

PART ONE

FAMILY FIRST

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL



IS THE EXAMINED LIFE A HUGE MISTAKE?

Happiness, Self-Knowledge,
and the Bluths

Jason Southworth and Ruth Tallman

Ignorance is bliss—or is it? While you hear that little nugget of folk wisdom fairly often, some people desire the truth regardless of the repercussions. On the side of ignorance, George Michael decides not to tell Maeby that she's adopted (she's really not) because he thinks she is happier believing she is her parents' biological child.¹ Michael chooses not to tell George Michael that he slept with his ethics teacher (after George Michael professed his love for Ms. Barely), because George Michael is happier not knowing.² Yet, on the side of truth, George Sr. escapes from a Mexican prison only to go home to verify his wife's relationship with his brother.³ So what makes us happier, ignorance or knowledge?

For centuries, analrapists and philosophers have come down on the side of knowledge. I mean, we philosophers *really* need to know the truth (about everything!); we need to know so badly that we even need you to need to know. If you don't, we're unhappy. On the other side of the debate is . . . basically everyone else. Sure, when we're feeling uncharitable we'll point to the MR. Fs and "moron jocks" (Steve Holt (!)) who prefer ignorance, but when we're being fair, philosophers will admit that there are plenty of smart people who seem to think we're wrong about self-knowledge being the key to happiness. Since there are no smart people on television, let's take the Bluths as our guides in reconsidering whether ignorance really is bliss.

The Life of *Arrested Development* Is Not Worth Living

Plato (428/427 BCE–348/347 BCE) is the most famous proponent of the view that self-awareness is the hallmark of a happy person. In his account of the trial and death of his mentor, Socrates (c. 469 BCE–399 BCE), Plato depicts a man who thought pursuing the truth about himself, others, and the world was the most important thing anybody could ever do—indeed, that it was worth dying for (would any member of the Bluth family do that?). Socrates spent his life trying to convince those around him to reflect on their lives and on their values, and to think critically about the kinds of people they were. This comes through clearly in his rebuke of the accusers at his trial: “Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honour, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul?”⁴

Socrates's actions made him an enemy of many in Athens (no one likes to be told they're behaving badly). Despite the lack of support, and outright hostility of many, Socrates continued

to reflect on his own life and urged others to do the same, saying, “Examining both myself and others is really the very best thing that a man can do, and that life without this sort of examination is not worth living.”⁵ Eventually, the people of Athens had enough and gave Socrates a choice—stop with the philosophy or face the death penalty. If this seems like an awfully strict punishment, you might not realize just how obnoxious Socrates could be.

Facing death, he had this to say: “You are mistaken, my friend, if you think that a man who is worth anything ought to spend his time weighing up the prospects of life and death. He has only one thing to consider in performing any action; that is, whether he is acting justly or unjustly, like a good man or a bad one.”⁶ Socrates would say that Gob’s worries about the next illusion, Lindsay’s worries about finding a suitable partner in adultery, and Tobias’s fears of being nude all fail to consider what is really important. Our crucial concern should always come down to one question: Am I being moral?

Socrates not only believed that self-reflection was essential—he thought it was *desirable*. Thinking critically and pursuing truth, he believed, leads to the greatest happiness. He often conveyed his teachings through stories, and one of his most famous is called the Myth of the Cave.⁷ In this story, Socrates describes the human condition as analogous to people who are imprisoned—chained in a dark cave, where they never see anything real, but rather, only see shadows of real people and objects as they are reflected by firelight on the walls of the cave. As far as the prisoners know, the limited existence they experience in the cave is the whole of reality. If one of those prisoners were to get free and emerge from the cave into the light, he would be temporarily blinded, much like George Sr. probably was when he emerged from his underground hiding place. In the myth, though, things are even worse for those who see the light outside the cave. They’re seeing it for the first time. After a period of adjustment, the escaped prisoners

will finally see the world as it really is, rather than as shadowy reflections. They will, in fact, find that reality is far more fulfilling than cave life ever could be.

