THE ORIGINS OF LIBERTY

AN ESSAY IN PLATONIC ONTOLOGY

Alexander Zistakis

Series in Philosophy

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It goes without saying that all the flaws and mistakes in this book are mine, and mine only.

Foreword:
Listening to Plato for modern times

Whatever we might think about Nietzsche's 'philosophic autopsies,' we must nevertheless acknowledge that he boldly plumbs philosophic discourses to strike incisively at all the 'virtuous noise' of those human beings — call them 'philosophers' — less inclined to admit their follies than to cloak their prejudices with intricate rationalizations. And just as poignantly, Nietzsche faces into the storm of contradictions that characterize philosophic attempts to provide explanations of the 'human condition.' He dissects their hermeneutical excursions as they variously claim to discover, perhaps sometimes claiming to recover, *truths* that, however lying just there before them in plain sight, they overlook because of their prejudices — prejudices both benign and almost excusable, and those less than exemplary of what is best in humankind. Even as we may disagree with Nietzsche, as we might perform our own autopsies on his works, we cannot help but appreciate his questioning philosophic landmarks and tilling the landscape of contemplation for, if nothing else, a fresh look at the sacred icons of our established tradition. And for this might we be forever thankful.

Nietzsche's obvious quickness of mind and poetic imagination enabled his assays through philosophical accretions to reveal the ontologies interred there that underlie the ethics and epistemologies of innumerable 'virtuous souls.' Precisely *this* activity is a signature of what is best in philosophic analysis. Moreover, his expositions proceeded well beyond providing clear exegeses of texts. His essays provide broad, critical, even inflammatory, explications of the European Tradition that resulted in his numerous *likely stories* for our modern considerations. Nietzsche unapologetically engaged the discourse, for which, again, we can be forever thankful.

While perhaps less obvious than Nietzsche's wit and wiles, our modern world is making hard-fought advances toward completing the project — albeit surely a protracted struggle beset by fits and starts, successes, setbacks, and uncertainties — begun in modern times with the European Renaissance to realize fully *what it means to be human* and to exalt in that meaning. The human community has yet to recognize itself as a species, to embrace its *species-being*, if you will. And humanity seems to resist doing so, although this resistance is less the deliberate efforts of the mass of humanity than the more determined attempts of entrenched ideologues to thwart progress toward that recognition. Hegel had deftly woven an Enlightenment confidence in *reason* into a Romantic predilection toward elevating the best in humankind to affirm the march of human progress. And, whether we believe with Hegel that

philosophy will deliver humanity, or with Feuerbach that anthropology is the compassing, liberating human science, or with Marx on the role of political economy in this connection, these great thinkers proffered inspired convictions toward human liberation. Each thinker engaged the discourse on themes of emancipation, of the value of the human person, and of the promises of democracy. Interestingly, each philosopher enlisted the importance of dialectics — of dialectical examination, of dialectical logic — in respect of both epistemic matters toward uncovering truth and ontic matters toward understanding the dynamics underlying nature and society.

If we look back only as far as the 20th century after the destruction wrought by a second encompassing world war, we easily recognize the new stirrings of liberation struggles against colonialism throughout the world that awakened new possibilities for freedom and engendered new opportunities to release the full force of human potential. The signature desire of all these movements — those domestic to the Euro-American peoples as also the movements of peoples situated in or indigenous to Africa, Latin American, Asia — is universally concern for freedom, for recognition of the worth and dignity of the individual person, and for human autonomy and democracy.

Furthermore, taking human developments in the latter half of the 20th century as antecedent, we see as consequent that there is nowadays not a single aspect of human being-in-the-world exempt from critical re-evaluation. The world's peoples are faced with having:

- **to redefine** gender, race, class, ethnicity, family, nation-state, community, individual, God, nature, human, intelligence, etc.; and
- **to re-examine** the relationships between human beings and the natural world, between the individual person and the community of which he/she is a part; and to ask whether progress and growth are to be preferred over sustainability; among other concerns.

There are no sacred cows, or, if there are, those embracing them are on the defensive even as they thrash viciously to hold on to the rapidly disappearing provincial past. We are entering a new period of human development, the outcome perhaps not as assured as Hegel had anticipated, one fraught, indeed, with profound disadvantages of the dispossessed and impoverished, but one just as surely containing new prospects for success. We are on the cusp of coming to reframe and understand the notion of the *common good*, that human beings are profoundly *social beings* that have mutual responsibilities to one another, that the notion of an isolated individual is a fiction. In short, we are on the cusp of embracing our common cause as a species, even as this 'eventuality' is not assured and might be lost in the short run. And as difficult and painful as this process is, just as exciting and beneficial are its fruits for humanity. At the heart of this emerging recognition are intensified, even violent,

struggles for democracy — the so-called *Arab Spring* is not an anomaly of our time but indicative of this heightened and universal activism swelling from the ground up. These mass movements express deeply seated desires of all peoples for self-determination, for recognition of their dignity, for establishing democratic institutions to promote and secure their rights.

Perhaps now more than ever we need to promote an intensified conversation about democracy. Already new opportunities for this conversation are emerging in the far reaches of the modern world as more participants, formerly excluded, demand being seated at the table. No society, no culture is exempt. However, these groundswells of activism, with their broadly democratic, idealistic aspirations, risk being co-opted without their having a solid theoretical grounding. Part of the process to ground these aspirations and then to consolidate them in enduring social institutions is reaching back to important sources for insight, for inspiration, for direction, for assurance. The world's peoples are now entering a new period of democratizing social institutions and they need to arm themselves with more than guns and ammunition. They need both a *social science* to objectify their conditions accurately and *theoretical models* to provide an inspired vision for new democratic possibilities. As we recognize the Arab-Spring as an indication of this broadening struggle on the ground, we might also consider such efforts as that of the *Global Civil Society* to provide new models of cooperation and democratic institutions. We need an invigorated appreciation of the dialectical unity of the formal matters of democracy with the material movements of the great masses of human beings.

