in a way she finds satisfying.

Some Unexamined Lives

As the example of Ella the surfer suggests, perhaps not all ways of refraining from self-examination result in lives that are not to be lived. However, we do not have to search too far before encountering unreflective ways of living that do seem to merit criticism. We mentioned that among Socrates' entourage was Plato, who wrote descriptions of many of the conversations that Socrates had with others in Athens. After Socrates' death, Plato continued to write dialogues in which Socrates is discussing philosophical issues with others. However, the consensus among scholars today is that many of the dialogues written after Socrates' death were primarily fictional rather than based on discussions that Plato witnessed; furthermore, these dialogues were often opportunities for Plato to develop his own answers to philosophical questions. Fortunately, our purposes here do not require us to sort out which of the things Plato wrote were based on conversations that took place and which were fictional. For even if some of the characters Plato describes are fictional, we may still learn from them. For instance, another of the dialogues Plato wrote is entitled *Ion*, named after a man who was a rhapsode. Rhapsodes traveled around ancient Greece reciting stories from Homer, and were much sought after. However, Plato makes clear that although Ion has memorized a great deal of Homeric poetry, he understands little of the stories he is telling: he thus has no appreciation of the way in which such stories offer insight into human character, mortality, love, and the horrors of war. This suggests that although he might be making a living as a rhapsode, Ion would seem to be missing out on other things of value.

A second example is provided by Euthyphro, after whom another of Plato's dialogues has been named. Socrates bumps into him at the law courts and asks him what brings him there. Euthyphro replies that he has come there to prosecute his father for murder. Surprised, Socrates asks Euthyphro to explain why he would do such a thing, and Euthyphro replies that his father had been responsible for the death of one of the workers he employs. Socrates replies that only someone who is sure of the rightness of his actions would prosecute his own father, to which Euthyphro replies that he is indeed sure that he is doing the right thing. In particular, Euthyphro tells Socrates that he is sure that he is doing the *pious* thing in prosecuting his father in the present circumstance, and Socrates responds by asking him to explain just what piety is. In reply, Euthyphro holds that piety is doing what the gods approve of. (Remember that Greek society is polytheistic at this time.) Socrates replies by showing that this is at best a superficial understanding of piety. For surely, the fact that a god approves an action cannot be enough to make that action right. (The Greek gods

were notoriously capable of doing terrible things.) Instead, rightness or wrongness must be due to something about the action itself, such as that it tends to bring about suffering, or that it is a gracious response to another's impoliteness. Socrates asks Euthyphro how he would reply to this question, but rather than making an effort to do so, Euthyphro brusquely tells him that he has another engagement and hurries away.

Here is a dramatic case in which a person not only seems to be missing something by failing to think more deeply about the nature of piety; even worse than that, Euthyphro seems to be willing to put his father's and indeed his entire family's well-being in jeopardy in light of his assumptions about what being pious requires. Of course, Euthyphro may well be doing the right thing in prosecuting his father, but his basis for doing so is dogmatic rather than reasoned. As a result, his choice is at best risky and at worst quite rash.

Another example is Plato's older brother Glaucon, who plays an important role in the long dialogue known as the *Republic*. At an early stage in the discussion described in this dialogue, interlocutors consider the story of the Ring of Gyges. This ring enables its owner to become invisible, thereby granting him considerable new powers. In the twenty-first century, with security technology being what it is, even invisibility would not give you access to everything you might wish to manipulate, such as your bank account information or your standardized test scores. However, one could easily imagine using the ring to sneak into, say, a jewelry store to liberate a few diamond earrings or luxury watches. Glaucon, considering the temptation that the Ring of Gyges would pose for him, asks Socrates why he should "do the right thing" and not use it for illicit purposes. Socrates' reply is too complicated to reproduce here in full. However, according to one simplified version of that reply, Glaucon's temptation to use the Ring of Gyges shows that if he were to gain power or wealth by illicit means, these things would be of little value to him. Most likely no amount of power or wealth would satisfy him, and in no case could he look at his possessions or power and take pride in a job well done. The very fact that Glaucon is tempted to use the Ring of Gyges, Socrates might suggest, shows that he is failing to live an adequately examined life.