The story doesn't end there, however. If one of the freed prisoners were to return to the cave and explain to those still chained what he'd witnessed in the world above, they would laugh at him. They would scoff because, after being in the sunlight, his sight in the darkness of the cave would be far less keen than theirs. Like Buster Bluth, the freed prisoner would be inept in the everyday world of the cave dwellers. Unlike Buster Bluth, though, this ineptitude would be the result of seeing the truth. The former prisoner of the cave would claim to be happier than those chained below, but the cave dwellers would have no interest in leaving the warm complacency of cave life.⁸

What does this strange story mean? Socrates thinks that most of us spend our lives shrouded in illusion. We think we're great magicians, or awesome actors, or brilliant businessmen. Our understanding of the world is clouded and inaccurate, just like the people in the cave. Unlike the prisoners in the story, however, our chains are of our own making. We can break free anytime we like, just by opening our eyes, looking around, thinking critically, and refusing to let our minds be lulled and soothed by false but comforting beliefs. Shaking off our familiar misconceptions will be uncomfortable at first, just as it was uncomfortable for the prisoner when he first emerged into the light. But once we adjust to the sharpness and purity of reality, we'll achieve a happiness that is equally sharp and pure, and we'll never again be content to live a life of self-delusion. This is what Socrates called "happiness." Happy people are those who have seen illusion and reality and are in a position to choose between them. And every person in that situation will embrace truth, even when it's difficult or painful. Socrates says that this happiness is so compelling, he will not deviate from his pursuit of truth, no, ". . .not even if I have to die a hundred deaths."⁹

The Myth of the Cave shares some things in common with the pilot of *Arrested Development*. Think back to the first morning we met the Bluths. Michael was excited, because he believed he would be made partner that day. Michael was living in the cave with his family. He was not seeing reality for what it really was. Though he had worked at the company faithfully every day, he was totally unaware of what had been going on around him. He didn't know that everyone else in the family was happily living off the company money, that his twin sister had been in town for weeks, or that his father was in serious danger of being arrested for illegal business practices too numerous to mention. He dreamily reminds George Michael that family (not breakfast) is the most important thing.

George Sr.'s boat party was a turning point for Michael. It was then that Michael was yanked out of the warm, comforting darkness of the cave and shoved up into the cold light of reality. Within minutes, Michael's illusions about his father, his importance in the company, and his future were shattered. First he learns, publicly and with no explanation, that his mother, who as far as he knows doesn't even work for the company, bypassed him as partner. Moments later, he learns that his father has obviously been involved in some pretty bad stuff, as he is hauled away in handcuffs. Michael is shocked but quickly makes the decision to face reality. Now, he says, he really sees the world clearly. Now he knows the score. He will not return to the cave. He will go out and make a life for himself and his son in Phoenix, far away from his cave-dwelling relatives.

The remaining Bluths see things differently, however. From their vantage point in the cave, Michael looks like a fool. Where does he think he's going? In fact, Lucille "would rather be dead in California than alive in Arizona!" So, the family stages an intervention (which sounds more like an imposition). Michael, though, is already out of the cave. His eyes have

adjusted to the sun, and he realizes that what he's done doesn't call for an intervention (I'd love to call it an imposition). Those in the cave and those who have emerged literally see things differently. Both prefer to remain where they are, and think those who do otherwise have made a huge mistake. This disagreement about how to live is clear throughout the series. Michael frequently criticizes his family's behavior, urging them to think about their lives and behave differently. Of course, this makes them angry and resentful (Lucille tells Michael that he is her second least favorite child, and Gob repeatedly calls him a robot . . . "the boy who couldn't cry"). Both sides think they're right, but Socrates's point is that only those who have emerged from the cave are in a position to make a call about which life is better. Socrates's claim is that a life of self-reflection and the critical search for truth is a better life, and will lead to more happiness. But let's take a look at the Bluths to see if the wisdom of Socrates can be confirmed.

