

Topic 4: “Another problem with people who fail to examine themselves is that they often prove all too easily influenced. When a talented demagogue addressed the Athenians with moving rhetoric and bad arguments, they were all too ready to be swayed, without ever examining the argument.”

Author: Martha C. Nussbaum

Examining the Examined Life

Socrates said that the “unexamined life is not worth living”, and Nussbaum’s words only resonate the principles Socrates once talked about. Quite simply, Nussbaum’s statement has two parts. The first, that illustrates the principle that those who fail to examine themselves are “all too easily influenced” and the second, which is an example referring to the sophists of Athens, that manage to sway the audiences of a democracy with hollow rhetoric. At first glance, it may seem that Nussbaum’s words are rather obvious. After all, why not must one examine oneself and understand one’s own beliefs? We can clearly see from several modern day examples that *not* examining oneself and one’s own beliefs can lead to dogma, and above all, the rising global problem of intolerance. However, our philosophical inquiry must dig deeper than the obviousness of her words.

This essay shall explore the various aspects of Nussbaum’s words, and explore first what it means to examine one’s own beliefs. Is it an exercise of awareness, or a journey to arrive at one’s own beliefs? We then shall explore what Nussbaum could have meant by “being influenced”. After this exploration, this essay will attempt to dig into some of the other problems of the unreasonable and unthinking mind, and then explore possible counterarguments as to why the unexamined life may be well worth living. I would then talk about the why self-reflection, and examining one’s own beliefs is critical to existence, and finally, conclude.

A) Examining Nussbaum’s “Examination”: Reason vs Intuition

One of the striking features of our species is that we seem to have hit the jackpot when it comes to evolutionary growth, for our minds, rather, brains have evolved to be capable of understanding the force of reason. Our ability to reason things and understand our world with reason allowed us to transcend from the early “hunter gatherer man” to what we today call “mankind”. Our use of this force of reason has allowed us to form laws, develop constitutions, evolve societies, and generally push mankind towards progress.

When Nussbaum talks about people who “examine themselves”, it is important to ask the question, what it would mean to “examine oneself?” Is it simply self-reflection and identifying that one has a certain belief as opposed to something else? I believe that I prefer apples to oranges. Is this mere awareness of my own belief the examination that Nussbaum talks about? Or is this examination more about *how* I arrived at that belief system? I believe that it’s the latter, for the mere cognizance of our own beliefs would not be examination, for it would simply be awareness. A religious extremist who perpetrates terror in others in the name of god is acutely self-aware of his beliefs as an extremist, and the things that he must do in order to advance his agenda. However, we may say that he lacks the reasons as to why those specific beliefs exist.

Nussbaum talks of the examination that leads one to examine *how* and *why* one’s belief came into existence. Not simply an awareness of what they are, but a deeper, more profound understanding of how they came to be. According to Nussbaum, this examination will lead to a more critical self, and thus a better society for one would not be “influenced too easily”. What she could mean by that is something we will explore later in the essay.

Now that we have established that the examination in question is one that must allow us to realize how our beliefs came to be, the question becomes, what process must one employ for this examination? Using reason to understand the world provides one possible explanation, that we reason our beliefs and ask why they are the way they are until we reach a bedrock that has an answer. For instance, if one believes that democracy is one of the best forms of government, and one asks oneself why one thinks so, one would perhaps respond that it is so because it is a political structure that allows the citizens of a regime to partake in an equal and active role in ruling themselves. Upon further asking why, one could perhaps answer that this is important because each individual is free and this freedom must be preserved, and the best way for doing so would be to have governance that is, as Lincoln said, for the people, of the people, and by the people. Here the bedrock that one has arrived at is the belief in free will, the value of freedom that one places over a human life, and the importance of one's participation in state affairs.

But I could propose an alternative, what if reason is not employed for this examination, and it is intuition that is used for this examination. One could intuitively *feel* right or wrong about their beliefs. Since reason is not employed, the justification for such a belief would be one's intuition and one's own conscience. However, this approach is self-defeating for this kind of examination will only allow us to rationalize the beliefs that we already have. For one would think that I believe so because I *feel* I believe so is right. This self-referential train of thought, if followed would lead to a society that has no objective standards for good or bad for this examination based on intuition will allow for moral subjectivism where everything would be accepted and would be right. To each his own, one might say. However, the biggest problem with this approach is that our subjectivist world view here is self-defeating. If one believes that truth is relative, and that one should follow one's own intuition for each individual is capable of assessing his or her own truth, then there also must be an individual who believes that truth is objective. This inconsistency is purely logical and thus, disproves intuition as a way of examining one's own life. Hence, we can safely conclude that the examination that Nussbaum talks about, is one that employs, rather actively employs the force of reason to understand *how* and *why* one has arrived at a particular set of beliefs.