In the context of contemporary world-historical events, Alexander Zistakis' *The Origins of Liberty* comes at a crucial, opportune moment in global events for elevating the discourse on democracy. He asks that we *listen to* Plato, that we set aside as much as possible our social and epistemic prejudices, our predispositions to fall into established scholarly camps, and to refresh our intellectual and spiritual lives by participating with the interlocutors peopling Plato's dialogues as if with new ears. Zistakis asks that we engage the discourse as were we among our friends in a symposium appropriate for our times and that we contribute to the conversation whose end is human betterment.

In effect, Zistakis' *essay* is a call to widen the discourse on democracy by widening the circle of inclusion to examine present successes and failures. Even more important, he asks that we do this by reaching back into the rich store of sources deposited by our predecessors concerned with these very matters. Moreover, he suggests in no uncertain terms that we take up in earnest Socrates' maxim that *the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being*, and, employing Socratic dialectic, that we encounter the contradictions of our modern times, work the discourse through, and act on the truths that emerge. And whom better, he believes, to consult than Plato, who in his youth heard the echoes of his parents' generation feeling a loss of the

'glory of Greece', who in his maturity experienced profound challenges to the Greek experiment with democracy, and who was deeply moved by an apparent dissolution of the noble for the scourge of the profane. Plato, notwithstanding his having grown up in a society founded on slave-labor, was profoundly moved by the principle of the *common good* so unfamiliar to the distorted view of modern liberal political theory with its corrupted notion of the individual that links its identity and freedom with property independent of its being thoroughly informed by a complex nexus of social relationships. Perhaps for different, even contrary reasons, today's peoples are raising the same concerns, this time crafting new wineskins having endured 2500 years of democratizing progress to have fermented new wine.

However, is it reasonable or useful to link Plato with promoting democracy? Or with providing foundations for revitalizing democracy and advancing its cause? Has not this matter long been settled that Plato is anti-democratic with a deeply-seated totalitarian strain to his song? Children plucked from their birth-parents. Innovation eschewed as destructive of social stability. Certain texts and arts censored. Bold lies disseminated among the people for political identity and social cohesion. And a deeply seated suspicion about the efficacy of natural science. Zistakis now seems to parade an entirely counterintuitive, if not absurd and contradictory, portrait of Plato's philosophy. How are these aspects of Plato's philosophy to be reconciled, if that is his intention? What are we to learn from Plato about a democratic ideal, the very political system that blends equals with unequals to forge an artificial mean so (apparently) abhorrent to him?

The Origins of Liberty is an inspired essay that weaves various threads running throughout Plato's dialogues to challenge not only our understanding of Plato's philosophy itself, but that also expects us self-consciously to reflect on our own conceptions of democracy, of the relationship between the community and the individual person, and of the common good. This is more than merely an extensive piece of scholarship. It is an invitation to participate in one of the most important discourses for modern times. This essay holds out hope that the 21st century secures human dignity by establishing democratic institutions for that express purpose.

In the spirit of his essay, we take up Zistakis' invitation to engage the discourse on democracy in connection with Plato's social and political philosophy as this philosophy is underwritten by his ontology (theory of forms). We confess at the outset that we have come to his essay secure in our interpretation of Plato's anti-democratic, if not totalitarian, sentiments. Nevertheless, as with Socrates, we believe it necessary to suspend judgment to get at the truth. In this respect we construct a problem directed not only to his reading of Plato's philosophy but just as much to our own and that of his readers. We ask readers, then, to consider a challenge, outlined below, as prefatory to a directed reading of *The Origins of Liberty* to equip them with a critical

disposition toward the essay while also enticing them with anticipation of making unexpected discoveries.

It is especially gratifying that Zistakis employs the interpretive principle that 'underlying a given political philosophy or ethic is a unifying ontology' with the express aim to provide an objective, non-arbitrary ground for a philosophic theory, in Plato's case, for the Good. This principle underpins and guides the movement of this essay. The importance of this approach to philosophic inquiry is easily exemplified by reference to the opposing *politeiai* of Hobbes and Locke who established and justified their respective systems on opposing notions of nature and human nature. Nor is it coincidental that Plato and Locke, for example, have opposing ontologies (with corresponding epistemologies) in connection with the ontic status of ideas and material objects, that these ontologies — the one idealist, the other materialist — underlie their opposing *politeiai*. Moreover, materialist philosophies and interests in natural science are most associated with democratic political systems as idealist philosophies and religion are usually associated with non-democratic political systems. In short, a *ruling legislative authority* (the citizenry) in a democratic regime is 'ground up,' while the *legislative authority* for a non-democratic regime is 'top down,' usually with severe restrictions on citizenship.

Zistakis is well aware that deriving useful insights for constructing ideal and practical democracies from the corpus of Plato's dialogues requires assessing Plato's ontology in respect of the relationship between the one and the many, between ideal forms and their respective material objects — precisely because they are the analogues of the relationship between the community and persons composing a community. This, of course, implicates Plato's theory of forms, and particularly in this connection how an individual *this* participates in a given form, for, after all, in a democracy individuals participate in governance. Accordingly, Zistakis develops his discussion by weaving together treatments of liberty, the Good, the unity of the forms, the dialectic of difference and identity, the instant, and the epistemic process of coming to know the forms and the Good. An underlying issue devolves to settling who is capable of self-government, who might then *participate* in legislation. Conflicting philosophies embrace conflicting ontologies that reflect contending political factions struggling to impose their wills by force or legislation. The social world and the natural world as reflected in thought are themselves reflections of each other as they appear in philosophical discourses. Exactly here, in relation to topics of permanence and change, *consideration of the forms takes centrality of place* — whether as reified and active or as reflections and passive. Again, determining whether *principles are explanatory or constitutive of nature* is neither philosophically nor politically a neutral matter. Both Plato and Zistakis are eminently aware of this truth. And, since we are concerned with how Zistakis connects listening to Plato with democratic interests, we are especially concerned with his treatment of Plato's notion of *methexis* (participation) and how the ideal and the material, the different and the identical, are united.

In this way, we are better positioned to assess whether what he has heard in Plato is commensurate with democracy.