For a fourth example, consider a character who appears in a dialogue named after him, Crito. In the narrative of this dialogue, Crito pays a visit to Socrates in his prison cell early in the morning of the day in which he is to be executed. Crito points out that he has enough money to bribe the jailer so that Socrates can escape before the time of his execution. He could work up a disguise for Socrates and get him away from danger without too much trouble. What's more, Crito points out, if he doesn't help Socrates escape, others will think badly of him for not helping him to do so. Maybe he was too cheap to bribe the jailer, they'll say, so let's hurry!

Socrates replies that Crito should be less worried about what others think of him, and more concerned about doing the right thing. Socrates goes on to argue that trying to escape prison at this point would be immoral. Here again, Socrates gives an argument for his position that has engaged and provoked

countless scholars and other readers of this dialogue. But for our purposes, the crucial thing is that Socrates is in effect accusing Crito of living an insufficiently examined life. For relying on other people's judgment to determine what he should do presupposes that he cannot think for himself to figure that out. Further, given how often the opinion of the crowd is in error, Crito should at least make an effort to think for himself rather than let his choices be determined by what others will or might think of him.

It would be natural to feel at this point that even if the above characters—Euthyphro, Ion, Glaucon, and Crito—are not fictional but were historical individuals, still, they lived a very long time ago. Surely human society has progressed since then? I will remain neutral on the question whether the passage of time has made for an overall improvement, although the current popularity of Elvis impersonators might make one wonder whether Ion's approach has really died away. In any case, I urge you to consider the extent to which you, or someone you know personally, is living a life that could benefit from examination in Socrates' sense of that term. To see why it might be possible to benefit in this way, observe that we regularly hear slogans, some of which are repeated so often that they come to take on the appearance of self-evident platitudes. Here are a few that I've heard:

"If It Makes You Happy, It Can't Be That Bad"

This is a line from a Sheryl Crow song titled "If It Makes You Happy." Regardless of what we think of the song's musical strengths, we might have our doubts about the line. All else being equal, it seems perfectly acceptable to do things that make one happy. But imagine a man named Earl who is happy only when he is making others suffer, either psychologically by making them embarrassed or humiliated, or physically by causing them genuine pain. I assume that most of us would find Earl quite repulsive, and would probably consider him a sadist. But if we accept Sheryl Crow's position, we would have to agree that what Earl is doing "can't be that bad" when he makes others suffer since it makes him happy. Closer examination of this dictum and its implications, would, I suggest, make us want at the very least to qualify it in some way.

"My Country, Right or Wrong!"

You may have attended a political rally or been involved in a movement via social media. Either way, it is quite possible you have heard this attitude expressed as a way of urging that commitment to one's country transcends any moral requirements. However, careful reflection on this position will lead many people to recoil from it. What if your country is engaging in discrimination against a racial minority, or for that matter genocide against part of its population? Would you still follow your country's policy and defend it against all challengers?

Some people would answer this question in the affirmative. Others might find, in light of the scenarios just raised, that commitment to one's country has

limits; beyond those limits, civil disobedience may be justified and perhaps even morally required.

“Everything Happens for a Reason”

I have heard this slogan countless times. In everyday contexts it is not said as an affirmation of universal causality, which would contradict accepted principles of quantum mechanics. Rather, it is normally said as a way of suggesting that when something befalls a person, such as life-threatening illness or failure to get the job of her dreams, that person will still gain something from the experience. From the life-threatening illness, she might acquire a new appreciation of the days that she still has remaining to her; from the failure to get the job, perhaps she will learn that she is not as qualified as she thought she was, or she may pursue an alternate career that to her surprise she finds extremely satisfying.

While it is always comforting to hear of people who triumph over, or at least are not entirely defeated by adversity, only a little examination of the present dictum will show that it is too strong. We easily forget those many occasions on which something bad happens and no one benefits as a result. Accordingly, someone striving to live an examined life will look at a slogan like this one and conclude that while it expresses a superficially reasonable attitude, on closer examination it turns out to be not terribly plausible.