Michael: "The Good One, the Moral One, the Fool."

Socrates would predict that Michael would be the happiest Bluth. After all, Michael is the member of the Bluth family who has most clearly emerged from the cave. He pokes his head back in sometimes to talk to his loved ones who still live there, and sometimes his perception of reality gets confused, but Michael tries to live a just, thoughtful life. He thinks critically about his actions and is aware of the fact that his behavior sometimes falls short of his own ideals. When this happens, he doesn't brush it aside, instead he reflects and considers how to behave better in the future. When Michael realizes that much of his dislike for Ann (George Michael's bland girlfriend) stems from jealousy over his son's affection, Michael takes steps to accept her as a part of his son's life.¹⁰ Michael thinks this is the right thing to do, but he also sees this type of reflective

life, of striving to know and better oneself, as the path to happiness. After getting to know Ann, however, Michael faces a sad truth—he really doesn't like her. Michael bravely faces the reality many parents face—he just doesn't like the person his son has chosen to date. Michael embraces the truth and is left disappointed.

The situation with Ann doesn't look like a fluke either. It looks as if Michael's level of happiness is proportionate to his level of self-deception. When is he saddest? When he sees reality most clearly; when Michael realizes that George Michael prefers to hang out with "Egg" over bikeriding with his dad. When he realizes (repeatedly) that his father doesn't trust him and continues to deceive him. When he's the only attendee at his mom's surprise party (twice). When he learns he is about to marry an MR F. When is Michael the happiest? When he is violating his own moral code by doing things he thinks he shouldn't. This usually involves sex with a forbidden partner—his brother's girlfriend, his son's teacher, his father's prosecutor. When he thinks his mother is genuinely concerned about his well-being after a car accident (really, she's framing him for an accident she caused; after all, she is one of the "world's worst drivers"). When he allows himself to be swept up in a delusion, like the time he almost married an MR F. Sure, he was unhappy when he discovered the truth, but Michael was happy as a clam as long as the deception held. Michael's awareness of reality makes him less happy than deception. Let's not be hasty though; perhaps some of the other Bluths can lend credence to Socrates's claim.

Gob: "They're Laughing with Me, Michael, They're Laughing with Me."

What do we know about Gob? He is in his mid- to late-thirties. He's never been in a serious relationship. He's been blackballed from the professional organization of his chosen

trade (which he founded), the Magicians' Alliance. He has no stable income or home. Yet, Gob sees himself as a superstar. Despite the fact that his illusions end in failure more often than not, despite the fact that he can't find work and is considered a joke within his profession, and despite the fact that his family openly ridicules his trade, Gob sees himself as a master illusionist. His professional identity is tied up in a self-conception that has no basis in reality. There are many, many signs that would cue a normally functioning human being into the fact that Gob is a terrible magician. He regularly kills his live props (and then returns them from whence they came), his fireballs never trigger (but still, where did the lighter fluid come from?), and bystanders with no experience in magic can figure out how his illusions work. Yet Gob never sways in his deep, ungrounded belief that he is an excellent illusionist.

When he is made figurehead president of the Bluth Company (and we're fine with that), he immediately begins to self-identify as an expensive suit-wearing CEO (C'mon!), despite the fact that he does no real work for the company. And Gob's self-deception is not restricted to his professional life. He fancies himself a philanderer but rarely manages to actually "seal the deal." Just consider his marriage, which remained unconsummated for months, despite his repeated claims to the contrary. Gob has every reason to see his life as a failure. Yet he appears to be one of the happiest members of the Bluth family. He is confident and vivacious, certain he is always in the know, even though every adult member of his family repeatedly and successfully deceives him. In fact, the only times Gob appears to be unhappy are in the rare moments when he sees himself clearly for what he is (like when he wakes up in the hospital, having failed in an illusion and having been stabbed with a shiv. He made a huge mistake). But for times like that, Gob has a steady supply of forget-me-nows.