Zistakis affirms the commonly accepted notion of the dialectical interdependence of the forms but goes on to affirm that the Good, "the idea of all ideas ... is immanent in each and every idea" and, further, that "each and every idea is capable of ... becoming [the Good] ... of what it ought to be". Nevertheless, the Good is a "*purely metaphysical principle*," transcendent, and possessing all the properties commonly attributed to it, including eternality. Indeed, all the ideas relate to the One, to the Good, "to which they owe their existence." Crucial to his interpretation of Plato's Good is his grasping it dialectically in respect of its own identity and of its relationship to the rest of Being. He writes that the Good unites its own potentiality and actuality at once and together. Zistakis deepens his discussion of the idea of the Good by affirming that it is "the paradigmatic idea of *identity* and *difference*, or of self-identity as self-difference [and thus] it represents the totality of reality, i.e. both the phenomenal and the ideal, both the being and the non-being of entities." Clearly, he is uniting the ontic and epistemic in Plato that seems to be reminiscent of Parmenides avowing that 'what can be thought can be.' The ideal Good becomes "the *self-vision of the mind*, its *contemplation* of itself (its principles, forms, entities, conditions, activities, practices, procedures, structures, etc.) as such and in itself, the contemplation of contemplation, or the thinking of thinking." And yet, the Good initiates difference.

> Understood as differentiated in itself, the idea of the Good then brings difference to the whole universe, to beings as well as to ideas. It indeed establishes difference in the very center of the realm of being(s) by introducing and performing differentiation within the realm of pure Being. This becomes obvious during the educational process and especially after the completion of the dialectical itinerary, when we are faced with a diversity of series of differentiations and distinctions.

And just here we need to see how Zistakis construes how the two realms in Plato's philosophy might 'interact,' that is, to see how he treats Platonic *methexis*.

> This *differential self-differentiating identification* is, therefore, exactly what *participation* is all about. It *is* participation just as much as it *enables* participation and *is enabled* by participation. Thus, instead of separating and antagonizing particulars by extrapolating and empowering one of them at the expense of others, this force and movement of generalization and universalization actually does the opposite: it relates, connects, unites, communizes, organizes and brings together all the disparate, diverse and divergent particulars.

Accordingly, he holds that *methexis* demonstrates the "mutual dependence of the two realms — that is, between "the thing-like and the ideal, the phenomenal and the noumenal" — which is no more than to affirm that "the eternal and the temporal

strive for each other, that they aspire and crave for one another and tend to turn into each other". *Methexis* is thoroughly a dialectical dynamic that contains and reproduces the dynamic of the eternal and the temporal, of the ideal and the phenomenal. Within the framework of *methexis* "transcendence is made possible and realized only by means of immanence, and the other way round: *only as transcendent can ideas be immanent in things*." Zistakis writes that the very transcendence of the ideas provides for the possibility of their immanence in things.

When he turns to take up liberty — which he defines for Plato as the "*self-articulation* (self-definition, self-determination, self-positioning, self-confirmation) and *self-appropriation* of the soul, mind, idea, universe and time (which always also includes the opposite), their *differential self-identification*" — he invokes reference to the instant (*exaiphnês*), or moment, when time appropriates both itself and its opposite, the eternal, to become the moment of self-appropriation of time and timelessness: "the moment when time and timelessness become one, identical, and therefore the moment when and where *time appropriates timelessness*, and vice versa: the moment of *time's becoming eternal, eternity*". Accordingly, Zistakis sees this moment, this special instant, as a moment of revelation, "an *instant of revelation*." And the importance of this moment lies precisely in its providing the union of time and eternity, the forms and the individual objects — which holds the possibility, on his listening, of a democratic *politeia*.

We consider it equally important to listen to Plato as he represents opposing philosophies, that is, in particular, how he portrays idealist and materialist ontologies and epistemologies, and for this purpose we direct attention to *Theaetetus* 172d-177c, along with *Sophist* 246a-254d, where Plato contrasts the sophist/materialist with the philosopher/idealist. A concern of natural science is to discern principles *explanatory of reality* that would be *constitutive of knowledge*. However, determining the ontic status of these principles has divided ancient philosophers into two camps, as Plato had stated in *Sophist* and *Theaetetus*, with significant consequences for political philosophy. Again, answers to questions about *ideal entities* — whether as ontic forms or epistemic universals — are matters neither intellectually nor scientifically nor politically neutral.

As an ancient witness to and participant in political turmoil, Plato locates rather precisely at *Sophist* 246ac where the Stranger tells Theaetetus about a conflict between philosophers on the *nature of reality*, a conflict "something like a[n interminable] battle of gods and giants going on between them over their quarrel about reality." Throughout these discussions, Plato disparages the sophist as dwelling in the dark and vulgar, and he praises the philosopher, albeit not in touch with everyday matters, as civilized and dwelling in the brightness of pure ideas — the one a slave, the other a free man, the one ignorant, the other possessed of knowledge. Moreover, it is not accidental that Plato stigmatizes the materialist/sophist as a 'godless giant'

attributing to him the belief that "nature gives birth to [natural objects] as a result of some spontaneous cause that generates *without intelligence*" in opposition to his position that natural objects "come from a cause which, working with reason and art, is divine and proceeds from divinity" (*Sophist* 265c).

In this frame of reference, then, the project of the *Theaetetus* is to destroy the materialist epistemology of Protagoras, in particular, his measure principle, that very principle underpinning both natural science and democracy, themselves intimately linked in social *praxis*. A way to accomplish this philosophically is to reify ideas such that they take on an independently existing form, which form then reappears as an active force imposing itself on passive matter. Our previous reading has been to believe that Plato developed an ontology aimed explicitly against democracy and its leveling tendency against social hierarchy in civil society. This is especially the case as the forms are gathered into a godhead, for Plato into the *Good*, that stands above being (*Republic* 6.509b). Complement this understanding of the Good with:

- a psychology that provides another ontological principle expressing the superiority of active mind over passive body,
- identifying, as exact reflections of one another, graduated faculties of the soul with social stratification,
- a corresponding teleological notion that nature makes nothing in vain and distributes intelligence unequally,

then insert into this scheme

- the principle that what is lower and inferior (worse) exists for the sake of (or to serve) that which is higher or superior (better),
- the division between manual and mental labor and vilifying connection with materiality, and
- a natural law notion of justice as 'treating equals equally and unequals unequally' and there emerges, it has seemed to us, a system providing moral license against democratic regimes.

