



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

By Alexander Nehamas

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

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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### Editorial Review

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If philosophy is primarily a theoretical discipline, suggests Alexander Nehamas, it is because it *has become* one through the influence of tradition. But there exists another tradition, which flourished in classical Greece, in which philosophical pursuits were much more thoroughly integrated into the creation of one's full identity, both in regard to morality and personality. "In the case of pure theory," Nehamas explains, "the only issue that matters is whether the issues to one's questions are or are not correct. In the case of theory that affects life, the truth of one's views is still an issue, but what also matters is the kind of person, the sort of self, that one manages to construct as a result of accepting them."

Nehamas fleshes out the origins and development of this philosophical style in the Socratic dialogues of Plato, then goes on to show how the model of "the art of living" that Socrates presented to the world influenced the philosophies of Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault. The book's six chapters are notable for their close readings of Nehamas's chosen subjects, and for the erudite straightforwardness with which he is able to lay out his proposal for renewed attention to a discipline of thought that, he freely admits, is not the one true way of philosophy, but is one that has had many fruitful results. --Ron Hogan

#### From Library Journal

In *The Art of Living*, an intelligently written and closely argued book, Nehamas (humanities, philosophy, and comparative literature, Princeton; *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, LJ 12/85) begins with a reexamination of Socrates' significance in Western philosophy and then proceeds to show his importance in the writings of Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault, in particular with respect to what Nehamas calls the tradition in Western philosophy of writings about the "art of living." Nehamas gives the thrust of the book clearly in the introduction: "[My] own view," he writes, "is that no single mode of life exists that is best for all people and that the philosophical life is only one among many praise-worthy ways of living. I do not urge a 'return' to a conception of philosophy as a way of life...[but] I do believe that we should recognize that such a conception exists." He perceives this as a counterbalance to the way much philosophy is carried on today. Nehamas analyzes the three thinkers he has chosen with considerable skill. This original work should be part of all philosophy collections. *Virtues of Authenticity* is a collection of 16 previously published essays on various themes concerning Plato and Socrates. The essays are divided into four groups. The first focuses on Socrates and questions relating to epistemological method and the idea of goodness. The second deals with several aspects of Platonic metaphysics and epistemology. The third considers questions of Plato's aesthetics, while the fourth contains one essay each on the *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, and the *Symposium*. The essays are all well written and well argued; for those who are not familiar with Nehamas's work in Greek philosophy, this collection provides an excellent introduction. Recommended for all philosophy collections. --Terry C. Skeats, Bishop's Univ. Lib., Lennoxville, Quebec

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#### Review

"[A] beautifully lucid account of philosophy as the art of constructing a unified self." --Melissa Lane, "Classical Review"

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