

# Open Socrates

THE CASE FOR A  
PHILOSOPHICAL LIFE



'BRILLIANT,  
COMPULSIVE'  
OBSERVER

Agnes  
Callard

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## Open Socrates

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# OPEN SOCRATES

*The Case for a  
Philosophical Life*



AGNES CALLARD



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# OPEN SOCRATES

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## *Introduction*

# The Man Whose Name Is an Example

THERE'S A QUESTION YOU ARE AVOIDING. EVEN NOW, AS you read this sentence, you're avoiding it. You tell yourself you don't have time at the moment; you're focused on making it through the next fifteen minutes. There is a lot to get done in a day. There are the hours you spend at your job, the chores to take care of at home. There are movies to be seen, books to be read, music to be listened to, friendships to catch up on, vacations to be taken. Your life is full. It has no space for the question, "Why am I doing any of this?"

If that question does arise, you are ready to reply that you *have* to do most of the things you're already doing. A job is a source of things one *has* to do, in that you depend on the money it provides, and many people—clients, patients, students, co-workers, readers, bosses, customers, mentees—depend on your work. If a job involves research, there might be a problem that *has* to get solved. In school, students are told what they *have* to do—attend class, complete assignments, study for exams. You also have obligations to your family members and friends, to live up to your (mostly tacit) agreements with them. And then there are other extraneous obligations—political activism, community involvement, religious commitments—that a person might feel called upon to fulfill. All of these are "necessities," and they bypass the "why" question.

That doesn't cover everything you do in a day; no one would claim they "have to" pursue the simple pleasures of entertainment or companionship. But in those cases, the question is not so much "Why?" but "Why not?" Between the things you need to do and the

things you like to do, your days are packed with activity. If you keep tacking one fifteen-minute period onto another, eventually it adds up to a life.

True, you might sometimes have to pause to ask: Should I take a vacation? Move? Have a(nother) child? Or you might find yourself faced with a moral dilemma or a romantic crisis. But in those cases you frame “What should I do?” as a question about which option fits best with what you had antecedently determined that you have to do and like to do. You are careful to keep your practical questions from exploding beyond narrow deliberative limits within which you confine them in advance. It is fine to be open-minded and curious about all sorts of questions that don’t directly impinge on how you live your life—How do woodpeckers avoid getting concussions?—but you are vigilant in policing the boundaries of practical inquiry. You make sure your thinking about how your life should go doesn’t wander too far from how it is already going.

You appear to be afraid of something.

## I. TOLSTOY

At around age fifty, the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) experienced his life unraveling. He reports:

My life came to a halt. I could breathe, eat, drink, sleep and I couldn’t *not* breathe, eat, drink, sleep; but I had no life because I had no desires in the fulfillment of which I might find any meaning. If I desired something, then I knew in advance that whether I fulfilled my desire or not, nothing would come of it. If an enchantress had come and offered to fulfill my desires for me, I wouldn’t have known what to say.<sup>1</sup>

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A person moves through life by envisioning positive outcomes either for herself, or those around her, and working to bring them

about. If there is nothing that could happen that would satisfy you, motivational collapse ensues. The fact that Tolstoy could face such a collapse is an alarming indictment of the very concept of success, since very few human lives have been characterized by more substantial success than Tolstoy's. Tolstoy's life "came to a halt" after he had written and been recognized for *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, and, more generally, when his life was going just about as well as it could possibly go for a person.

And this happened to me at a time when on every side I had what is considered to be perfect happiness: it was when I wasn't yet fifty. I had a kind, loving, and loved wife; good children; and a large estate which without labor on my part grew and increased. I was respected by family and friends, was praised more than ever before by the world at large, and without especial self-deception could consider myself to have fame. Moreover, I not only wasn't sickly physically or spiritually but on the contrary had both spiritual and physical strength such as I seldom encountered in my contemporaries: physically I could mow the hay and keep up with the peasants; mentally I could work for eight or ten hours at a stretch without feeling any consequences from the effort.<sup>2</sup>

Tolstoy's crisis was caused by his inability to answer certain questions. He has everything he ever wanted in life—literary fame, a loving family, wealth, physical and mental stamina—but finds himself plagued by the thought that he cannot understand *why* he cares about any of those things:

Before occupying myself with the Samara estate, the education of my son, the writing of a book, I had to know why I would be doing that. *As long as I didn't know why, I couldn't do anything.* As I thought about estate

management, which engaged me a lot at the time, there would suddenly come into my head the question: "Very well, you'll have sixteen thousand acres in the province of Samara, and three hundred horses, and then what?" I was completely thrown and didn't know what more to think. Or starting to think about how I was educating my children, I would say to myself, "Why?" Or considering how the welfare of the people might be achieved, I suddenly would say to myself, "But what's it to do with me?" Or thinking about the fame my works would bring me, I would say to myself, "Very well, you'll be more famous than Gogol, Pushkin, Shakespeare, Molière, than all the writers in the world—so what?"

And I couldn't answer anything, anything at all.<sup>3</sup>

The above quotations are from a work called *Confession*, in which Tolstoy describes the period of his life when he struggled with these questions, found them unanswerable, and reached a devastating conclusion: "The thought of suicide came to me as naturally as once there had come thoughts of the perfection of life."<sup>4</sup>

Throughout *Confession*, Tolstoy is tormented by the problem of how to move on: How do I go back to a life centered on writing novels, managing my estate, attending to my family? How do I go back to *anything* I could have previously recognized as life? He cannot answer, and the result is that he becomes "convinced of the need for suicide."<sup>5</sup> By his own lights, what Tolstoy discovered is that the examined life was not worth living.

Although he found an escape from these questions—and from suicide—in religious faith, Tolstoy is clear that faith is a way of setting them aside, not an answer to them. He expresses envy for the simple existence of peasants who, at least in Tolstoy's imagining, enjoy blissfully unexamined lives from birth to death.