We have tended to read Plato as establishing a moral hierarchy of social class. In this connection, we have taken him to be an anti-democratic thinker who affirmed the independent, active, and divine character of ideas and to have united the ruling element of a *polis* with active mind imposing form on the passivity of matter. Contrariwise, we have taken democratic thinkers to universalize *activity* over the entire human population, even those connected with manual labor, who are mixed with materiality. Has Zistakis successfully extracted the democratic kernel from its idealist integument or been enamored by Plato's mellifluous turn of phrase?

Perhaps it is a trivial truth that 'every human being is inescapably a materialist in the business of practical affairs.' Every human being, however free of or corrupted by an ideological system of beliefs, works from individuals of a given kind to apprehending a universal, or a definition, of the given kind. This is a natural and practical epistemic process. However, when it comes to assessing the ontic status of the universal — whether as a form or idea, a universal, a generalization — philosophers often reverse the process: where materialists assign only a reflexive epistemic nature to ideas, idealists hypostasize ideas as having independent and superior existence. We have taken Plato to have done this with a specific political agenda.

An unprejudiced study of philosophy reveals that idealist philosophies tend to shift between materialism and idealism, that is to say, that idealist philosophies are inherently contradictory. It is left to critical analyses to identify those points of contradiction within a given philosophy. Given that this is the case and thus equally applies to Plato, we incline to ask the reader to assess whether Zistakis subscribes to any of the following (or other) interpretations.

- His treatment of the relationship between *temporality* and *eternality*, especially in his linking *liberty* with *the instant*, suggests Kierkegaard's *moment* in which the historical and eternal are united. If this is so, then liberty seems to reduce to an inward phenomenological freedom; the consequence is a subjectivism that does not establish the material conditions for democratic society.
- His treatment of the Good as a dialectical unity of difference and identity, of self-appropriation, resonates profoundly with Hegel's *Logic* and Hegel's notion of God. Perhaps, then, allowing that Hegel's philosophical discourses are thoroughly informed by material history, Zistakis takes Plato to be a *crypto-materialist*. It seems a reach to make him a dialectical materialist. Still, Plato and Hegel are equally objective idealists, and embracing such philosophy conceptually challenges (let alone practically) how a truly democratic system can emerge that has an entrenched division between mental and manual labor, the vestige of any idealist philosophy. Perhaps, while Plato and Hegel come at opposite ends of history, Zistakis perceives their 'identity' as providing for a modernist interpretation of Plato.
  Zistakis might have appropriated Plato's notion of *person* implicit in his dialogues, whose intension is much the same as our modern notion, and then universalized that notion over the entire human community to constitute a principle of *universal human rights*, such rights inclusive of moral equality, political equality, and economic equality.

This third option has an attractive appeal, just in its enabling a modern listener to connect with and to appropriate the humanist elements in an ancient philosophy

while discarding the historical limitations that narrow the extension of *person*. Zistakis might be thought to have faced into the contradictions inherent in Plato's philosophy to discover genuine possibilities of working with his dialectic to ground a democratic political philosophy. This is genuinely an imaginative approach to Plato's corpus. It requires, to be sure, his considering that the entire population of a community, a *polis* or nation-state, (1) be citizens, that is, legislators, and (2) collectively own property, more particularly, property in the means of human subsistence. In this connection, then, there is an elimination of the division between mental and manual labor whereby the interests of all the people is coincident with the interests of the community. Whether taking this tack is the license of a free-ranging interpretation or an accurate re-presentation of Plato is a matter for readers to decide. In either case, working through this essay results in a fresh appreciation of Plato's accomplishment as well as promoting an enriched discourse on the nature of a democratic community.

Zistakis has an abiding personal love for philosophy and a deep intellectual commitment to careful scholarship. Moreover, it is patently evident that he has philosophic expertise with the full range of issues in the corpus of Plato's dialogues. Were these his only attributes, we might consider ourselves lucky for the present study of Plato. However, Zistakis has more than intellectual interest in this topic — his interest runs deep because of the location of his own being-in-the-world. His familial relationships and personal experiences in a troubled part of our modern world have not only informed his reading of Plato, his *listening to* the personalities speaking throughout the corpus, they have also activated his passions for justice and social justice. Zistakis has crafted *The Origins of Liberty* with impassioned reason for, and with reasoned passion toward, the Good.

Finally, Zistakis is not an apologist for Plato. He provides a refreshing and bold essay that takes up the mantel to carry on incisive philosophical reflection concerning the profound issues of human well-being by means of thorough, careful scholarship, to provide a likely story. His study is an essay of and for our time, an invitation to plumb ancient texts for new, perhaps renewed, inspiration. His essay does not run against the grain, but provides an excursion into the thinking of a gifted philosopher, whose dialogues can serve, if properly appropriated, to objectify our modern dilemmas and expose new possibilities. Zistakis succeeds in providing a fresh look at Plato's political philosophy. We leave to his readers to assess whether his hermeneutical expertise has successfully opened for us altogether new lessons for humanity by listening to the philosophical exchanges contained in Plato's dialogues.

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Preface: About this Book

As its title states quite unequivocally, the main proposition of this book is that Platonic ontology constitutes the origins of liberty, where liberty is understood as a specific complex conception and situation quite different from the simple and raw state of freedom. Platonic ontology provides the origins of this liberty in at least a twofold sense (hence the plural in "origins"). On the one hand, there is a deeper structural and substantial sense of providing the fundamental conceptual framework of liberty as both general and particular concept and condition, exactly the one that determines its inner logic, structure and forms. In other words, it is the sense in which it articulates and regulates the features and rules of the thought and discourse about liberty. On the other hand, it establishes the practical modalities and procedures of realizing and sustaining liberty in concrete social and political circumstances. Therefore, it could also be said that this twofold constitution of liberty through ontology is due to the latter's being tightly interwoven with politics, i.e. with the political.

