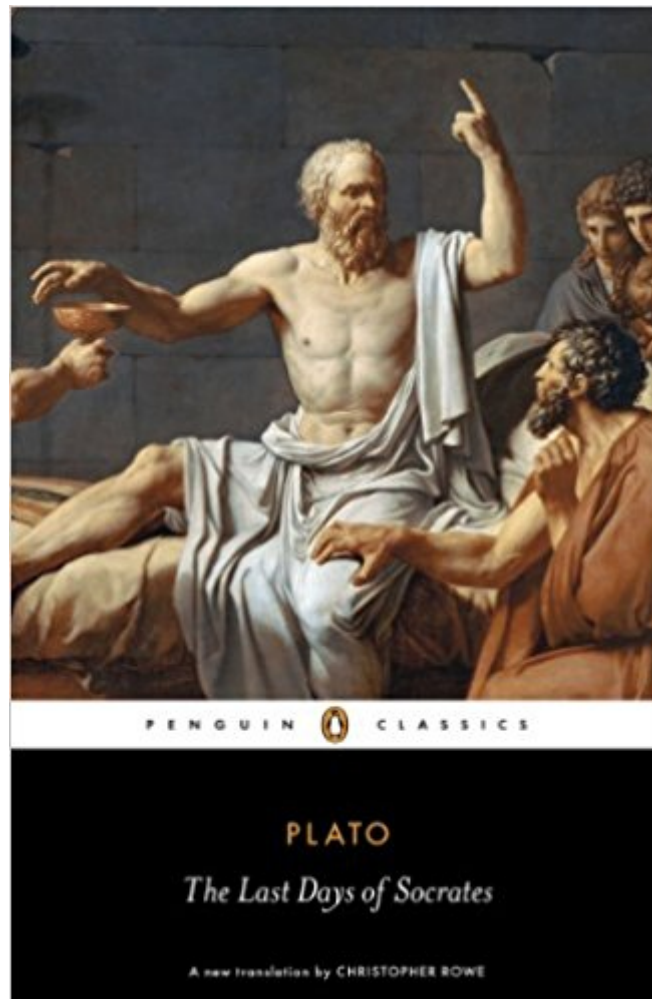


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The Last Days Of Socrates (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

"Consider just this, and give your minds to this alone: whether or not what I say is just" Plato's account of Socrates' trial and death (399 BC) is a significant moment in Classical literature and the life of Classical Athens. In these four dialogues, Plato develops the Socratic belief in responsibility for one's self and shows Socrates living and dying under his philosophy. In *Euthyphro*, Socrates debates goodness outside the courthouse; *Apology* sees him in court, rebutting all charges of impiety; in *Crito*, he refuses an entreaty to escape from prison; and in *Phaedo*, Socrates faces his impending death with calmness and skilful discussion of immortality. Christopher Rowe's introduction to his powerful new translation examines the book's themes of identity and confrontation, and explores how its content is less historical fact than a promotion of Plato's Socratic philosophy. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

THE DEATH OF SOCRATES is a very inspiring book to read, especially now, when many of us may

be facing the same situation he faced--though with a crucial difference. Whatever distortion of the real Socrates may have been introduced by Plato or other writers, enough comes through to paint a portrait of the first true individual in history-- the first person to be guided by his own individual conscience to do what is right, regardless of the consequences. Reading the Apology, one thrills to Socrates intransigence in the face of the Athenian jury which sentenced him to death. CRITO presents the best argument for government under law ever offered, and thus the beginning of the tradition of civil disobedience later taken up by Thoreau, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. When Socrates' friend Crito urges him to flee, saying that most people will think he was really guilty if he does not, Socrates says, "Why should we pay so much attention to what most people think?" Then he engages in a symbolic dialogue with the Law of Athens, which can be thought of as comparable to the US Constitution. It is clear that he is grateful to the Laws for having given him the opportunity to be a dissenter. The crucial fact is that they have permitted him the right to attempt to persuade his fellow citizens by permitting him free speech. Even when he was arrested for his teachings, he was allowed to speak in his own defense. Although the verdict was unjust, he was a victim not of the Laws but of his fellow men. (p. 95) However, the tradition of civil disobedience which Socrates founded is only meaningful in a democracy, where people have the right to dissent and to have a fair and public trial. And it is rapidly becoming obsolete.

Karl Popper hated Plato. He had good reason. See his "The Open society and its enemies". Thomas Jefferson hated Plato. He had good reason as well. Boogie his letters, or, if you still live in that era, go to the library and demand his complete correspondence and work your way through it. It may be time better spent than reading the complete "Dialogues" of Plato. But read this before for you do that or something like it. Plato mattered, whether we like it or not. He appealed to Christians and Muslims (I've heard that the Ayatollah Khomeini wrote a commentary on the Republic), and you will note, over time, that his appeal was usually greatest for those who had an inherent attachment to command-and-control societies. There were some exceptions, though: Bertrand Russell, for example had many kind things to say about Plato, though not much, as I remember, in connection with Plato's daffy notions of statecraft. There were reasons for such exceptions. Plato may have been the greatest prose writer we've ever gotten, among those who were not writing fiction. Or at least not those whose principle aim was to write fiction; Plato himself works characterization, plot and drama into his pieces. Plato is certainly the greatest Greek Prose writer. If you are young and don't read Greek, learn it. If you don't have time (meaning old, there's no other excuse), read this book. This short book includes four "dialogues". I put the word in quotation marks to indicate (for

those not already aware) that Plato's works are normally called "dialogues" in English parlance, and to indicate that I don't believe that the word is, usually, appropriate to what Plato was doing.

The life and legacy of Socrates can be interpreted in many different ways, and have been so interpreted. While that is frustrating, it could be argued that it's also inevitable. The words and deeds of great men have different effects on different people. Most scholars base their accounts of Socrates on Plato's dialogues, especially the four dialogues included in this volume: "Euthyphro", "Apology", "Crito" and "Phaedo". They deal with Socrates' trial, execution and death. And no, they don't answer the eternal questions. Rather, they raise more questions than they answer. But then, that's the point! What makes Socrates so important? The reason, of course, is his philosophy. The whole point of philosophy is to reject tradition and revelation as automatic sources of knowledge, to be taken simply on faith. Instead, human reason is paramount. True, philosophy doesn't *necessarily* reject tradition and revelation, but it does say that such sources of knowledge should be scrutinized by reason. In this sense, philosophy is subversive and radical. At least in a society gone terribly wrong... I mean, who would need philosophy if society had been perfect? Socrates wasn't the first philosopher, nor even necessarily the "best" one. The reason why his name has been associated with the philosophical endeavour is, of course, the story of his life and above all his death. Socrates became the first known martyr of philosophy, placing his conscience and convictions above politics. Socrates showed how dangerous philosophy can be, by questioning both the oligarchic regime of the Thirty Tyrants in Athens, and the later democracy. He was the perennial dissident, the man who questioned everyone and everything. Ironically, it was the democrats who had him railroaded and executed.

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