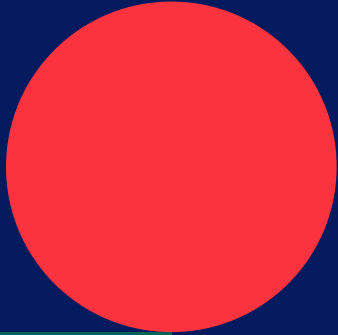


BY ENDURANCE WE CONQUER

NewPhilosopher



TAKING RISKS

TOM CHATFIELD
The courage to act

ANTONIA CASE
Befriending fear

CYNTHIA PURY
Standing on the edge

COUNTING OURSELVES WORTHY



By Mariana Alessandri

Artwork: *Don't Talk To The Man On The Job*, Tom Eckersley & Eric Lombers, 1940

“There’s an Olympian athlete inside of you,” I tell my students early in the semester. They admit that holding this belief would change the way they approached the gym. They would sweat more than they ever had, determined to reshape the body they dragged in to fit their new self-perception. “I can’t make you an Olympian athlete, but hold on to how it would feel to believe it.” I can’t make them philosophers either, but I admit to believing there really is a philosopher inside each of them. What’s more, I tell them, Socrates believed that they already know everything they need to know to live well.

On the day of his death, Socrates called it noble – even glorious – to risk the belief that our souls are immortal. Now, you could call him a coward for not facing his death head-on. It is convenient, when one is about to drink Hemlock, to believe that death isn’t the end. But I don’t think Socrates declared

his soul immortal to blunt the edge of death. I think he wanted to leave his friends with a reason to trust themselves.

Socrates’s myth of Recollection is premised on immortality: at birth our everlasting souls enter the body and at death they fly away. More bottomless well than blank slate, every soul knows infinitely more than we give it credit for. Socrates tried out his theory on Meno, a man who consistently looked outward instead of inward for answers. Together they had agreed to come up with a good definition of virtue, but the conversation stalled when Meno’s first three definitions of virtue – all nonsense easily refuted by Socrates – failed. At this point in the dialogue, Meno throws up his hands and declares that they are never going to define virtue because they don’t already know what it means. Humiliated, Meno decides to quit thinking and looks to the exit. To keep him from walking, Socrates launches into some

story about how our souls have always been around and already know everything. He tells Meno not to worry, that they’ll recognise virtue when they see it. Recollection was Socrates’s pep talk.

My most vocal students, remembering their terror in high school calculus, aren’t buying it. They deny that knowledge comes from within. They still believe that teachers, parents, and strangers deposit knowledge into their mostly empty heads. They are unwilling to accept something so obviously fabricated as “I know.” It’s too risky.

The Skeptics understood the dangerous nature of beliefs: they often lead to sadness, heartbreak, and disappointment. It’s safer to withhold assent than to believe the person cupping your face promising to love you forever. But here was Socrates promising Meno that he would be “better, braver, and less idle” if he could only bring himself to believe in himself. I ask my students what would

change if they believed their souls were philosophical Olympians itching to break through their skin.

Most students worry that believing in Recollection would make them closed-minded. If you believe you already know everything, they reason, you won't seek it. You would become arrogant and closed off from other people. But others are with Socrates, claiming that if you believed you had the answer inside of you, it would make you more "energetic and keen on the search". They'd work their Olympian souls as hard as they'd work their Olympian bodies.

Believing they are already philosophers would do a lot for my students. It would bring philosophy out of the clouds and down to earth. It would make them less scared of it, and perhaps more interested in self-discovery. Believing in Recollection would do even more for my students – them and every one of us who lives with imposter syndrome. Recollection is for people who just can't be convinced that they belong here.

Women have historically been taught not to trust themselves. Minorities, too. Instead, we have uncritically swallowed a different story: someone smarter knows the answer, and our job is to pay them

for it. I see this attitude in my students, 90 per cent of them Hispanic, who come to my class with fifteen years' experience of being empty cups. My PhD makes me a full cup, so to receive my 'overflowing wisdom', they need only prostrate themselves before me. But what if they came in believing they were full? What kind of revolution could women and marginalised peoples start by believing that wisdom resides in us?

If we took this one glorious risk, if we believed the story that Socrates made up, we would be indomitable. If we believed against all odds that we already know what we currently don't know we know,

A question of courage, by Gordon Grant, Library of Congress



THE DEMOCRATIC LOT—BAYLER SOUL

we wouldn't have to hustle for worthiness or speak only of our potential. If we believed that knowledge comes from inside instead of outside, we would spend more time there, getting to know ourselves, inspecting and evaluating our judgments. We would consult ourselves more, trust ourselves more, think that we had something to contribute. We would be willing – eager even – to offer our inner thoughts for debate instead of keeping them hidden for fear of looking dumb. We would go deep within, be more truthful, maybe even love ourselves more. And we would see others not as teachers with some content to push nor as adversaries threatening

to make fools of us, but as companions, sometimes coaches, on the road to recovering our deep knowing.

Socrates' idea of Recollection, the one where the soul enters the body full, is a story. He never meant to prove it, and he even said that no sensible man would believe every piece of it. But later philosophers like William James and Miguel de Unamuno defended the right to believe in what cannot be proven, including immortality. The question for these philosophers is less "Is it true or false?" and more "Where will this belief take me? Which door will believing open and which door will not believing close?"

From reading student journals, I can tell that the Olympian athlete story sticks to them for days. They don't believe that one either, in part because it's safer to believe oneself incapable than capable. It's safer to believe that we don't have the answers, and that if life goes wrong, it's because no one told us how to do it right. It's safer to consider ourselves untrustworthy than to intentionally unlearn the decades of messaging telling us to look anywhere but in. But if more of us risked this belief called Recollection, the one that sounds so implausible, maybe we could finally count ourselves worthy.



THE REPUBLICAN LOT—A MORE ALLURING FIELD.