B) What does it mean to be influenced?

Now that we have established reason as the underlying force of this examination, let's take a look at what it could possibly mean to be influenced. When Nussbaum suggests that one of the problems of not examining oneself is being able to be influenced by others far too easily. Here, being influenced is not simply a passive acceptance of other ideals, it is rather an active acceptance, and thus the word *influence*. As we explore what it means to be influenced, we delve into exploring how others' beliefs affect our own. Is being influenced allowing this other belief to be accepted as a possible *alternative* to one's own? Or is it simply the passive acceptance of another belief system *as* one's own?

If one were to believe the former, then one could see that accepting another belief system as an alternative may or not direct our actions towards a particular decision, for it simply an alternative. If I believe that a democracy is the best form of government, and someone proposes to me that a dictatorial regime would perhaps be the better alternative, then my opinion may or not may not change about democracies. The degree of influence then would depend on a range of factors ranging from social and cultural contexts, and how one sees oneself in the same. The best example I could provide for this could stem for the rise of Hitler in Nazi Germany. Despite rising to power using democratic methods, the government was turned to an autocratic dictatorial regime that individuals at first were accepting of. As this change in regime brought about economic prosperity

during times of economic depression, individuals in civil society then accepted this change in regime that was brought about without their consent. Here we can see, that there was some form of reason employed that turned this alternative belief into the norm, the reason being economic prosperity.

On the other hand, it is also possible to be swayed by the beliefs of another individual that lacks reason. In this case we answer the question that was posed later, when being influenced is the passive acceptance of another belief system without any rational basis. In situations like these, a leader or an ideological system comes to power not on the grounds of its effectiveness or substance, but rather its appeal. The best and biggest example of this phenomena can be seen across the globe as right wing populist leaders take on positions of power. In nearly all scenarios, these leaders cater to politics of identity that manifests itself using religion, history or economic prosperity. In this case, the association that one has with these areas can allow one to be far too easily influenced if one does not examine oneself, and thus contribute to the rise of populism and populist ideals. It is in this scenario when being influenced is simple the passive acceptance of the popular norm.

Now, why must an individual want to cater to populism? Perhaps one could be unsure of one's own cognitive abilities to reason out things oneself, and thus believing the mandate of the majority would ease the decision making process in one's mind for it is far easier to go with the tide than go against it, literally and metaphorically.

It is also possible to be influenced by reason, as a force of good, as women's rights movements across the globe suggest. Even then, we must acknowledge that our ability to be influenced is what is critical to understanding why self-reflection is necessary. Since our potential "to be influenced" can be, and has been used positively and negatively in the past, it becomes all the more important to understanding why self-reflection is important.

C) The Un-reasonable mind: Problems and Consequences

Nussbaum begins her statement by saying that it is *another* problem for those who do not examine themselves and are susceptible to be easily influenced. This begs the question what other problems could there be for the individual that does not examine one's own life and one's own beliefs? As we have seen from the discourse above, one of them is surely the ability to be swayed easily or be influenced easily. The other, and perhaps more severe and more prominent is the rising problems of intolerance, at the root of which is dogma.

An individual who does not examine his or her own values and belief systems either adopts them from the ones presented to him or her by society or picks them intuitively. The absence of critical self-examination and one's own beliefs can allow one to think of their beliefs as the *only* possible belief system to possess. This one dimensional world view would make one critical of any other belief system and would lead to the problem of otherisation where any and all alternative systems of thought would be categorized as "the other". In due time, and in extreme forms this will turn to dogma, contribute towards intolerance, and polarize communities. One might argue that intolerance could be the norm, and it would be justified to assert and accept one's own belief systems over someone else's. However, we must acknowledge here that the problem of intolerance, and the problem of passive acceptance is one for the unthinking, un-reasonable mind. For it is not that one understands, interprets and analyses different modes of thought, and choose the one that convinces him best, but rather that by the virtue of being born in a specific community, and a specific environment, and a specific mode of thought, one automatically

assumes the superiority of one's own beliefs over others'. This manifests itself into a state of the world that guarantees mutually assured destruction.

