



The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault (Sather Classical Lectures)

Alexander Nehamas

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For much of its history, philosophy was not merely a theoretical discipline but a way of life, an "art of living." This practical aspect of philosophy has been much less dominant in modernity than it was in ancient Greece and Rome, when philosophers of all stripes kept returning to Socrates as a model for living. The idea of philosophy as an art of living has survived in the works of such major modern authors as Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault. Each of these writers has used philosophical discussion as a means of establishing what a person is and how a worthwhile life is to be lived. In this wide-ranging, brilliantly written account, Alexander Nehamas provides an incisive reevaluation of Socrates' place in the Western philosophical tradition and shows the importance of Socrates for Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault.

Why does each of these philosophers—each fundamentally concerned with his own originality—return to Socrates as a model? The answer lies in the irony that characterizes the Socrates we know from the Platonic dialogues. Socratic irony creates a mask that prevents a view of what lies behind. How Socrates led the life he did, what enabled or inspired him, is never made evident. No tenets are proposed. Socrates remains a silent and ambiguous character, forcing readers to come to their own conclusions about the art of life. This, Nehamas shows, is what allowed Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault to return to Socrates as a model without thereby compelling them to imitate him.

This highly readable, erudite study argues for the importance of the tradition within Western philosophy that is best described as "the art of living" and casts Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault as the three major modern representatives of this tradition. Full of original ideas and challenging associations, this work will offer new ways of thinking about the philosophers Nehamas discusses and about the discipline of philosophy itself.

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