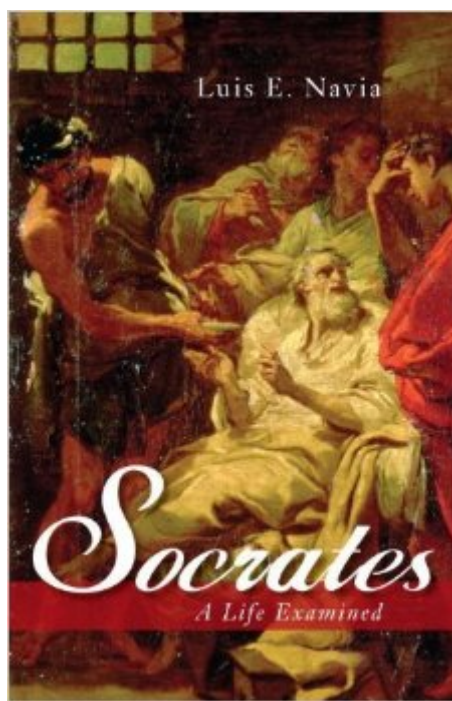


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Socrates: A Life Examined



Synopsis

One of the most influential thinkers in the history of the West was Socrates of Athens (469-399 BCE). Literally, thousands of books and other works of art have been devoted to him, yet his character and the tenets of his philosophy remain elusive. Even his contemporaries had very different impressions of him, and since he himself left no writings to posterity, we can only wonder: Who was this man really? What ideas and ideals can be truthfully associated with him? What is the basis for the extraordinary influence he has exerted throughout history? Philosopher Luis E. Navia presents a compelling portrayal of Socrates in this very readable and well-researched book, which is both a biography of the man and an exploration of his ideas. Through a critical and documented study of the major ancient sources about Socrates — in the writings of Aristophanes, Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle — Navia reconstructs a surprisingly consistent portrait of this enigmatic philosopher. He links Socrates'™ conviction that the unexamined life is not worth living with Immanuel Kant's™ later concept of an innate moral imperative as the only meaningful purpose of human existence. He highlights Socrates'™ unrelenting search for the essence and value of the soul as that aspect of his philosophical journey that animated and structured all his activities. Navia also considers Socrates'™ relationship with the Sophists, his stance vis-à-vis the religious beliefs and practices of his time, his view of the relationship between legality and morality, and the function of language in human life. Finally, he eloquently captures the Socratic legacy, which, more than twenty-four centuries after his death, is still so urgently relevant today. Navia brings to life this perennially important philosopher, illuminating the relevance of his ideas for our modern world.

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Customer Reviews

Socrates is a seminal character for the West- just about everyone knows of him, and certain characteristics are universally ascribed to him. In essence, he is what one thinks of when the word Philosopher is thrown around. But in truth he is a puzzle separated from us by 2400 years whose pieces have been contributed by many sources, especially Plato, Aristophanes and Xenophon, those who actually knew him. And the picture they offer is far from homogeneous or distinct. Even in just considering Plato you find a Socrates who greatly changes over time and you realize the difficulty and maybe impossibility of separating the beliefs of the author from those of his mentor. Because we have nothing actually written by Socrates all we can do is attempt to see him through the eyes of others. And it is that daunting task that Dr. Navia takes on with this book. He first analyzes the three primary sources, comparing and contrasting their descriptions, looking for points of commonality or at least similarity. It is an interesting though occasionally redundant exercise which lays the groundwork for the last two chapters where Navia attempts to distill and understand the basis of Socratic thought. I thought this was definitely the most interesting part of the book and plan on rereading these two chapters because there is much to digest and reflect upon. Having thus indicated the complexity of those last 80 pages, I will attempt to summarize them, knowing that I will fall far short and only hoping that what I offer is appealing enough to entice others to read it for themselves. Basically, Navia concludes that Socrates redirects our attention from the outer world (which would eventually be addressed by science) to the inner world of our self consciousness.

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