As for the other conspicuous trait of this book, it should be emphasized that it is an *essay in* Platonic ontology rather than *on* it; which is to say that it is conceived as an attempt at *thinking* about certain set of problems and ideas in the sense that it takes Plato's thought as its point of departure but does not purport to be a comprehensive and accurate ("correct" or "right") interpretation of his ontology and politics. Rather, as mentioned above, it takes Plato as a model and a framework of the ontological and political thought, and from there tries to determine possible meaning and significance of this thought for contemporary world and its most prominent theoretical, social, political and other issues. Thus, it is an essay in the sense of an attempt at thinking *with Plato beyond Plato*.

Such an attempt has not often been undertaken. Most Plato scholars have preferred undertaking textual exegesis of his work, or taking sides for or against (all or some of) his propositions and positions, to the harder task of thinking with him with a view to taking his ideas in new directions. While the need for such analysis is obvious enough, this has not always led to felicitous results. In that respect, this book is quite different from most of the recent and not-so-recent Plato studies, both in approach and in handling of its chosen set of problems.

First of all, it adopts a discursive approach which only partly follows a linear mode of development, the standard method of presentation in the huge bibliography on Plato. While most books and studies of Plato in the recent decades represent either detailed case studies of a particular dialogue or passage, or confine themselves to a

textbook-like approach that provides little more than an introductory overview of the Platonic corpus, the present essay emphasizes the systematic whole of Plato's work and its relevance to the issues in question. Rather than develop each line of examination and argumentation fully and completely in the united narrative mode, by grouping them, say, in a chapter or a series of chapters solely dedicated to the specific particular subject in question, there is a lot of intertwinement of topics, subjects, arguments and developments throughout the book.

Each of the specific topics and problems is repeatedly discussed in different segments of this book. Therefore, the full scope of the arguments and ideas proposed here is only visible and comprehensible once the whole of the study has been read and examined, because only then are the intricate relationships and interdependences of these ideas clearly visible and comprehensible. In short, the discursive procedure followed throughout the book is one of *constellations* of different discussions and their mutual *supplementation* rather than linear narrative development.

Our approach, however, in no way neglects in-depth treatment of specific materials. On the contrary, in many places it engages in a very close interpretation and analysis of certain passages (e.g. the Allegory of the Cave from the *Republic*, the extensive and detailed analysis of the *Parmenides*, the *Sophist*, of some passages from the *Timaeus*, the *Statesman*, etc.). However, even these closer interpretations of relevant passages and dialogues do not aim at their "correct" interpretation, but rather serve as points of departure for further analysis and investigation. Or, as stated above, they are part of the attempt to "think with Plato beyond Plato."

Second, the major premise of the whole book — namely, the reading and deriving of Plato's political theory and philosophy from his ontology, e.g. from his theory of ideas — has rarely, if ever, been taken up so emphatically. Authors who have attempted something similar, such as Popper and his followers and critics, did not do it in such a manner as to emphasize a consistent unity of the two (ontology and politics) in Plato. And they certainly did not base this unity on Plato's fundamental ontological conceptions, such as those of participation and of the idea of the Good. This book, however, takes ontology and politics in Plato to be aspects and dimensions of a unique theoretical core, and is thus able to discuss both as one, and actually to use one as the supplement and explanation for the other. That is why it is also capable of discussing and analyzing a variety of topics and subjects from Plato's philosophy in one and the same breath. Thanks to such a standpoint, this book can deal with so many apparently different motives of Plato's philosophy, such as ideas, participation, statesmanship, time, liberty, democracy, knowledge, state, education, ethics, etc., thus exposing Plato's thought as fully systematic and his work as a complete philosophical system.

Finally, another specific characteristic of this book consists in the fact that the results of our investigation tend to go against the grain regarding many age-old issues in Platonic scholarship, and sometimes even against the long-lasting opinions preva-

lent in classical scholarship in general. In the first place, there is the presentation of the whole of Plato's philosophy as primarily (and almost exclusively) the thought and *theory of liberty and liberation*. This book refers to the problems and arguments pertaining to the relationships between ancient and modern/contemporary democracy and uses them as materials to support the main thesis about Plato's conception of liberty. Thus, it tends to go against the widely-accepted prejudice that Plato's is the fundamental thought of totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and dictatorship of all kinds. It also opposes the dogma about Plato being an ardent enemy of democracy and, in doing that, it corrects the common fallacy concerning the meaning and notion of *demos* and democracy as such. In addition, this essay runs against the common prejudice that, even if one grants the Greeks the invention of the notion of individuality, such a thing cannot and does not apply to Plato since, allegedly, his thought is one of crude collectivism and (again) totalitarianism. If such an admission is made at all in the existing scholarship, it is mostly with a lot of reserve and usually reserved for other Greek thinkers, most notably Socrates, the Cynics or the Stoics.

The three main terms and concepts that define the scope and structure of this book, namely Liberty, Individuality and Democracy, have been the subject of numerous Platonic studies, but to the best of my knowledge there are virtually no studies that put these three concepts in such a close relationship as this book does. That is, no particular study analyzes them together and much less sets them in a coordinated motion so as to form a whole, where each refers to and explains the others.

