



The Soul of the Greeks: An Inquiry

Michael Davis

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The understanding of the soul in the West has been profoundly shaped by Christianity, and its influence can be seen in certain assumptions often made about the soul: that, for example, if it does exist, it is separable from the body, free, immortal, and potentially pure. The ancient Greeks, however, conceived of the soul quite differently. In this ambitious new work, Michael Davis analyzes works by Homer, Herodotus, Euripides, Plato, and Aristotle to reveal how the ancient Greeks portrayed and understood what he calls “the fully human soul.”

Beginning with Homer’s *Iliad*, Davis lays out the tension within the soul of Achilles between immortality and life. He then turns to Aristotle’s *De Anima* and *Nicomachean Ethics* to explore the consequences of the problem of Achilles across the whole range of the soul’s activity. Moving to Herodotus and Euripides, Davis considers the former’s portrayal of the two extremes of culture—one rooted in stability and tradition, the other in freedom and motion—and explores how they mark the limits of character. Davis then shows how *Helen* and *Iphigeneia among the Taurians* serve to provide dramatic examples of Herodotus’s extreme cultures and their consequences for the soul. The book returns to philosophy in the final part, plumbing several Platonic dialogues—the *Republic*, *Cleitophon*, *Hipparchus*, *Phaedrus*, *Euthyphro*, and *Symposium*—to understand the soul’s imperfection in relation to law, justice, tyranny, eros, the gods, and philosophy itself. Davis concludes with Plato’s presentation of the soul of Socrates as self-aware and nontragic, even if it is necessarily alienated and divided against itself.

The Soul of the Greeks thus begins with the imperfect soul as it is manifested in Achilles’ heroic, but tragic, longing and concludes with its nontragic and fuller philosophic expression in the soul of Socrates. But, far from being a historical survey, it is instead a brilliant meditation on what lies at the heart of being human.

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