Lindsay: “You Call Yourself an Environmentalist, Why Don’t You Go Club a Few Beavers?”

A stereotypical privileged daughter, Lindsay has not pursued a career. Instead, she devotes herself to maintaining her appearance and is a crusader for social justice. Unfortunately, Lindsay couldn’t care less about any of the causes she spends her time championing. She wastes food at a benefit for world hunger,¹¹ opposes the war in Iraq because her hairdresser is being called to active duty (leaving her in need of a stylist), and is uncertain about what exactly she is supposed to be doing with the wetlands. “Dry them?” she guesses.¹²

Lindsay sees herself as a good mother, yet fails to recognize that her daughter is flunking out of school. Believing it to be an award, she has Maeby’s expulsion letter from the “new age feel-goodery” Openings framed. She also considers herself to be a good daughter, but only visits her father in prison three times, with each visit motivated by the frustrated desire for leers and cat calls from the inmates (in her distorted version of reality, this would be the ultimate self-esteem boost). Lindsay brags about being employed while everyone else loafs around, but all she ever managed was a job *offer* (anyone can get a job offer), and she is fired for sleeping through the job after celebrating the job (offer) with money that she had not yet earned. To be fair, she did work at a clothing store once, but she was so invested in her public image she lied about the job, preferring that everyone believe she was stealing.

Similarly, Lindsay brags about keeping the house clean, but the two times she claimed to clean it she actually tricked someone else into doing the job (Lupe the first time, and Tobias—Mrs. Featherbottom—the second). Whenever she begins to see the ugly truth of her life, Lindsay immediately descends deeper within the cave. When she and Tobias finally admit to each

other that their marriage is not working, she quickly switches gears. After an admittedly delusional suggestion of Tobias's ("it never works; these people somehow delude themselves into thinking that it might but—but it might work for us"), Lindsay proclaims their relationship an open marriage. She then happily engages in an imagined competition with Tobias over who will manage to have an affair first, even though neither of them do more than brag and scheme. Lindsay guards carefully against ever having to face her life for what it really is—and she's happy because of it.

Tobias: "You Blow Hard."

Tobias is perhaps the saddest member of the Bluth family, though he rarely recognizes this himself. He usually manages to glide along, deeply, happily self-deluded. Even more so than Gob, Tobias's professional identification is simply in his mind. Like Gob, Tobias has no reason to believe that he's any good at his chosen profession. After a few failed attempts to land work, Tobias is happy to spend most of his time on the couch. He blissfully wallows in his conception of himself as a misunderstood actor who strives for work, while actually watching bad TV and experimenting with his wife's wildly overpriced beauty products.

Tobias twists every situation to better match what he takes himself to be (an actor) and what he takes himself to be doing (searching for his breakthrough role). Despite good evidence to the contrary, Tobias insists on understanding his gym buddy, Frank, as anything but what he really is. When it becomes clear that Frank is not interested in him sexually, Tobias hears "agent" and assumes it to mean "talent agent." He misunderstands Frank as saying that he works for the CAA (Creative Arts Agency), when in fact he works for the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). He interprets Frank's request that he be a mole as Frank wanting him to don a giant mole suit and

act out a role.¹³ Common sense tells us that we should understand ambiguous words in the most reasonable way, given the context, but Tobias's single-minded desire for the world to conform to his dreams leads him to contort his understanding of simple information in such a way that his own delusions are not threatened.

Tobias's sexual orientation is a running joke and a continuing mystery in the show. It isn't clear whether or not Tobias is gay because Tobias himself doesn't know. He's a tragic character, because it's clear that he does love his wife and daughter (this is undeniable when you remember that, after being kicked out of the house, he becomes Mrs. Featherbottom to spend more time with them).¹⁴ The fact that outing himself would result in the end of his marriage is compounded by Tobias's deep sexual repression, of which his never-nude syndrome is one manifestation (it's exactly what it sounds like, and there are literally dozens of them). His level of repression suggests that Tobias would find having a sexual relationship with a man just as challenging as with his wife. We're also told that he and Lindsay do, on extremely rare occasions, manage to have enjoyable sex. So, while Tobias isn't clearly gay, he's certainly unaware of his own sexual nature.