With respect to each of these three main concepts, the greatest lack and deficiency is present in the studies that focus on the Platonic concept of *liberty*. There have been very few studies that even take this into consideration, and even then mostly in passing.[1] A somewhat lesser lacuna in the literature occurs when it comes to the concept and conception of *individuality* in Plato.[2] However, most recent studies that

[1] General studies on liberty in the ancient world, which dedicate portions to Plato include such works as, in French, D. Amand's *Fatalisme et liberté dans l'antiquité grecque* (Louvain 1945) and A-J Festugière's *Liberté et civilisation chez les Grecs* (Paris: Ed. de la Revue des Jeunes 1947); in German, H. Gomperz's *Die Lebensauffassung der griechischen Philosophen und das Ideal der innern Freiheit* (Jena-Leipzig 1904) and D. Nestle's *Eleutheria. Studien zum Wesen der Freiheit bei den Griechen und im Neuen Testament* (Bd. I Die Griechen, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr 1967). There is virtually no book-length monographic study in English. Relatively recently, a monograph has been published on the Platonic doctrine of freedom in French by R. Muller (*La doctrine platonicienne de la liberté*, Paris: Vrin 1997). However, Muller's book takes on a largely limited approach that, in spite of all its academic meticulousness and prudency, fails to situate this doctrine within the wider framework of Plato's ontology, and does not relate it to his main ontological conceptions, such as the Platonic conceptions of participation, interweaving of ideas, time, and dialectic.

[2] Ever since H.D. Rankin's *Plato and the Individual* (New York: Barnes and Noble 1964), there appeared a study by M.M. McCabe on individuals in Plato (*Plato's Individuals*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press 1999), but that study focused almost exclusively on logical and methodological

deal with the problem of individuality are usually more general in scope and focused on the specifically ethical aspects of this problem, without however relating it to the issue of liberty and liberation.[3] Finally, regarding the third main issue of this book, *democracy*, there exists a vast literature on both ancient Greek and modern democracy and democratic theory, as well as on Plato's own understanding of and position towards democracy.

Apart from its attempt to compensate for the limitations of existing academic scholarship, this book also tries to satisfy a more tangible need. The questions of democracy, liberty and the general wellbeing of nations and individuals are nowhere as important and relevant as they are in today's world. The political developments in the past few decades have imposed the consideration of the problems of democracy, its presuppositions, origins and foundations. In the particular geo-political context of our times, attempts at answering these questions seem to be literally matters of "life and death"; that is, they are decisive for ensuring the possibilities and conditions for a dignifying life in this day and age. However, although investigations of issues related to liberty, democracy and democratic politics are most welcome by the general public and the majority of thinkers and researchers; this does not seem to be the case with a discourse that proposes to relate Plato to these issues and to suggest that the origins, the fundamental elements and the criteria of the very thought of liberty and democracy could be found in Platonic philosophy. It is generally considered to be a strange thing to try and unearth some doctrine of liberty or any elements of democratic politics – ancient or modern – in Plato, so such a discourse seems to go against not only his critics, but against Plato himself and against his explicit self-understanding.

In what follows, the explanation for such a view of Plato will be twofold, based on two major reasons. On the one hand, this essay will claim that this actuality springs from the impossibility of neglecting Plato's work no matter which theoretical perspective or orientation towards ontological and political issues one may take. On the other, the almost unison resentment among the proponents of liberal democracy and democratic values seems to stem from the tacit realization of the indisputable relevance of Platonic philosophy on the whole, and particularly of central Platonic concepts and doctrines, for democratic theory. This resentment, thus, betrays the discontent with the possibility that democratic thought and theory may originate in something that appears to be so diametrically opposed to it.

Despite the resentment and doubt, the recognition and reconstruction of crucial elements of democratic thought from Platonic philosophy is not only possible but

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issues and did not take into consideration the social, political, and ethical aspects of that conception, which are exactly at the center of the present study and retain greatest importance throughout this book.

[3] A good example is N. White's *Individual and Conflict in Greek Ethics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2004.

highly plausible as well. Under one condition, though. One must respect the integrity and peculiarity of Plato's *oeuvre*. Without getting into a detailed discussion about the ways of approaching Plato and his thought, it should be noted here that one must abandon all preconceptions and prejudice before entering the Academy and let oneself be guided by that thought.[4] This seems to be the *conditio sine qua non* of the real beginning of understanding not only Plato and his work but, more importantly, the meaning of our liberty, our philosophy and our politics.

From the abovementioned twofold perspective, then, the central problem and issue in this work is the problem of *liberty*, both as an idea and a condition. The study of Platonic concept and conception of freedom/liberty, however, does not simply need to prove that his *is* the thought of freedom. That is relatively easy to do, for the simple reason that it is a fact underlying the whole building of this philosophy as its ultimate measure and goal. So, it is in a sense trivial to pose such a thing as a goal of any particular study on Plato and Platonism. What is much more questionable and worthy of investigation is the thing that springs from this fact, and that is *the problem of liberation*. How does anyone (a person, an individual) and anything (any group of individuals, any political system, any type of institution and organization, any social and political environment) *come to be* free? How does one *become* free and how does one *gain* liberty? How is liberty created and achieved? How do we *liberate* ourselves or anything else?

Therefore, the primary aim of the present study was not and is not to prove that Plato's is the thought – and, much more importantly, the full-fledged philosophy – of liberty and freedom, but rather to examine and find out whether and how that philosophy is also a philosophy of *liberation* or a *liberating* philosophy. More precisely, it examines the *theoretical and political foundations* of the thought of liberty, as well as attempts to recover and discover the *origins* of that thought (and thus of liberty itself), and through that hopes to unearth its *liberating potential*. And in that, this essay is guided by the principle (or assumption, if you like) that *any thought of liberty must necessarily also be a thought of liberation and a liberating thought*. Therefore, the whole study should first and foremost be read as an examination of that assumption and principle, or as an inquiry into its sustainability and validity.

This of course immediately points at the political sphere, or at the idea of the political, as the realm in which particular forms, structures and modes of existence of freedom find their realization. Since today, within the political, democracy tends to claim and obtain a special place and status as *the* condition and institutional framework for the realization and development of freedom, and since the main problem/achievement of democracy seems to be the balanced relationship between the individual and the collective; these two are necessarily counted among the major

[4] This is discussed in more detail below, in the first part of the *Introduction* (see "How to read Plato's Dialogues?").

objects of our interest here. In other words, more to the point and the structure of this essay, the notion of liberty is the contemplative starting point, from which the investigation proceeds through a series of discussions and transfigurations (the most important of these being the relationship between the individual and the collective) in order to critically pose some important questions about democracy as a form of liberty.