Allow me to illustrate using a simple example. When, and if, one is born into a religious family, one's upbringing is done in accordance to that particular religion. It's not that when one is born, one is made to think and reason, after which one is presented with the religious texts of different religions, which one reads and understands, and then chooses which religion would suit one best. There is a passive acceptance of beliefs that shapes the world view of an individual born into a particular religious community. History is testament to the crusades and several other wars that were fought to assert the superiority of one religion over the other. The analogy I attempt to present is the same. When one is born into particular community, one often accepts some passive ideals and norms. However, if one fails to examine oneself, and realize that his or her way of life is just one among many other, then the line between asserting one's own beliefs as their own, and as the ones that are superior gets blurred fast.

One can see then, why Nussbaum and Socrates placed such emphasis on the need to examine oneself. For without reason and critical self-evaluation, it is far too easy to delve into perpetuating dogmas that one may not even be aware of. Without this examination of the self, we are passively contributing to a world that is intolerant and not accepting of diversity. We must then perhaps acknowledge somewhere that as a species, our battle against each other is nothing but petty, when our humanity is nothing but a mere blip in the vast expanse of the cosmos. Our diversity thus, is not our weakness, but our strength. Our multiplicity of thought is not an excuse to assert the superiority of one, but rather to accept and embrace the alternative to another.

D) Pros and Cons: Why the unexamined life IS worth living

I must admit that throughout this essay, I have not only assumed that humans have free will, but also that we are free to choose our beliefs and our own set of values. Much like the philosophers of the existentialist tradition of thought, I have assumed up till now that existence indeed precedes essence, and that we, as individuals have freedom to choose our values and our thoughts. Now, one may argue that examining oneself and one's belief is an exercise that only leads to a waste of time, for free will is non-existent, or perhaps that we are not able to choose our values. For the purposes of this essay, my only answer to such a question posed would be that there is no way we can truly *know* something. There are enough arguments in support of free will as there are against, and the fact that I am aware of this distinction does little to solve the problems at hand. Thus, for the purposes of this essay, we shall not delve deeper into justifying *if* free will exists, and *if* we are free to choose our values.

One might also argue that one is not free to choose one's own values as one's values are shaped by society, and this is best illustrated by Sartre, who gave the example of an individual who is extremely skilled at his job, and does his job well because that is what is expected of him. He goes day in and day out and completes his job to the best of his abilities, because that is what society expects him to do. The dilemma here is that the man doing this job is not aware of *why* he is doing what he is doing. As a student of philosophy, I believe that it is this *why* that one must attempt to answer. I would go so far as to say that our mere awareness of this *why* also equips us to take attempts to answers it.

The third, and perhaps the biggest counterargument to the essay presented above could be that there are several benefits of living the unexamined life. These benefits are not only such that they benefit they individual, but also one that may potentially benefit society as well. For instance, if a

government is catering to a nation where all individuals share an ideology that is similar to that of the government, then implanting laws, ensuring justice, and in general good governance would not just be easy, but also effective and efficient. Such a nation could potentially set up an example for other nations to follow, for the order it maintains within its borders. After all, one of the major problems for a democratic government is that it must cater to different individuals that have different belief systems. Thus, maintaining a power structure is a complex process that almost always has a tradeoff for some sect of society. Now, to argue against Ms. Nussbaum and our dear friend Socrates, if individuals led the unexamined life, would it not be easier to maintain a power structure? Surely it would. Would it not be easier to cater to the needs of the citizens that are swayed by, or are “all too easily influenced”? Surely it would. Is it not true that the combination of all these things above would make implementing policy and achieving policy objectives much easier? Surely it would. After all, if Germany could boast economic growth before the second world war and during times of great economic depression, and China still continues to grow economically, we have more than enough evidence to suggest that maintain order and ensuring economic progress would be easier. We can clearly see the advantages of living the unexamined life for a regime, it not only ensures the maintenance of a power structure, but in cases can also be used to promote economic growth.

For an individual too, living the unexamined life would be much more convenient as then one could possibly avoid the arduous task of asking and answering questions like philosophers about why one’s beliefs are the way they are. This time could be considerably spent in doing things that one finds value in.

But is this unexamined life, truly, all that we call life? Perhaps not. Is living in a regime that does not allow for an alternative system of thought just? Perhaps not. I would not attempt to answer these metaphysical questions about justice and life, simply because I am not capable of doing so, and it is not under the purview of today’s debate. But as a thinking, feeling, and reasoning human being, I feel that to reason and to think is essential to be human. So much so that without exercising these abilities, we are little more than animals living to fulfill their mere physiological needs. Therefore, we can, and we must be critical of ourselves, and our beliefs.