*Confession* reads as a cautionary tale: Stay away from fundamental questions! Keep yourself busy enough to ensure your gaze never

has time to turn inward, because, once it does, you put yourself on the road to self-destruction. Even if you escape the temptations of suicide, you'll never recover your once untroubled calm. You can't answer these questions, and you can't unask them, so the best strategy is to keep the lid on Pandora's box secured as tightly as you can.

Taking life fifteen minutes at a time is a Tolstoyan strategy. The name for the opposite strategy is "Socratic."

## II. SOCRATES

The event that nearly ended Tolstoy's life is the same as the one that got Socrates' started. Like Tolstoy, the philosopher Socrates found himself confronted with profound questions he did not know how to answer; and yet Socrates came to the conclusion that this confrontation was the best, not the worst, thing that ever happened to him. Whereas Tolstoy struggled, with only partial success, to find a way to return to his old life, Socrates never once looked back. He pursued happiness not by avoiding or moving on from these questions, but by diving headlong into them, to the point of forsaking the thought of ever doing anything else with his life. Tolstoy found that the "why" question made existence unbearable: "I had no life."<sup>6</sup> Socrates described the prospect of spending an eternity inquiring into it as "an extraordinary happiness."<sup>7</sup>

Who is this Socrates? Everyone has heard his name, and most people are aware of the basics: he lived thousands of years ago in Athens, Greece, and is somehow the father of Western philosophy, though exactly how is a mystery, since people struggle to say what he actually believed.

Socrates left no writing behind, but we know many biographical details about him from other sources. We know, for example, that he was an Athenian citizen born around 469 BCE, that his father was a stonecutter, his mother a midwife, that he was married, and had children; that he rarely left Athens; that he fought in the Peloponnesian War; and that in 399 BCE he was charged by the city of Athens with

impiety and corrupting the youth, put on trial, found guilty, and executed. He was famous for interrogative conversations—with leading Athenians, with visiting dignitaries, and with promising youth—in which he regularly exposed his interlocutor's pretensions to wisdom. He was also famously ugly—bug-eyed, snub-nosed, and goatish, in a city where personal beauty was as highly prized as wealth or fame.

Our earliest major source for Socrates is Aristophanes' *Clouds*, a comic play that mocks Socrates and his practice of refutation. Our other main sources are the works of Xenophon and Plato, who each wrote texts that were similar to plays, though some of them are narrated in the third person. These texts are called "Socratic dialogues," and they present Socrates talking to a great variety of people on a great variety of topics—love, death, politics, punishment, household management, the interpretation of poetry, the proper use of oratorical skills, and much more. Both Plato and Xenophon were close associates of Socrates, so when they portrayed him they were able to draw on their memory of what they had witnessed, participated in, or heard reports of; but in neither case should their dialogues be understood as transcripts of actual conversations. Nor were Plato and Xenophon the only authors of Socratic dialogues. The Socratic dialogue became a genre in the period after Socrates' death, with many writers trying their hand at depicting Socrates in conversation. Although most of the entries in this genre were lost, the fact that Socrates inspired so much writing by other people says something about the kind of cultural significance he had. As does the fact that in the centuries that followed Socrates' death, when philosophical schools were proliferating, not only the Academics—the school descended from Plato's Academy—but also the Stoics, the Cynics, and the Skeptics treated him as a paradigm for their (sharply differing!) conceptions of what a philosopher should be.

Plato's dialogues are the exclusive source for the Socrates you will encounter in this book, just as they are the starting point for most of the philosophizing done in Socrates' wake. (Few would disagree with the claim that Plato's is the more interesting Socrates. And that

includes Xenophon scholars.) To this day, Plato's Socratic dialogues remain the standard text used in college courses to introduce students to the very idea of philosophy.

Socrates was a particular, historical individual; but he was and is more than that. Plato reports that during Socrates' lifetime his contemporaries were already imitating him, to the point of copying his habit of walking barefoot.<sup>8</sup> Then as now, Socrates presented himself as a person one can become, as a *kind* of person, someone imitable enough to have his persona replicated in so many dialogues and plays.

Socrates was not only famously ugly, but also poor, and he often remarked on his lack of intellectual gifts. He confesses to having a bad memory, and denies any facility with speechmaking, those being the two essential markers of intelligence in fifth-century Athens. In a society that prized manliness and male-coded attributes, Socrates described his life project in feminine terms, saying that he is a kind of midwife to ideas, and cites a woman—Diotima—as his teacher. Beauty, wealth, eloquence, and a decidedly manly self-presentation may have been prerequisites for conventional success as an Athenian citizen, but Socrates represents a new model for human excellence.

Unlike Tolstoy, or Plato, or Xenophon, or Aristophanes, Socrates did not write great books. And yet he is responsible for one truly great creation: the character of Socrates. Socrates made himself into someone that other people could be. He fashioned his very person into a kind of avatar or mascot for anyone who ventures to ask the sorts of questions that disrupt the course of a life.



**IF YOU ARE ON** trial for your life, and you have the chance to tell the jury one story about yourself, then you will take great care to select the right one.

