



Socrates and The Examined Life

What is 'The Examined Life'?

The 'examined life' refers to intentionally paying attention to what we do and how we live. We can get so caught up in the demands and activities of life that if we are not careful, we can go into 'automatic pilot.' We then end up doing things without clarity or awareness, and without concern for the consequences of our actions.

For [Socrates](#), the examined life requires rigorous scrutiny of our ethical biases and presumptions. We seek the [truth](#) about important concepts, such as justice, love, and the 'good life.' Socrates famously claimed that: *The unexamined life is not worth living.*

Socrates

[Socrates](#) - wise man, thinker, teacher, lived from 470-399BC in Athens, Greece. Socrates wrote nothing himself, but we know of him from others' writings, especially his dedicated student, Plato. Plato wrote several [Dialogues](#) in which Socrates is the main interlocutor.

The Dialogues give us an idea of Socrates' life and concerns. From a humble background, Socrates became a wandering teacher – a rather eccentric figure, roaming the Athenian streets and market places, chatting about life with anyone who would listen and talk.

Socrates would present contrary cases to show that what people thought was the case isn't always so. He discussed how we should live and what makes a 'good life.' For his efforts, Socrates was sent for trial, accused of corrupting the youth and worshipping false gods.

Plato, present at Socrates' trial, wrote [The Apology](#) - a record of Socrates' defence speech. Socrates explains his search for [Truth](#). He has visited the 'Oracle' – a revered priestess who gives predictions in mystical language. She told him that no-one was wiser than Socrates. Finding this hard to believe, Socrates questions people to find out how much they know.

Discovering that knowledge is very slippery and hard to pin down, Socrates concludes that his 'wisdom' lies in the fact that he acknowledges that he 'does not know,' whereas others – mistakenly – think they do. He knows that he knows he does not know but others do not.

To live a moral life, we must keep the soul good and virtuous. To *know* good is to *do* good. If we fail to do good, it is because of ignorance. If we *really, really* knew what was right, we could not fail to do it. Acts of evil are really acts of ignorance. This view has been challenged many times since Socrates' time, but we need to bear in mind that Socrates is talking about a much deeper kind of knowledge than we normally mean when we use the word.

Unafraid of death, Socrates accepts the hemlock from his gaolers, choosing to obey the state's laws and end his life, rather than abandon his principles and seek exile instead.