E) The question after

Let us assume for an instance that Nussbaum manages to convince all individuals on the planet that living a life of self-examination is one of the best ways to live. (A rather large assumption that is). We must try to answer where does this possibility leaves us. If all individuals are very much aware of their own beliefs, moreover, why those specific beliefs exist, surely it would create an atmosphere of tolerance as the reasoning mind then would be open to the possibility of alternatives. One would then be engaging in not just the enterprise of public reason, but that of private reason as well, where one would be aware of their own values.

However, the bigger question that would arise here would be to what extent would this awareness of one’s belief contribute towards tolerance? The second question would be that to what extent then could tolerance be used as an excuse to accept the wrongs in society?

If we were to allow for moral relativism and say that one is accepting of another’s beliefs, or to say that one is tolerant, would the case still be so if something done by other is grossly wrong. For instance some democratic communities ensure equal rights to all its citizen. However there are also some Middle Eastern countries where women are, quite literally, whipped if they do not conform to a particular set of rules. Is our global community then to be accepting of this gross

injustice? In the name of tolerance, perhaps one could say yes, it is alright for such a community to exist, but is that really justified? Is that really the mark of a progressive, global society? To be accepting of a community that violates fundamental human rights, in the name of tolerance? The line between indifference and tolerance has the potential to become blurred really quickly.

Our attempt to answer the question posed above brings us to the meta-question about the nature of truth itself. For our interpretation of truth would allow us to identify the rights and wrongs, and thus our morality. If truth is subjective, then so is the nature of right and wrong. If truth is subjective for different individuals, then as shown earlier in the essay, it is also objective for some. Thus our view of the subjective nature of truth, and thus morality is logically inconsistent and falls upon the umbrella it tries to uphold. This is not to say that I am denying, or negating the subjective interpretation of morality, or asserting the objective existence of one. Kant would argue that there is indeed, an objective way to understand whether actions are right or wrong, and perhaps Mill would argue otherwise. The classical trolley problem would do best to illustrate this dilemma.

This begs us to acknowledge the nature of beliefs themselves. Even a belief system that one may think that one has arrived at by reasoning, may exist before hand or be adopted. For instance, one may believe in human rights and believe that killing another individual as a means to one's own end is wrong, but this belief itself is not one that was *generated* by the individual. It was perhaps adopted from the charter of human rights, or simply arrived at because killing is illegal in that individual's state. It is this, difficult, rather nearly impossible to precisely define and categorize which beliefs are our own, arrived at via inductive reasoning, and which ones are a result of the social construct we are born into. In several instances, our beliefs are dynamic and are shaped by our day to day experiences of life.

We simply cannot objectively answer if man is born with a certain set of beliefs, creates his own, or if it is solely the individual's cultural and social context that shapes it. However, what we can assert is that there is a possibility of transition within the two. That is, that man indeed has the ability to influence public reason, and the collective consciousness of his or her own society. As seen from women's rights movements across the globe, man has the capacity to shape and actively construct his or her social construct. I would not go so far as to say that the ability to make this change this is always right, for revolutions in history have been for the better, and have been for the worse. However, all revolutions, and nearly all change in ideology has been a shape shifting exercise when man has tried to actively exercise the force of reason and shape public reason. Be it the end of apartheid or the rise of women's rights, it has been and always will be those that lead the examined life, who are able to bridge the gap between public and private reason. Our ability to influence society, for the better or for worse is enough to make us acutely aware of the need to examine our own beliefs, and the truth in Socrates' words that the unexamined life is not worth living.

F) Conclusion

I acknowledge that there is no distinct, or rather objective way for us to truly *know* something. However I feel that our inability to assert something with objectivity must not prevent us from engaging in the enterprise of thinking why things are the way they are. I have tried to prove that our beliefs can be both, a result of our choices, and an outcome of our cultural context, and that we, as thinking, feeling individuals have the ability to use the force of reason to influence the thoughts of other individuals. It is this ability of ours to employ the force of reason to bridge the gap between public and private reason, and be susceptible to influence and in turn influence others' that makes it imperative that we engage in critical self-examination. Socrates, and Nussbaum are

right in their beliefs, for even though we may not be able to objectively arrive at what is right or wrong, or understand the nature and breadth of our knowledge, our awareness of our self is the primary and the most important check and balance that could prevent the rise of divisive forces across the globe.

As individuals, we must embrace and value reasoned disobedience over unthinking obedience, in the face of populism, dogma, and totalitarian leaders who want to divide the world, and we must employ what was and is perhaps the greatest tool invented in all of human history – the question mark. Only then can we truly be - Human.