Socrates, finding himself in just such a situation, chose to talk about the time that his friend Chaerephon took a trip to the oracle at Delphi. The oracle, which was held to communicate the will of

Apollo, was the supreme religious authority for people throughout the Greek world. Chaerephon asked the oracle whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates; its answer was “no.” Upon hearing this, Socrates is shocked:

When I heard of this reply I asked myself: “Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle? I am very conscious that I am not wise at all; what then does he mean by saying that I am the wisest? For surely he does not lie; it is not legitimate for him to do so.”<sup>9</sup>

This is not the normal reaction to being told, by an official representative of God, that you are special. Most of us harbor secret hopes of finding out that we are in some way distinctively, uniquely better than everyone around us. If you are a normal person, you would bathe in the glow of the oracle’s answer, treating it as the confirmation you had been waiting for your whole life: I’m a secret genius! Socrates, by contrast, insists that he knows perfectly well that his wisdom is in no way extraordinary, and eventually finds a way of understanding the oracle’s pronouncement as confirmation of *that* view:

What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing, and that when he says this man, Socrates, he is using my name as an example, as if he said: “This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless.”<sup>10</sup>

Socrates is saying: the god only appears to be singling me out. According to Socrates’ interpretation of the oracle, the message is that no human being is possessed of any kind of extraordinary wisdom. The god wasn’t specifically talking about Socrates; rather, Socrates merely served as *an example*. When the god used the name

“Socrates,” he was referring not to the concrete individual who was the son of Sophroniscus and the husband of Xanthippe, but to *a kind of person*, namely anyone who understands the fact that no human being is wise. If you understand this, that is enough to make you “a Socrates.”

Socrates thought that anyone could become a Socrates; moreover, he had a habit of demanding that they do so. For instance, when talking to the orator Gorgias, he says:

I’d be pleased to continue questioning you if you’re the same kind of person I am, otherwise I would drop it.<sup>11</sup>

And he challenges Gorgias:

So if you say you’re this kind of person, too, let’s continue the discussion; but if you think we should drop it, let’s be done with it and break it off.<sup>12</sup>

Notice that Socrates is, implicitly, making a very strong claim here. He equates being willing to continue the discussion with saying, “I’m the same kind of person as you, Socrates.” Only a Socrates can talk to Socrates.

Socrates is successful at inducing Socratism in others, as is clear from Gorgias’ response:

Oh yes, Socrates, I say that I myself, too, am the sort of person you describe.<sup>13</sup>

What sort of person is Gorgias agreeing to be here? Socrates is careful to spell it out:

And what kind of person am I? One of those who would be pleased to be refuted if I say anything untrue, and who would be pleased to refute anyone who says anything

untrue; one who, however, wouldn't be any less pleased to be refuted than to refute.<sup>14</sup>

Because Socrates understands that he is not wise, he is pleased to be shown to be wrong—and that is the kind of person he also needs Gorgias to be. One might have expected Gorgias to resist this, and press Socrates to accept the commonsense view that being refuted is worse than refuting someone else. The norm, in Gorgias' time as in our own, is for people to become angry and offended when shown to be wrong, and proudly delighted to show others that they are wrong. Socrates announces that he doesn't play by those rules: "I count being refuted a greater good, insofar as it is a greater good for oneself to be delivered from the worst thing there is than to deliver someone else from it."<sup>15</sup> Athenians were inclined to dismiss comments of this kind as ridiculous, or naïve, or simply to express incredulity:

Tell me, Socrates, are we to take you as being in earnest now, or joking? For if you *are* in earnest, and these things you're saying are really true, won't this human life of ours be turned upside down, and won't everything we do evidently be the opposite of what we should do?<sup>16</sup>

Those are the words of a man who has been quietly observing Socrates interact first with Gorgias, and then with another man, Polus, until the moment arises when the observer, whose name is Callicles, cannot contain himself any longer. And yet, even as such interlocutors questioned whether they could take Socrates seriously, he also brought them around, and they started to see the problem with arguing to win. Talking to Socrates is like encountering argument in the wild, in its natural habitat. By comparison, your usual argumentative practices come off as unnaturally distorted by social considerations: the same kind of animal, but trapped in a cage in the zoo. Socrates' interlocutors couldn't help finding themselves inspired to want to become the kind of people who think ignorance is the worst thing there is. That is

why the space around Socrates becomes peopled by Socrateses. It is a space dedicated both to acknowledging one's ignorance in the face of, and to overcoming one's fear of, the "why?" question.

When Socrates is on trial—as least in Plato's representation of that event, the *Apology*—he goes beyond simply defending himself against the official charges to argue that not even his accusers really believe that he is guilty of impiety or corrupting the youth. Then why were they trying to put him to death? Socrates' answer is: fear of being asked "Why?" He tells the jury members who voted against him that they did so in vain. They voted to kill him, he says to them, "in the belief that you would avoid giving an account of your life," but imitators would rush forward to take his place, so that in the end "there will be more people to test you." He claims that "if you kill the sort of man I say I am, you will not harm me more than yourselves."<sup>17</sup> As Socrates understands it, the jury's quarrel is not with an individual—the elderly son of a stonecutter—but with the very idea of a person who lives as if there is no good greater than knowledge and no human project more important than inquiry. The jury's real target is not Socrates but his creation—the sort of man Socrates says he is. As Socrates suggests, *that* creature is a hydra who sends forth multiple heads to replace each one you sever.

Socrates predicted that after his death, the world would be filled with Socrateses. Was he right?

### III. WHERE IS SOCRATIC ETHICS?

English economist John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946) famously claimed that anti-intellectuals are more intellectual than they realize:

Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.<sup>18</sup>

If we concede to Keynes that many practical men unwittingly draw on the ideas of economists, we may find ourselves wondering: Where do the economists get their ideas? The answer, for defunct and non-defunct alike, is ethical philosophy.

Economists draw on the tradition of ethical theorizing that springs from the writings of English philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), and Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900), which tells you to perform the action that is likely to result in as many benefits to as many beneficiaries as possible. The benefits are typically understood in terms of the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain, and the beneficiaries are typically assumed to be human beings, but both of those terms can be broadened—from pleasure to any good state of affairs, from human beings to any sentient being. This theory is called “Utilitarianism.”