“Better Safe Than Sorry”

You may have heard this advice from someone warning you not take a course of action you’re considering that may carry some risks. Sometimes traveling in dangerous weather, or lending money to a friend, are more risky than their potential benefits would justify. However, if you examine the dictum a bit more carefully, you might begin to wonder how valuable a guide to action it really is. It is no doubt better to be safe than sorry; but if this dictum is used to justify not taking any risks, then surely our reasoning has gone wrong somewhere. Nearly everything we do involves *some* element of risk. Whether a given course of action is worth taking depends not just on whether it involves some risk, but also on whether its potential benefits—and costs if things don’t go well—are great enough to make taking the risk worthwhile. Imagine someone uttering, “Better safe than sorry!” as a reason for never traveling on a plane, or for that matter not going on a blind date. These policies would be questionable at best. The difficulty, then, with saying it is better to be safe than sorry, is that in a given case of action being considered, this platitude won’t tell us whether the risk is worth taking—and sometimes risks *are* worth taking.

In this chapter we have considered a notion of self-examination from ancient times and weighed its merits. I hope to have made it at least plausible that Socrates’ understanding of self-examination has value, and that this value is not just in its ability to help us appreciate the failings of people who lived over two millennia ago. Instead, Socratic self-examination has worth even now as

a way of helping us to consider some of the principles on which we act and to ask whether those principles are really viable. All too often, I suggest, we may find that those principles are in need of refinement, and in some cases they deserve to be rejected outright. The best way to learn more about Socratic self-examination is to try it out, preferably in the company of others patient enough to reflect on your questions about some of our basic assumptions concerning how to live.

Is this a task that could ever end? That is, have we reason to hope that with the help of enough patient and insightful interlocutors, we could finally reach agreement on the nature of justice, virtue, piety, and like notions? Some people will say that on such matters there are no right answers. However, there are two reasons to suspect that this attitude may be rash. First of all, we may ask how one could possibly know that there are no right answers to questions like these. Have you considered all possible answers and determined that none of them quite works? This seems very unlikely; if you had met as many creative, hardworking and insightful scholars as I have been fortunate enough to know, you might come to share my hope that one of them will write a dissertation, book, or journal article that is the definitive account of one of the concepts that Socrates and his friends puzzled over. Second, even if we remain neutral on the question whether it is possible to find definitive answers to these core philosophical concepts, we do know that progress has been and continues to be made. Contemporary theories of justice, for instance, are vastly more detailed, subtle, and powerful than those that were available to the ancients. Even if there are no absolutely definite answers, we seem to be making progress: so let's keep talking!

Finally, recall that we distinguished Socratic self-examination from the process of introspecting on one's own psychological states. We did not consider the merits or limitations of the latter approach, which has in fact been a dominant part of the Western philosophical tradition for approximately four centuries. In the next chapter we will begin to explore that tradition by considering the work of the philosopher widely considered the founder of what is known as the "modern" period of Western philosophy.

Chapter Summary

- The temple at ancient Delphi exhorted those visiting it to know themselves. This provides our first example of a people appealing to, and apparently placing value on, self-knowledge.
- Knowing oneself requires self-examination, but not in a sense that would come most naturally to contemporary readers. Instead, self-examination as understood by Socrates requires investigating, through debate and dialogue, the contours of concepts that seem necessary for living a good life: knowledge, justice, virtue, piety, and the like.
- Socrates heard that the oracle at Delphi had pronounced that no one was wiser than he. Socrates found this unbelievable and sought to disprove it. His years-long attempts to do so failed.

- Socrates learns from this failure that unlike those who mistakenly and complacently think themselves knowledgeable, he at least is aware of his shortcomings.
- Socrates is put on trial for a number of charges, and defends his actions by explaining that he was trying to disprove the oracle. He nevertheless is found guilty and sentenced to death.
- After his sentence, Socrates tells his audience that the unexamined life is not worth living. We may interpret this as implying that most people live lives that are not worth living; or we may take it to mean that the unexamined life is not to be lived. The latter seems a more reasonable interpretation of Socrates, though it is still challenged by a pluralist approach.
- Various characters from Plato's dialogues may be seen as failing to live examined lives. Even contemporary slogans suggest a lack of examination, since they must at least be qualified if they are to have a chance of plausibility.