So, first of all, for us here, the question: What is democracy? will necessarily be considered together with another question: What is politics? What is the essence of the political? Of course, there is consequently a double-bind relationship between these questions and the questions like: What is the political system most adequate to the structure of human being? What political system and what institutional structures best secure human *liberty*, particularly the liberty of the individual? In what political system can an individual human being really be the subject of politics and of liberty? Which political constitution or system enables and secures the fullest exercise of human liberty? And, further on, together with the questions about the individual and his/her liberty, there come those that concern the proper dimension in which the individual freedom is and can be realized: the questions about the collective, the collectivity as the proper characteristic of the human being as such, which is inscribed in the very notion and in the being of man as such. This is to say that one has to investigate the collective, communal essence of man, in order to be able to understand and express the notion of liberty, as well as the forms and modes in which this liberty has been realized in history, and in which it continues to realize itself.

In that line, one must constantly bear in mind and point at the simultaneous difference and unity between the *individual* and the *collective*. For one of the basic suppositions of this work is that one can discern and reveal the structure and the meaning of essential *human liberty* only within the dialectical relationship between the individual and the collective. This supposition further points in the direction of *politics* and the political as the sphere of emphatic interrelation and intertwinement of the individual and the collective, and also points to the conviction that politics is the sphere and the means of recognition and realization of liberty. (One must insist on this last point, i.e. on the fact that the innermost property of liberty, of its notion and idea, is the indispensability of its practical consideration and realization.)

Thus, Plato seems to remind us of the constant need for rethinking and re-evaluation of the origins and foundations of the political and social world. In other words, compels us to constant reinvestigation of the philosophical foundations of (democratic or any other) politics, indeed of the very process of founding it upon philosophy. And, exactly in order to get as close as possible to the understanding of the fundamental philosophical and political notions and problems, the present essay analyzes the Platonic concepts which are most important for our main subject – such as conceptions of *methexis* [μέθεξις] and *symplokê* [συμπλοκή], of knowledge, of opinion, of *praxis* [πρᾶξίς], theory, art/craft, i.e. *techne* [τέχνη], of ideas in general and

particularly of the ideas of the Good and of Justice – and does that by exposing their dynamic through a circumscription of their dialectic. Thus, conceptual analysis contained in this essay tends to engage the concepts it is working with in a specific relationship, which could crudely be described as a reconstruction of the multifaceted and multidirectional movement of (primarily Platonic) thought, precisely the *dialectical reconstruction* of the system of ideas.[5] This movement is conceived as a (conceptual) flux running underneath the textual surface; a flow that, curiously enough, sustains and supports the stability, permanence and durability of that surface. It is here envisioned as a *circuit* and a *network* of ideas and notions that is proven (and provable) solely by a demonstration of its inner consistency and therefore finds its proper justification and confirmation in its very unfolding. Consequently, the indication of the paths, posts and destinations, of the processes and procedures, but above all of the *energy* that enables, fills and performs this motion, constitutes the project of this essay. Indicating this energy and the *constellations* (environment, situation, atmosphere) it creates time and again, making it present and felt as such in the *traces* and workings of its *pulsation*, is thus the major concern of the text that follows. Furthermore, such indication is both its main aim and its primary instrument.

However, such an attitude – for it is an *attitude* and *disposition*, rather than a method in the usual sense – also remains fully aware of its limitations. These limitations are imposed, on the one hand, by its own character and particular quality. Namely, by itself being dialectical in the sense that it tries to capture the dynamic of its subject-object by following its movement along some of the paths it takes or may take, it runs the risk of remaining partial and uncritical. Thus, it may be unresponsive to a critique launched from another discursive register or manner of thought, or may even be incapable of dealing with such criticism. On the other hand, since in spite of everything it is still some kind of interpretation, it is prone to the predicament of any and all interpretations, and that is the impossibility of absolute objectivity, or the necessity of being biased. For, when engaging in interpretation of any kind, one brings in a heavy load of presumptions, preconceptions and prejudice; and it is exactly this load that constitutes the starting point or the so-called "zero degree" of every interpretation. To the extent, therefore, in which it interprets authors, thoughts, concepts or phenomena, this whole essay shares this *structural vulnerability* of interpretation.

However, the structural vulnerability of interpretation may not only help us overcome criticism of the first kind (e.g. possible accusations from other theoretical camps regarding the absence of a critical distance towards Plato) but also confirms the dialectical attitude as a full-fledged interpretation (just as valid and plausible as any other), and thus enables us to follow and effectuate one of the basic suppositions and tasks of this work; namely, to show the presence and relevance of Greek thought

[5] The system that operates with essentially synthetic concepts such as *harmony*, *difference*, *participation*, *unity* and *otherness*.

in our age. And it is from this fundamentally dialectical perspective that we look upon the whole of Plato's work as a consistent corpus; that is, as a unique effort to come to terms with an articulated and determined set of problems and issues, or a continuous and enduring consideration and reconsideration of certain ideas and principles.[6]

Thus, the itinerary circumscribed by this essay should not be understood and envisaged as some extensive unfolding of successive steps, moments, movements, entities etc., nor should one here suppose some fixed temporal order of appearance and duration. Instead, one has to do with changeable constellations of elements whose organizations and re-organizations, i.e. arrangements and re-arrangements, aim at showing that difference does not imply (spatial or temporal) distance, not necessarily and not in every possible case. When it comes to the status and place of the ethical, ontological and political dimensions and concepts in Plato's thought, despite its distinctly static character, one cannot speak of some permanent structural hierarchy. In reality, they all fall together and at once, thus forming a dynamic network. Therefore, any order is provisional, arbitrary and temporary, and it is here presented and exposed in such a manner solely due to the limitations of the narrative mode.