I am not sure which “mad authorities” Keynes had in mind, but people in positions of political, legal, or religious authority tend to rely on scribblers who, whether they know it or not, are themselves relying in some way on the scribbings of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant was a German philosopher who articulated a form of ethics that is focused on the ways that dignity—the infinite worth of every rational being—constrains how we are allowed to treat one another. This system features a “categorical imperative,” or absolute prohibition, against using a human being as a mere tool for the benefit of others.

If the practical men and the economists and the authorities and the scribblers are all getting their ideas from philosophers, the natural follow-up question is: Where do the philosophers get their ideas? The answer is, other philosophers. Bentham and Mill and Sidgwick are drawing on a tradition that goes back to ancient Epicureanism, and Kant is similarly indebted to ancient Stoicism. But now we must take the final step: Where did the Epicureans and the Stoics get their ideas? Like Keynes’ madmen, they too, heard voices: the Epicureans heard the voice of the body, as it screams out to us, in the language of pleasure and pain, and demands that we promote and protect and

serve it. The Stoics heard the voice of the group, when it draws each individual's attention to the fact that she is part of a larger community, and demands that she regulate her behavior accordingly.

The Stoics and the Epicureans did not simply channel those voices, but reformed them, making them more reasonable and consistent, so that they could become the basis of a systematic approach to the conduct of life. Subsequent philosophers made further contributions toward the universalization and stabilization of each system. The later revivals of these two traditions have been very successful: utilitarianism and Kantianism continue to underwrite our lives to this day. Yet neither was so successful as to avoid conflict with the other. The action that best promotes the greatest good for the greatest number is not guaranteed to be the same, in all cases, as the action that shows respect for the dignity of another person. (This conflict is what the set of philosophical thought experiments called "trolley problems" is designed to reveal.)

The predicament of the anti-intellectual is worse than Keynes recognized: he is the secret slave of not one but two masters, and these masters are at war with one another. But the darkest secret of all is that these warring masters are merely feeding him back, in disguised form, the *savage commands*, either of his own body (Save me!) or of his own group (Cooperate with us!).

In the twentieth century, a movement arose—called "Neo-Aristotelianism" or "Virtue Ethics"—aiming to do for Aristotle what Kant did for Stoicism in the eighteenth century and what Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick did for Epicureanism in the nineteenth. The Aristotelian insists that the two commands can be harmonized with one another through *habituation*, which is the Aristotelian term for the moral training that occurs during one's upbringing. Someone who has been well habituated pursues happiness and pleasure for herself by means of behaving respectfully toward others, which is to say, she aims at virtue. Neo-Aristotelianism has been less influential than Kantianism or Utilitarianism, perhaps because its more recent revival has given it less time to be widely adopted,

or perhaps because its philosophical foundation is more complex than the other two theories, or perhaps because Aristotle's explicit restriction of the audience of ethical theory to those who have been "well habituated" is not as plausible to a modern audience as it was to his contemporaries.

What about Socrates? Why isn't there a Neo-Socratic ethics? Why hasn't Socratic ethical thought been revived as the basis of an ethical framework that might compete with those drawn from other ancient sources? The answer is that Socrates' ethics is typically understood in purely negative terms. The characterization offered by the Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero (106–43 BCE) is representative:

The method of discussion pursued by Socrates in almost all the dialogues so diversely and so fully recorded by his hearers is to affirm nothing himself but to refute others, to assert that he knows nothing except the fact of his own ignorance, and that he surpassed all other people in that they think they know things that they do not know but he himself thinks he knows nothing, and that he believed this to have been the reason why Apollo declared him to be the wisest of all men, because all wisdom consists solely in not thinking that you know what you do not know.<sup>19</sup>

In this view, the reason we can't live our lives Socratically is that Socrates, unlike Kant, or Mill, or Aristotle, didn't have answers. Socrates could criticize the overconfident answers of others, but had nothing to offer in their stead. "Being like Socrates" just means being open-minded, and willing to admit when you are wrong, and unafraid to ask challenging questions. This is not an ethical theory. It is more like a critical-thinking "sauce" that can be poured over any ethical theory, or simply over common sense. Whereas "Kantian" or "Aristotelian" refers to a set of ideas about how to live, "Socratic" refers to a style.

So goes one story about Socrates. This book tells a different one. It

argues that people have overestimated the degree to which a Socratic approach can be layered on top of what we were doing anyways. When Socratism is adopted as a style, it has a tendency to land the one who so stylizes themselves in a performative contradiction. For example, consider the plight of my own university, the University of Chicago, declaring its commitment to “the principle of complete freedom of speech on all subjects” by insisting that “this principle can neither now nor at any future time be called in question.”<sup>20</sup> Apparently, our freedom to question extends to all subjects *but one*. People will announce, “Question everything!” without noticing that they have just uttered not a question, but a command. If the Socratic method is a tool, it is a strange kind of tool, one that has the audacity to dictate both how it should be used, and for what purposes.

How should the method be used? With another person, who has taken on a role distinct from yours. One of you offers answers to some fundamental question, while the other explains why he or she cannot accept those answers. Thinking, as Socrates understands it, is not something that happens in your head, but rather out loud, in conversation. Socrates argues that it is only by recognizing thinking as a social interaction that we can resolve a set of paradoxes as to how thinking can be open-minded, inquisitive, and truth-oriented. The Socratic motto is not, “Question everything,” but “Persuade or be persuaded.”

When it comes to the purpose of the Socratic method, Socrates had colossal ambitions. He believed that all of the trouble we have leading our lives, all of our dissatisfactions, all of our failures to progress, all of our moral imperfections, all of the injustices we commit, large and small, stem from one source: ignorance. Socrates’ claim that “I know that I know nothing” isn’t an empty gesture of skepticism, but rather a plan for life. It tells you that the key to success, whether you are navigating difficulties in your marriage, your terror at the prospect of death, or the politicized minefield of social media, is to have the right kinds of conversations. Given that we cannot lead lives based on knowledge—because we lack it—we

should lead the second-best kind of life, namely, the one oriented toward knowledge.

