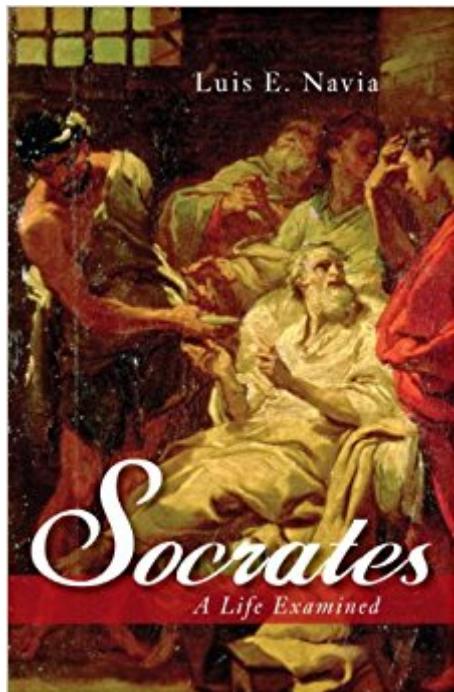


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# Socrates: A Life Examined



## 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Know thyself" was the foundation of Socratic philosophy. Ironically, history knows little of Socrates, because he refused to write about himself and only fragments of Socratic writing survive. New York Institute of Technology philosophy professor and Social Sciences chair Navia sifts through the writings of Aristophanes, Xenophon and Plato, all of whom knew Socrates personally, to discover the man in full, but an incomplete historical record and conflicting accounts prevent Navia from delivering a nuanced biography. Aristophanes portrayed Socrates in his comedy *Clouds* as a "ridiculous man," for instance, while Xenophon and Plato described Socrates as "a gregarious man...possessed by an irresistible passion to communicate his message." But murkiness is prevalent, as with Navia's account-based on Xenophon's *Apology* of Socrates's trial for asebia (worshipping gods not accepted by the state), in which the author constructs a rickety case of conjecture to explain Socrates's motivations. Philosophy scholars will benefit most; casual readers with an interest in philosophy or Socrates will likely find the book tough going. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Adult/High School •Though this Greek philosopher left no writings of his own, he is one of the most influential thinkers of all time. Navia synthesized the works of primary and secondary sources to weave together a vivid account of Socrates's life and ideas. He found common characteristics of his subject's philosophy in his sources and many fascinating differences. Each chapter presents a unique view of Socrates from the writings of his contemporaries and followers. Aristophanes ridiculed Socrates in his play *Clouds* and influenced public opinion, while Plato carefully recorded Socrates's ideas, and Xenophon regarded him as a master of philosophy. He had devoted friends and followers and also a few powerful enemies, who viewed his ideas as being at odds with those of his fellow Athenians. The Greeks at the time were extremely religious, carefully living their daily lives by rules so as not to anger the gods. Socrates believed that only by acknowledging one's ignorance could one move toward the acquisition of knowledge and achieve virtue and piety. His questioning of popular beliefs has set the stage for many modern philosophers, notably Kant, who wrote that self-knowledge leads to holiness. The carefully documented research provides a valuable resource for those interested in the man and his ideas. Students researching philosophy will benefit from the author's accessible connections between the beliefs of Socrates and

those of many modern thinkers. Susanne Bardelson, Kitsap Regional Library, WA

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This is a beautifully written work by a scholar who knows his subject thoroughly. It is a work of genius. Best of all, it is written to be read by almost anyone. After years of trying to grasp what was going on in Athens that helped produce a man like Socrates, Luis E. Navia has completed the picture for me. He draws the man, his friends, and the city together in a way that makes sense. If you're a scholar, a philosopher, a historian, or a reader with curiosity about Socrates and the great Greek city-state of the 5th century BCE, this is the book for you. There have been two books of the many I have read that have been the most pivotal for me in advancing my understanding of history. The first was Julian Jaynes' masterwork, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, and the second is Navia's *Socrates: A Life Examined*.

An excellent book which offers real, innovative insights into Socrates the man as opposed to Socrates the myth.

Socrates! one of the best selling book and very good read!!!

Very good!

In his book "A life Examined" Luis E. Navia, does a great amount of extensive study on the life of Socrates. Because Socrates didn't leave us any literature of his own, the author begins his book with questions that have no answers but have theories and arguments that leave us unclear, with Socrates early life, family life, faith, personality etc. Navia does a great job in integrating ancient Greek literature about Socrates into his book. He structures the literature in such a way that the sources themselves bring out the questions and answers. Since we do not have much material on the life and philosophy of Socrates, the middle of the book searches to find out more about Socrates in examining the Socrates in Plato and Aristotle. At the closing of the book Navia endeavors very hard to assess and convey his understanding of the philosophy and the faith within the Socrates who is unknown.

Got it all int he headline. So anything I add here is merely repetitive. They sitill want six more words, well, ok,here's eight.

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. "Know thyself" becomes the mantra, the all encompassing instruction along with "a life unexamined is not worth living" that guides Socrates as he attempts to enlighten man as to his soul and those virtues which will raise us up to the divine nature inherent in each of us. To do so Socrates uses reason and language to reveal the ignorance and obfuscation that clouds our understanding with the aim of obtaining that knowledge which will open our eyes and guide into the right way to live. But that doesn't really do justice to Socrates ultimate goal, for it is too easy to think of it as just being a good person. While that is part of it, there is much more, and involves a transcendental aspect which many secularists will find disturbing. However, as Navia shows, this is very much an integral part of the Socratic teaching. More disturbing to the Rationalists will be the implication that Navia makes about reason itself- that it may be insufficient to find the final, true and ultimate knowledge that Socrates seeks. As is shown, much of what Socrates does is deflate the understandings and beliefs of those he talks to, and for this reason is the major tool. However, he really offers no answers and alludes to the need for others to find it themselves. As he proclaims, he himself know nothing. In fact Navia shows that faith in that knowledge, perhaps Providentially provided, is what

sustains Socrates in his quest. But his failure to find answers reminds us of Pascal's observation that reason's fundamental purpose is to show Man what it is incapable of proving. At this point it must be mentioned that Navia does compare Socratic and Christian beliefs and thoughts and finds remarkable similarities, but there is a major difference when it comes to sin- for Socrates true knowledge ensures virtue and the lack of wrongdoing, while Christianity believes original sin overcomes knowledge and explains evil even in the face of wisdom. In considering this divergence it struck me that it was correct as far as orthodox Christianity is concerned, but if you look at Gnosticism and its search for knowledge to reveal the Divine nature in each of us, you get an almost perfect fit with the Socratic view. And the Gnosis sought is knowledge which is not found by reason but by other mystical means, just as Socrates seems to show that reason is inadequate for finding the knowledge he seeks. In considering his metaphor of being a midwife and comparing it to the Gnostic belief in rebirth in light of the ultimate knowledge it becomes interesting to wonder if Socrates may be a proto-Gnostic whose teachings would arise again 500 years later in the context of Christian thought. Again, let me emphasize the cursory nature of what I have offered here. Navia's writing is much more complex and interesting and I do not do it justice. But hopefully I have whetted your appetite enough to entice you into reading this excellent book. You may not agree with it, but it will make you think, and Socrates is so foundational to Western civilization that it is almost obligatory that we attempt to understand him. Too often we seem to wander in the drunken state he warns about- this book will help you to sober up and begin to wonder about the world within you.

I did not enjoy this book. The author continually jumps through time periods without any regard for continuity of flow or theme. I found it to be rather boring.

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