Study Questions

1. What were the charges that were leveled against Socrates and on which he stood trial?
2. Does the statement "No one is wiser than Socrates" imply that Socrates is wiser than all others? Please explain your answer.
3. Why does Socrates appear to be uninterested in going into exile rather than accepting his death sentence?
4. How does the ancient Greek conception of self-examination differ from the contemporary concept of introspection?
5. Is it possible to be knowledgeable without being wise? Please explain your answer. Is it possible to be wise without being knowledgeable? Please explain your answer.
6. Please explain why the slogan "The unexamined life is not worth living" permits two readings, one of which seems more plausible than the other.
7. Please explain how the pluralist about the examined life would criticize the Socratic Dictum, Revised. Could the proponent of this revised dictum reply by drawing a comparison with the notion of insurance? Please explain your answer.
8. Can you think of any slogans you have heard (other than those mentioned above) that could benefit from further examination, refinement, or clarification? Please explain your answer.

Note

1. Since the early 1960s, controversy has raged over the question whether justified, true belief is *sufficient* for knowledge. Examples have emerged in which a person has justified, true belief and yet still does not seem to know the proposition that she believes. For further discussion see Pritchard (2009) and Pritchard (2014).

Introductory Further Reading

- Glover, J. (2008) *Choosing Children: Genes, Disability, and Design* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). Accessible introduction to bioethics, including explanation of the concept of the “zero line.”
- Johnson, P. (2011) *Socrates: A Man for Our Times* (London: Viking). Accessible and well-written biography of Socrates.
- Kitto, H.D.F. (1951) *The Greeks* (London: Penguin). Classic and highly readable general introduction to the world of ancient Greece.
- Kraut, R. (2009) ‘The Examined Life,’ in S. Ahbel-Rapp and R. Kamtakar (eds.) *A Companion to Socrates* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell), pp. 228–42. Argues for a more modest reading of the Socratic Dictum than is normally invoked.
- Nails, D. (2009) ‘The Trial and Death of Socrates,’ in S. Ahbel-Rapp and R. Kamtakar (eds.) *A Companion to Socrates* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell), pp. 5–20. Discusses the social and historical milieu of Socrates’ trial and execution.
- Plato. (2002) *Five Dialogues*, 2nd Edition, trans. G.M.A. Grube and J.M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett). High-quality translation of *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Meno*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*.
- Pritchard, D. (2014) ‘What Is Knowledge? Do We Have Any?’ in M. Chrisman and D. Pritchard (eds.) *Philosophy for Everyone* (New York: Routledge), pp. 21–36. A brief and highly accessible chapter on epistemology.
- Spiller, H., J. Hale, and J. Z. de Boer. (2003) ‘Questioning the Delphic Oracle,’ *Scientific American*, vol. 289, pp. 67–73. Influential but controversial archeological study aiming to establish that the Pythian inhaled a noxious vapor emanating from underground in Delphi.
- Taylor, C. (1998) *Socrates: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press.) Brief introduction to the thought of Socrates; more focused on philosophical questions as compared with Johnson.

Advanced Further Reading

- Bowden, H. (2005) *Classical Athens and the Delphic Oracle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Advanced scholarly text explaining relations between Athenian culture and politics and operations at Delphi.
- Fontenrose, J. (1978) *The Delphic Oracle: Its Responses and Operations* (Berkeley: University of California Press). Detailed discussion of archeological evidence concerning Delphi.
- Kraut, R. (1992) *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Collection of articles on Plato by leading contemporary scholars.
- Pritchard, D. (2009) *Knowledge* (London: Palgrave Macmillan). Accessible and self-contained introduction to epistemology.
- Reeve, C. (1989) *Socrates in the Apology: An Essay on Plato’s Apology of Socrates* (Indianapolis: Hackett). Influential study of many of the central philosophical ideas playing a role in the *Apology*.

Internet Resources

- Green, ‘The Examined Life,’ in *Wi-Phi* (<http://wi-phi.org>). A brief animated video briefly setting forth the core ideas of this chapter.
- Nails, D. ‘Socrates,’ in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/socrates/>). Accessible and informative overview of Socrates’ life and thought