Socrates discovered that between the acknowledgment of one's own ignorance and the ideally knowledgeable life lies a substantive ethics of inquiry. The way to be good when you don't know how to be good is by learning. You should do everything in such a way as to be learning what the right thing to do is, and this means getting other people to show you when you are wrong. Instead of implementing a principle—such as “Achieve the greatest good for the greatest number!” or “Obey the categorical imperative!”—you should inquire. Socrates insists that there is no greater benefit he could receive from another person than being shown why he is wrong, and that the only sure way to treat another human being with respect is to either answer their questions or question their answers.

Socrates turns a spotlight on all the places where we have dressed up our ignorance as something else—a lack of willpower, or selfishness, or laziness, or badness—in order to evade the imperative to inquire. According to Socrates, whenever we say, “I knew what the right thing to do was, I just couldn't get myself to do it,” we are flattering ourselves, ascribing to ourselves knowledge we evidently lack, and whenever we say, “He knew what the right thing to do was, he just decided not to do it,” we are creating excuses for the exercise of vengeance. Socrates denies that it is possible to act against one's better judgment, and he denies that anyone ever deserves to be harmed. There is only one problem, which is ignorance, and there is only one solution, which is to learn.

When inquiry informs your love life, your approach to death, and your politics, the result is not simply a continuation of business as usual. For example, we will see that when it comes to politics, Socrates holds that free speech is achieved neither by debate nor by persuasion; that political battles, including war, are simply philosophy gone awry; and that true egalitarianism is fully compatible with the pursuit of status. Socratic ethics does not confine itself to adding an air of skepticism to the small subdivision of life explicitly occu-

pied with intellectual pursuits; it inserts itself everywhere, into every interaction, infusing every corner of life with the demand to become more intellectual.

Ultimately, our difficulties seeing that Socrates' ethics forms a distinct alternative to Kant's or Mill's or Aristotle's are rooted in the imitability of the character of Socrates. Socrates' greatest strength has also turned out to be a weakness. We, especially those of us who identify as intellectuals, experience ourselves as fully saturated by critical-thinking sauce. We feel sure that we already are being Socratic. We are not entirely wrong. Before Socrates, bold claims to possessing deep wisdom were a sign of elite status; after Socrates, epistemic humility and skeptical disavowals become the surer mark of culture and sophistication. Being gracious to those who criticize you, welcoming disagreement, refusing to straw man your opponent—all of these now-commonplace norms bear the mark of Socrates.

But our Socratism has been much diluted from the original formula. So, although it has become a matter of routine to praise open inquiry into any topic, and especially into what are labeled as “fundamental questions,” the ones doing the praising are rarely doing much inquiring. If someone teaches a class by asking questions, even if they are only using those questions to fish for the specific answers they had in mind, that is called, wrongly, “the Socratic method.” The value of skeptical caution, open-mindedness, and intellectual humility are familiar talking points among people who, by and large, agree with Tolstoy that only the unexamined life is livable. All of these normalizers of Socrates miss what Callicles saw: that Socratic skepticism, the Socratic method, Socratic inquiry, and Socratic humility are not ways of conducting business as usual. We are all halfheartedly imitating—or as Keynes might say, “slaves to”—a man who, if he were around today, would be disappointed in us. The reason why we aren't inclined to acknowledge the existence of Socratic ethics is that the existence of Socratic ethics is an indictment of us.

In this book, I aim to reintroduce Socratic ethics as a novel and distinctive ethical system, complete with its own core theses and

distinctive ethical recommendations. Unlike the other three traditions, Socratic ethics does not take its bearings from the savage commands of one's body, or one's group. Unlike the other three traditions, Socratic ethics does not present itself as a finished system, but rather awaits its own elaboration by those who now do, and those who in the future will, understand themselves as Socratics. A follower of Socrates is ethically required to inquire into Socratism, whereas no such intellectual requirements constrain someone who wants to be a good Kantian, a good Utilitarian, or a good Aristotelian. Those traditions purport to rest on a bedrock of ethical knowledge that is immediately available to be acted on: no further philosophizing is required. Socrates boasts of no such bedrock. Nonetheless, Socratic ethics offers concrete practical guidance: it tells you that you should live a philosophical life, and helps you see how to do so.

#### IV. AN INCAUTIONARY TALE

The book that you are currently reading is an incautionary tale. It is the counterpoint not only to *Confession*, but also to the countless other stories, novels, essays, and speeches that echo Tolstoy's message of fear and despair. Many of those warnings are written by professional philosophers, who, far from being immune to Tolstoyan terror, are in many ways especially susceptible to it. Academic philosophers are, in my experience, eager to allow that one can live a perfectly happy and fulfilled life without ever engaging in philosophy. They are also careful to shield the rest of their lives from their philosophical activities: they would readily admit to taking off their philosopher hat when walking into their homes, when socializing with friends—even friends who are philosophers!—and, more generally, whenever things get serious. Even the practitioners of philosophy are wary of philosophy.

Those who praise philosophy tend to take care to praise it in limited doses. Callicles, a Socratic interlocutor mentioned above,

speaks approvingly of young people asking “why?” questions, and compares philosophizing to lispng: charming and delightful right up until someone reaches the age for serious, manly pursuits. It is common today to hear advisors to young people unwittingly echoing Callicles, praising a philosophy major on the grounds that it gives you “analytic tools” and “critical thinking skills” valued by employers. The message is: Do philosophy, but don’t overdo it.

We live inside a bubble of caution and wariness that can only be sustained by maintaining the conviction that, when it comes to the question of how to live our lives, we are already being intellectual and critical and thoughtful enough. The assumption is that no one—not even a professional academic philosopher—needs to be living their whole life in a philosophical manner.