Despite these extremely deep-rooted problems, Tobias has worked himself into such a high level of denial about his issues that he understands himself as actually being the person he would like to be. He proudly announces that he has sex with his wife (though her own level of sexual frustration tells us he doesn't), he proclaims himself a fabulous actor, and he thinks of himself as a loving father who has a strong relationship with his daughter (everything she does tells us that she looks on him with embarrassment and contempt). While maintaining his self-deception, Tobias seems relatively happy, most of the time. Strangely, however, at times he manages to have moments of clarity when he realizes his life is really nothing like the dream world he works so hard to keep going. When this happens

he succumbs to overwhelming despair, alone, in his cutoffs, weeping in the shower.

Arrested Development follows the Bluths through several years of their lives, during which we watch Michael struggle for self-awareness yet find misery. We also watch the others maintain happiness in self-deception. So it looks like Socrates's prediction about self-awareness leading to happiness doesn't match up with the evidence. That means it's time to consider another philosopher.

The Arresting of Happiness

In *The Conquest of Happiness*, the philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) gives an account of the relation between happiness and self-knowledge that more clearly accords with *Arrested Development*. Russell saw the greatest cause of unhappiness as the desire for knowledge—obviously, this is bad news for us philosophers. Rather than appealing to a hypothetical example like Socrates's cave, Russell uses his own life as his primary example. From a young age, he was an unhappy person for two reasons. First, he desired something essentially unobtainable—absolute certainty about the issues he most cared about. The only way to end this type of suffering was for Russell to change his desires to something short of absolute certainty, which is obtainable. The second reason for his unhappiness was his “preoccupation with himself.”¹⁵ Russell, like most philosophers, spent a lot of time thinking about himself, just as Socrates urged. He reflected on his behavior (judging some actions moral and others immoral) and his beliefs (judging some justified and others unjustified). This constant search for self-knowledge left Russell feeling inadequate and prevented him from finding much happiness in life. In time, he learned to be indifferent (his word) to himself and his shortcomings, and he found himself happier. Russell went so far as to say that “interest in oneself, on the contrary, leads to no activity of a progressive kind.”¹⁶

There are, according to Russell, three types of people who come to be unhappy through reflection: sinners, narcissists, and megalomaniacs. Sinners constantly find fault in themselves. No matter what a sinner wants, he'll see it as something he shouldn't want. As a result, he either does something he doesn't want to do or does what he wants and disapproves of himself.¹⁷ George Michael fits this description. He's infatuated with his cousin Maebly, but he knows that society at large (except maybe the French . . . he likes the way they think), and his family in particular, would disapprove of any sexual relationship the two of them might form. Rather than admit his desires to his cousin, he enters into a relationship with a boring girl, Annabell (I call her that because she's shaped like a . . . she's the belle of the ball!), with whom he's got nothing in common. He spends a lot of time with her family praying (they are on Bethlehem time), which he hates, and he goes so far as to waste money on music just to burn at Ann's Christian (pause) music bonfire. All the while he longs to be with his cousin, and goes out of his way to impress her, only to feel ashamed. When he and Maebly finally act on their feelings, he gets to second base (stealing it like Pete Rose), but the cost is that he is filled with so much self-loathing he can't be in the same room with her. If George Michael would just admit to his taboo sexual desires (like his Gangee and Uncle Oscar), rather than suppressing them, he would probably be happier.

