



Socrates Cafe: A Fresh Taste of Philosophy

By Christopher Phillips

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"A bracing, rollicking read about the spark that ignites when people start asking meaningful questions." ?O Magazine

Christopher Phillips is a man on a mission: to revive the love of questions that Socrates inspired long ago in ancient Athens. "Like a Johnny Appleseed with a master's degree, Phillips has gallivanted back and forth across America, to cafés and coffee shops, senior centers, assisted-living complexes, prisons, libraries, day-care centers, elementary and high schools, and churches, forming lasting communities of inquiry" (*Utne Reader*). Phillips not only presents the fundamentals of philosophical thought in this "charming, *Philosophy for Dummies*-type guide" (*USA Today*); he also recalls what led him to start his itinerant program and re-creates some of the most invigorating sessions, which come to reveal sometimes surprising, often profound reflections on the meaning of love, friendship, work, growing old, and others among Life's Big Questions.

"How to Start Your Own Socrates Café" guide included.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

For Christopher Phillips, philosophy is a passion: it is not so much a discipline to be learned as an experience to be lived. Taking his cue from Socrates, the inaugurator of the Western philosophical tradition, Phillips embarks on a search for truth and meaning through a series of conversations that is at once refreshing, humorous, troubling, confusing, encouraging, depressing, and provocative. What makes Plato's Socratic dialogues so enduring--and Phillips's book so intriguing--is that for both Plato and Phillips, philosophy is not something you read or study. It is something you do. Plato wrote in *Parmenides* that "without wandering around and examining everything in detail one is unable to secure understanding." Phillips takes this approach--the Socratic approach--to heart. In the course of *Socrates Café*, he travels around asking questions of everyone who's interested. Just like the real Socrates, who did not confine himself to the Athenian ivory tower, Phillips searches out public conversations--what he calls Socrates cafés--with children, seniors, psychiatrists, prisoners, ex-academics, students, lawyers, and everyday people. In a sense, the book is a series of short, modern-day Socratic dialogues interspersed with meditations on the nature of philosophical inquiry.

Phillips seizes upon what the Greeks called "elenchus," a method of inquiry that helps people see their own beliefs and opinions more clearly. In the course of the numerous Socrates cafés highlighted in this book, Phillips persistently reminds us that we ought to ask questions simply because the process is good for us. In each of the cafés, the participants vary as widely as the questions, and the dialogues are by turns candid, insightful, muddled, intelligent, bland, and piquant. The real meaning of *Socrates Café* lies in the contentious and wonderful space of human interaction. --*Eric de Place*

From Publishers Weekly

In an entertaining blend of memoir and philosophical reflection, a former journalist describes his adventures bringing philosophy to the masses through his Socrates Caf. Phillips travels the country starting philosophical discussion groups in caf,s, schools, churches, community centers, prisons, hospices, nursing homes and senior centers. In each session, a question from a participant becomes the focus for free-flowing, sometimes contentious, communal inquiry. Questions spotlighted in this book include "What is insanity?" "How do you know when you know yourself?" "What is a world?" "Does anyone have the right to be ignorant?" and "Why question?" A rough version of the Socratic method is employed, characterized as "the sustained attempt to explore the ramifications of... opinions and... offer compelling objections and alternatives." Phillips presents several real discussions in poetically "filtered" form, interspersed with his own lucid commentary and citations. These dialogues are lively and sometimes moving, particularly his account of how he met his wife. But the quality of participants' opinions is often low, on the sophomoric level of such comments as "Communication is meaningless," and despite Phillips's efforts to probe, these dialogues yield few fresh insights. Phillips's own philosophical weakness is in romanticizing questioning as nearly an end in itself, claiming to run a "church service for heretics," even though his belief that "all so-called truths... are never the last word" is itself a popular dogma. Nevertheless, as in the case of the usually silent fifth-grader who wonders out loud about the word "wonder" ("I wonder what other kids think of me.... I wonder what they see, I wonder if they see a good person..."), he winningly showcases a tantalizing method for getting philosophy to thrive more widely.

From Library Journal

Former journalist Phillips travels around the country to elicit dialogs, questions, and philosophical investigations from nonacademic participants. Elementary schools, senior-citizen facilities, public coffeehouses, and other well-populated venues provide the backdrops for the discussions he reports in this account of what "doing philosophy" can and does mean in contemporary culture. "To this day," he claims, "Socrates' example continues to teach us how to expand our own intellectual and imaginative horizons." In an accessible format and breezy tone, Phillips shows how his public Socratic forums help many in attendance work through the kind of life issues that would send others for professional help. Among his own boosters are distinguished scholar and professor of philosophy Matthew Lipman and Harvard psychiatrist and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Robert Coles. Both this book as well as the web site (www.philosopher.org) that it complements provide inspirational guidance for those who want to investigate wisdom beyond the halls of academia or at least read about the efforts others are making in this regard. For all collections. DFrancisca Goldsmith, Berkeley P.L., CA

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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