This book is an argument to the contrary: it makes the case for a philosophical life. That case has three parts. We begin, in part one, by pulling at the threads that Tolstoy urged us to leave alone. The kinds of questions Tolstoy warned us against asking form a special class: I call them “untimely questions.” Untimely questions are marked by the fact we need answers to them before we are prepared to ask them. Our default answers—the ones available to us absent philosophizing—come from unreliable sources: our bodies, and other people. These sources issue savage commands, contradicting one another and themselves, leading us to act in confused and haphazard ways. One approach to this problem is to try to “tame” the savage commands. Thus Utilitarianism aims to rehabilitate the bodily command; Kantianism the command of the group; and Aristotelianism tries to harmonize the two commands with one another. But those are not the only possible methods for dealing with untimely questions—there is also the Socratic one.

Part two explains the Socratic approach to untimely questions: don’t rely on the default answers, not even on tamed versions of them. Instead, inquire into them, with an open mind, pursuing truth, and avoiding falsity. Following this formula is, however, less straightforward than it appears. Each of its three parts—inquiry,

open-mindedness, and truth-seeking—conceals a paradox. The paradox as to how inquiry is possible is called “Meno’s paradox”: How can one search for what one does not yet know? How will one recognize it when one finds it? Open-mindedness is paradoxical because it requires a person to be willing to admit that she is wrong—which, if you consider it carefully, is a form of self-awareness that is not easy to make sense of. It is not hard to admit that you *were* wrong, but very hard to admit that you *are* wrong. This is called “Moore’s paradox.” The third paradox is about pursuing the truth and avoiding falsity, two activities that, far from being identical, turn out to be in tension with one another. In order to believe truths you must believe *something*, and that means you run the risk of believing something false. You could avoid false belief by believing nothing at all, but that would frustrate the aim of believing truths.

Socrates’ solution is to give one person the task of asserting truths, and the other person the job of avoiding falsehoods. If they work together, the second refuting the first, they can achieve both goals. We also get solutions to the other two paradoxes: someone who refutes you serves as a mirror in which you can see your own errors reflected, and they allow you to search for answers to questions—even untimely ones. Socrates discovered that by working together with another person, we make possible forms of thinking, self-knowledge, and questioning that are foreclosed to the person who works alone. Speech can free thought from the blindness and bias and provinciality endemic to being just one mind.

If you face up to the difficulty of understanding what it means to truly think critically, the result is a much more demanding “Socratic method” than the one to which we are accustomed. In part three, we examine that method’s demands in the three areas of human life where Socrates thought our ignorance loomed largest: politics, love, and death. Two and a half millennia later, these remain humanity’s problem areas. Even as the explosion of scientific and technological knowledge has created massive improvements in many areas of our lives, we remain at sea when it comes to managing politics, handling

love affairs, and confronting our own deaths. Socratic ethics is the ethics of living a truly philosophical life, and it tells you that the way you should conduct yourself in each of these three domains is: inquisitively. It promises to make people freer and more equal; more romantic; and more courageous.

The details of inquisitive living may well appear odd or downright unacceptable to us: from the *Phaedo*, we learn that Socrates believes in life (before birth and) after death; from the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, that he embraces (a distinctively Socratic version of) polyamory and rejects (so-called “Socratic”) irony; from the *Gorgias* that he denies that it is so much as *possible* to fight injustice. Socrates says that vice is ignorance, that falling in love is an attempt to ascend to another plane of existence, and if he were around today, he would accuse all of us of treating corpses in a superstitious manner. He insists that everyone desires the good, and that treating others unjustly is worse, for the person who does so, than being unjustly treated herself. In his hands, both “freedom of speech” and “egalitarianism” become not political ideas, but intellectual ones. He thinks that philosophy is a preparation for death.

Couldn't Socrates have gotten it wrong on one or more of these questions? Of course. He admits this regularly; we will encounter an especially startling example, taking place in the final hour of his life, in the final chapter. Followers of Socrates will feel welcome to disagree with him, so long as we can explain why. We Socratics are not beholden to Socrates, the protagonist in Plato's dialogues; nor are we beholden to Socrates, the historical individual. The one to whom we are beholden is the character—that is, the ideal—created by the historical Socrates. We want to be the kind of person that the historical Socrates, no doubt imperfectly, tried to make himself into; it was that same kind of person that Plato, again, no doubt imperfectly, tried to copy. It is un-Socratic to treat a Platonic text dogmatically, but it is also un-Socratic to dismiss the ideas in that text simply because they strike us as “upside-down.”

Again, this book is an incautionary tale. I will show you what a

philosophical life looks like, but I can't say whether the sight of it will fill you with Socratic hope and energy or plunge you into Tolstoyan despair. If you are willing to take the risk, read on.

*A Note on the Use of Plato's Dialogues*

Chapters 1 to 5 bounce around among Plato's Socratic dialogues (*Alcibiades*, *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Clitophon*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Meno*, *Protagoras*), but from chapter 6 onward, each chapter is chiefly devoted to one dialogue, as follows:

chapter 6, Moore's Paradox: *Alcibiades*

chapter 7, Meno's Paradox: *Meno*

chapters 8 and 9, Politics: *Gorgias*

chapter 10, Love: *Symposium*

chapter 11, Death: *Phaedo*

*Part One*



# UNTIMELY QUESTIONS

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## *Chapter 1*

# The Tolstoy Problem

My question, which at the age of fifty brought me to the point of suicide, was the very simple question that lies in the soul of every human being, from a silly child to the wisest sage—the question without which life is impossible, as I experienced in actual fact. The question is this: What will come from what I do and from what I will do tomorrow—what will come from my whole life?<sup>1</sup>

**I**N MIDDLE AGE, TOLSTOY CAME TO THE TERRIBLE CONCLUSION that the question “without which life is impossible” is also intractable, in that no matter how much he thought about it, he would never be able to answer it. If Tolstoy is right that this question “lies in the soul of every human being,” then his predicament is far from unique. Nor does he seem especially well placed to fall into bottomless despair. Quite the contrary: one might have thought that if anyone would have been in a position to find the meaningfulness of their life to be self-evident, it would have been someone like Leo Tolstoy. So why aren’t all of us haunted by Tolstoy’s problem?