The narcissist is in many ways the opposite of the sinner. When a narcissist reflects on himself he sees his good qualities to the point of admiring himself. This leads to a desire to be admired by others, and when that doesn't happen, suffering ensues.¹⁸ This seems to be the type of unhappiness that Michael suffers from. Just think of how many times Michael looks for recognition—from his father, sister, brother, son, employees, or girlfriends—that he is a good person. Even when he behaves badly, he wants to be seen as doing the bad thing in as good a way as he can (when he steals his brother's

girlfriend or sleeps with his son's teacher). If Michael spent less time obsessing over his virtue and more time taking pleasure in the things he does, he would be better off. In other words, if Michael were more like Gob, or if he actually took the "stupid pills" that George Sr. often accused him of taking, he would be happier.

The last category of unhappy people is the megalomaniac. Russell says these people want to be powerful and feared in the way that a narcissist wants to be well-liked. But unhappiness results when these people recognize the great difference between the power they feel they deserve and the little they actually have.¹⁹ A case might be made for Gob exemplifying this type of person, but we have a better *Arrested* example in George Sr.'s secretary and mistress Kitty (the whore). Secretaries outside of the academic setting are fairly powerless. Michael saw the position as so unimportant he allowed Tobias, Lindsay, and Starla (the model Gob gave a firm offer to) to do it. As a mistress, Kitty saw herself as more important to George Sr. than his wife, so she felt she was entitled to at least as much power as Lucille. Nobody else, including George Sr., saw things this way. Instead they saw her as crazy (she was). If Kitty just accepted her powerlessness like Buster (who is perfectly content to let others shepherd him around), she could find happiness.

Russell also thought that there are external circumstances that, regardless of self-knowledge, prevent a person from being happy. You need to have a reasonable income that allows for food, shelter, and health care before happiness is an option. Yet, even with these things, certain personal traumas can prevent any chance at happiness. Chief among these, according to Russell, are the death of a child and public disgrace. Russell would think George Sr. extraordinarily lucky that, after being arrested by the SEC, he was able to do (and have) the time of his life in prison.²⁰ While these observations might seem

obvious, it's worth noting that Socrates didn't even see it as a possibility that external circumstances could affect happiness; he thought self-knowledge was necessary and sufficient for happiness.

This isn't to say that Russell thought there was no benefit to some reflection, or that we ought never to reflect (you should see all the stuff this guy wrote!). Rather, he thought that in moderation, reflection could lead to additional happiness. Russell, himself a "deliciously witty" man, put it this way, "Perhaps the simplest way to describe the difference between the two sorts of happiness is to say that one sort is open to any human being, and the other only to those who can read and write."²¹ What he meant by this was that the more knowledge you have, the more you are able to understand and accomplish, and reaching your goals brings a type of happiness that is not available to those who don't have any goals.

There are many opportunities for happiness, and some of those opportunities are not available to those who don't reflect. Doing little tricks (illusions; tricks are what a whore does for money . . . or cocaine) can lead to happiness, but if that's all you can do, you may not be as happy as people who can do more. Learning more about the world and about yourself increases the number of places you can find pleasure. George Michael, for example, derives pleasure from getting As in class, a pleasure not open to Maebly.

Russell's lesson is that self-reflection is more likely to hurt than to help. However, for those who desire a certain amount of self-reflection, it's not necessarily something to be avoided. If Michael and George Michael can get it together and learn how to engage in a level of self-reflection that is not all-encompassing, they will have opportunities for happiness that are not available to their less-reflective family members. So, the unexamined life isn't a huge mistake, but a touch of examination might not be a bad thing.

NOTES

1. Episode 12.
2. Episode 14.
3. Episode 27.
4. Plato, *Apology*, p. 29e.
5. Plato, *Apology*, p. 38a.
6. Plato, *Apology*, p. 28b.
7. The story is probably Plato's, though he puts it in the mouth of Socrates.
8. Plato, *Republic VII*, pp. 514-518.
9. Plato, *Apology*, p. 30c.
10. Episode 26.
11. Episode 1.
12. Episode 5.
13. Episode 45.
14. Episode 36.
15. Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), p. 18.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 113.