It is tempting to answer that Tolstoy was depressed. When you hear that anyone is contemplating suicide, it is hard not to jump to a medical diagnosis; so much the more so when the person in question is spectacularly successful. The natural explanation for why someone thinks their life is going badly when it gives every outward sign of going well is that there is something off with the part of the body whose malfunctioning characteristically escapes

the mind's notice: the brain. But when it comes to Tolstoy, we are in an awkward position to draw these conclusions. The basis on which we presume to diagnose him, namely, the book in which he describes his crisis, constitutes an eloquent argument for feeling just the way he does. He held that there are facts about the human condition which, if you attended to them, would make you "mentally ill," too.

This is why the psychologist and philosopher William James (1842–1910), discussing *Confession* in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, insists that Tolstoy's "melancholy," as James described it, "was not merely an accidental vitiation of the humors," but rather "the escape from falsehoods into what for him were ways of truth." James continues: "And though not many of us can imitate Tolstoy, not having enough, perhaps, of the aboriginal human marrow in our bones, most of us may at least feel as if it might be better for us if we could."<sup>2</sup>

If most people find themselves unbothered by Tolstoy's question, is it because they have a real answer to it, or because they have the power to ignore it?

## I. QUESTIONS THAT COME TOO LATE

If you stood under the immediate threat of violence—unless you take action, you or a loved one will be harmed—the last thing it would make sense to do would be to ask about the meaning of life. In movies, people frequently are provided with good reasons to cut off conversations because "we have to go, now!" Many of us have become gifted at endowing everyday tasks with such urgency: I "must" go to the store, I "have to" get to work, I "need to" call my parents, I am "very busy"—after all of which I probably "deserve" a break during which the last thing I want to do is embark upon an exhausting existential inquiry. We learn to take life fifteen minutes at a time. And if you add up enough of those fifteen-minute periods, the sum total is a whole life. This is what T. S. Eliot refers to when he writes, "I have

measured out my life with coffee spoons.” We find a way to avoid ever asking, “What will come from my whole life?”

One can avoid Tolstoy’s crisis by placing one foot after another, and attending either to whatever strikes one as the greatest danger—either physical or moral—to be avoided, or, alternatively, the greatest source of pleasure or entertainment to be pursued. Whether we see life, pessimistically, as an ongoing crisis punctuated by periods of relief, or, more optimistically, as an ongoing source of pleasure punctuated by periods of crisis, we will find it replete with reasons for postponing philosophical inquiry. If we postpone for long enough, death will rescue us from ever having to come to terms with the meaninglessness of life.

I believe that Tolstoy identified a special class of question that I am going to call “untimely questions.” An untimely question is a question that comes at the wrong time—namely, after it has been answered. Untimely questions are remarkable not only because they are hard to answer, but, first and foremost, because they are hard to ask; and they are hard to ask not only because it is hard to pose them to others, but, first and foremost, because it is hard to pose them to oneself. We are familiar with the circumstances under which a person will be unable to get others to engage with her question—when they won’t let her talk, or when she doesn’t want to admit that she doesn’t know the answer, or when there is simply no one around. But can’t one always pose a question to oneself? No. Some questions are so elusive that if you write them down on a piece of paper, and then go on to read what you have written out loud to yourself, over and over again, to the point where even after you stop talking, the words of the question are echoing through your head, you still won’t be *asking* the question. You’ll be going through the motions of inquiry without actually inquiring into anything.

The reason why you can’t ask yourself untimely questions is that you think you already have the answer to them, and the reason you think you have the answer is that you are *using* the answer. Such questions don’t show up to you *as questions*; by the time you get

them in view, you find that they have hardened into the shape of answers. Untimely questions come too late. “What will come of my entire life?” was, for Tolstoy, such a question, but in other places he is more specific. Recall:

Before occupying myself with the Samara estate, the education of my son, the writing of a book, I had to know why I would be doing that. *As long as I didn't know why, I couldn't do anything.* As I thought about estate management, which kept me very occupied at the time, there would suddenly come into my head the question: “Very well, you'll have sixteen thousand acres in the province of Samara and three hundred horses, and then what?” I was completely thrown, and didn't know what more to think. Or, starting to think about how I was educating my children, I would say to myself, “Why?” Or considering how the welfare of the people might be achieved, I suddenly would say to myself, “But what's it to do with me?” Or thinking about the fame my works would bring me, I would say to myself, “Very well, you'll be more famous than Gogol, Pushkin, Shakespeare, Molière, than all the writers in the world—so what?” And I couldn't answer anything, anything at all.<sup>3</sup>

Why seek material prosperity? Why educate my children? Why care about the welfare of the people? Why does literary fame matter? These are untimely questions, and they form a contrast with the sorts of questions that float free of what we are currently doing, questions where open-mindedness is possible, questions whose answers we needn't rely on already knowing. Those sorts of questions come at the right time.

At this point you might reply that a person does not “need” an answer to this, or any other, question in order to live: Food, water, air, and shelter are the sorts of things a person needs in order to

survive—not answers to questions! It is true that food and water are the sorts of things that, if withdrawn from a person, remove the possibility of survival. No answer can substitute for any of those things: man cannot live on ideas alone. But there are questions whose answers constitute a person's basis for living. This is because, first, living, for a human being, essentially involves acting; second, every action is for the sake of some goal; and, third, a goal is an idea about what matters. Ideas are, in fact, prerequisites for the kind of living that we human beings do. Indeed, even breathing is, as Tolstoy noted in his suicidal despair, strictly speaking, optional. We go on breathing because we chose to do so.

Human existence requires a biological infrastructure; human agency requires, in addition, a conceptual infrastructure. Though everything from changes at the cellular level to involuntary reflexes illustrate the fact that our bodies can be moved in ways we don't control, most of what we refer to under the heading "human life" concerns all the ways we *do* exercise some control over our bodies: we choose where to go and how to behave when we get there, we decide what words to assert, we do our best to hurl ourselves into one future rather than another. To engage in these acts of self-control and self-management, we have to believe that something is worth pursuing. Recall Tolstoy: "As long as I didn't know why, I couldn't do anything." Every belief that we might act on is the answer to some "why" question. But that means whichever answer we're currently acting on the basis of closes the corresponding question. The difficulty is that we can't make use of the answer and ask ourselves the question at the same time.

Suppose I firmly believe that cloning is immoral. I won't be able to ask myself, "Is cloning immoral?" because, when I check in with my beliefs, I see that one of them already answers the question. In order to inquire into that question, I would have to take "cloning is immoral" off of the list of my beliefs. At that point I could look into whether I can derive it from other beliefs that I have, or whether any new information I might acquire could settle the question for

me. But if what I am currently doing is advocating against cloning, then I cannot take “cloning is immoral” off of the list of my beliefs, because I’m relying on its presence. If someone asked me, “Why are you doing what you are doing?” I need to be able to answer, “Because cloning is immoral.”

If it strikes you as somehow brutal and uncaring that Tolstoy is willing to countenance such thoughts as “Why should I care about my children” and “So the peasants are suffering, what’s it to me?” your judgmental response—How dare he?!—points to the unaskability of the corresponding question. You are not supposed to regard those questions as open, precisely because you are supposed to already be using the answers, in the caring that you are currently doing. But in that case, how was Tolstoy, who did care about his children, and about the welfare of the peasants, able to ask himself those questions? The answer is that he wasn’t. He could say the words of the questions to himself, but he couldn’t ask them.

## II. WHAT TOLSTOY COULDN’T DO

Though Tolstoy repeatedly *refers* to the process of inquiry into fundamental questions, his text betrays no sign of his having performed such inquiry: actual philosophical reasoning and argumentation are strikingly absent from it.

Consider Tolstoy’s initial response to his own questions:

At first I thought that these were just pointless, irrelevant questions. I thought all this was known and that if and when I wanted to take up finding the answers, it wouldn’t be much work for me—it was only that now I didn’t have the time to do that, but when I turned my mind to it I would find the answers.<sup>4</sup>

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Tolstoy’s description of how we use trivializing rationalizations to keep such questions at bay likely rings true for many people. But

one might expect that the result of rejecting this approach would be a recognition of those questions as worthy of sustained intellectual effort. By Tolstoy's report, however, despair set in immediately:

I understood that this was no casual exhaustion but something very important, and that if these same questions kept on being repeated, then one must answer them. And I tried to answer. The questions seemed such stupid, simple, childish questions. But as soon as I tackled them and tried to find the answers, I at once became certain first that these were not childish and stupid questions but the most important and profound questions in life, and second that I could not, just could not answer them, however much I thought about it.<sup>5</sup>

Note the simultaneity of question and answer: "*As soon as* I tackled them and tried to find the answers, I *at once became certain* . . . that I could not, just could not answer them." Tolstoy jumps very quickly from acknowledging that these questions must be answered to certainty that they cannot be. The claim that it is immediately obvious that philosophical questions cannot be answered is no less evasive than Tolstoy's initial claim that it is immediately obvious that philosophical questions are easy to answer. In one way Tolstoy's attitude toward these questions undergoes a profound transformation: from casual dismissal to reverential awe. Eventually, this awe takes a religious form. But Tolstoy's attitude never at any point becomes inquisitive; in one way or another, inquiry always gets ruled out in advance.

Though he reiterates this negative conclusion many times over the course of his autobiographical account, he never actually explains how he arrived at it. Consider another of his descriptions of that conclusion: "I couldn't attribute any intelligent meaning to a single act or to the whole of my life. I was surprised that I couldn't understand that at the very beginning. All this had been known to everyone for so long."<sup>6</sup> Though he has moved from his initial description

of the questions as “pointless” and “irrelevant,” his description of the meaninglessness of life as “known to everyone” is likewise evasive: Does everyone really know that neither one’s life, nor any act contained therein, has any meaning? How do they know this?

Tolstoy never explains why the questions he asked himself were impossible to answer, or what makes these questions so “important and profound.” He does not even leave the reader with much clarity as to what the questions are—or how many of them there are. Sometimes, as in the passages above, the “questions” are in the plural: these are his questions about the value of wealth, literary fame, or parenting. At other times he seems to see but a single question, though he formulates it in multiple ways that are not obviously identical to one another:

The question without which life is impossible . . . is this: What will come from what I do and from what I will do tomorrow—what will come from my whole life? . . . Expressed differently, the question would be this: Why should I live, why should I wish for anything, why should I do anything? One can put the question differently again: Is there any meaning in my life that wouldn’t be destroyed by the death that inevitably awaits me?<sup>7</sup>

This list of questions itself raises many questions, for example: Is the final question really equivalent to all of the others? What could it mean for something to “come from” a whole life—especially given that literary fame doesn’t count as an answer? Should one expect that a question such as “Why should I educate my children?” will be answered by the same “meaning” that would also underwrite “Why should I pursue a literary career?”

It is evident that Tolstoy was in anguish over questions about the meaning of his own life, but it is less evident that he actually succeeded in asking those questions. He regularly leaps from a highly imprecise statement of some form of the question to despair over