The same structural vulnerability, then, affects the scope and the extent of this whole investigation of Plato and of some contemporary strains of political theory, primarily by leaving out whole periods, traditions and positions that certainly deserve closer scrutiny in relation to the chosen set of issues and conceptions.[7] However, the necessary limitations imposed by the particular path of this investigation, should not lead to the conclusion that such omissions aim at the exclusion of possible alternative paths of interpretation, or that the general conclusions and propositions derived from the present investigations imply rejection of possibilities that lie outside of the specific conceptions and situations discussed herein. It is, therefore, a case of certain choices that had to be made prior to and during the investigation itself.

Before we embark on one possible journey towards the origins of our liberty, philosophy and politics, we must realize that, whether one likes it or not, and when everything is taken into account, every path is always a personal one, every journey is a different one, with a different itinerary and a different ending, and yet somehow we are all together in and on it.

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[6] In accepted terms, my approach here moves between "developmentalism" and "unitarianism." It is, in fact, similar to that of J. Annas in her *Platonic Ethics Old and New* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1999). Like her, I also recognize "false starts, different approaches to the same problem, and change of mind on one theme coexisting with unchanged views on another" (p. 12).

[7] Among those, different traditions, such as the Byzantine, Arabic and Persian traditions of dialectic, ontology, epistemology, rhetoric, etc., present an obvious case in point. As do all the diverse doctrines of political philosophy and theory that have been proposed throughout the centuries.

Instead of an Introduction: How to Read Plato's Dialogues?

The question of how to read Plato's dialogues is certainly one of the first things that come to anyone's mind when confronted with a piece (or rather, as is the case here, pieces) of Plato's work.[1] At the same time, however, this is a notoriously tough question to answer, since this one line contains three of the most puzzling words in our vocabulary: "how," "read" and "dialogue."[2]

The predicament augments and intensifies by the fact that, before even posing this particular question, one has to doubt its legitimacy. Namely, should one really read Plato's dialogues? Shouldn't we rather listen to them, have them memorized and spoken out loud? That is, perhaps we should read them aloud, in the company of friends, just as we are told the Greeks of those times used to do? Maybe the appropriate manner of reading these dialogues is exactly such almost mystical ritual, a sort of spiritual procession, an initiation... This issue seems to arise all the more urgently because Plato's immediate circle of friends and colleagues nurtured the notorious Socratic suspicion towards writing and anything written, especially written documents, and most of all books.[3] More specifically, they only slightly valued writing as a medium for philosophizing and philosophical deliberation and seem to have considered it little more than a favor to the feeble-minded, to those whose memory and other intellectual abilities were simply inadequate. From such a perspective, then, it would consequently follow that we the contemporary – we the Moderns or Postmoderns –, being sort of entrapped in our literate culture (be this literacy graphic, alphanumerical, or digital, computer related), are generally inadequate and incompetent, that we lack the proper faculties for understanding Plato and his fellow thinkers.

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[1] All the translations from the Platonic text in this book are based on the translations collected in: *The Collected Dialogues of PLATO – including the Letters* (edited by E. Hamilton & H. Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1978[7]), with the sole exception of the translations of the passages from the *Charmides*, which are my own. Likewise, the translations from Aristotle are based on the revised Oxford translations in *The Complete Works of ARISTOTLE* (edited by J. Barnes, Bollingen Series LXXI: 2, volumes 1 & 2, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1984).

[2] To these three one should definitely add the fourth: "Plato," but that one is already widely regarded as an extremely perplexing signifier (all the more so since it seems to run against everything our common sense may imagine or acknowledge).

[3] See, for example, Socrates' remarks about this at the end of the *Phaedrus* (275d-e).

But if we are to listen to Plato rather than read him, we are faced with a triple quandary. Namely, the problems of performance, language and translation immediately impose themselves. For, first of all, would we then listen to Plato or to a performer, who is always necessarily an interpreter of what he reads; and wouldn't then the original be always already transformed, tampered with and essentially distorted? Then again, speaking of language, maybe we should listen to Plato only in Greek (and similarly read him only in Greek) in order to take hold of the proper meaning and sense of his work, not to mention its atmosphere and taste. But Plato's Greek is a so-called dead language: nobody speaks it anymore (or more accurately, given the incontestable continuity of the Greek language and its speakers over the millennia, very few do that). How are we to prevent ourselves then from suffering one of the two immediate consequences of this fact, namely either to imagine and behave as if we ourselves were dead too, or to perform a kind of resuscitation and artificial life support[4]? Finally, the problem does not get any easier with translation, for every translation is supposed to perform the same, or at least similar, operation: be it a "dead" or a "living" language, it should present its living core, present it as if it is alive or coming alive in front of our eyes and ears.

Be that as it may as far as the issue of translation is concerned, one might on the other hand legitimately doubt the legitimacy of this whole line of questioning. One cannot neglect the fact that Plato did write and was fully aware of everything that act or activity implies. Therefore, although completely legitimate in many other contexts, the questioning of the legitimacy of writing (and of Plato's writing above all) simply remains futile and misses the point. In the same vein, all the talk of Plato's unwritten doctrines is equally misplaced and irrelevant.

One should definitely read Plato's dialogues, and that is not a recommendation but an instruction, a *dictum*. Or, more appropriately put: *Read Plato*! And nobody would

[4] Which, in fact, is not so outrageous at all, especially since one of the numerous Platonic definitions of philosopher is exactly the study of death, or the one who examines death and seeks it as an antidote to an "unexamined life." Of course, there is nothing morbid in this definition provided that we take the context of such statements into account. It is offered during the discussion on the immortality of the soul and immediately before Socrates' death, of which we read in the *Phaedo*, where death is being reflected upon and articulated as a true liberation from the body; and, indeed, death is this ultimate liberation because of its being the only state where the real, pure and direct cognition and knowledge of the truth is possible, and exactly for that reason "those who philosophize properly study dieing [οἱ ὀρθῶς φιλοσοφοῦντες ἀποθνήσκειν μελετῶσι]" (*Phaedo* 67e4-5). So, instead of being frightening, repulsive, macabre or cadaverous, it is actually one of the most comforting thoughts on and of philosophy that one could possibly have. Apart from that, it also confirms the point to be made later on in this text, namely that to read Plato (and other philosophers) always means to philosophize, i.e. to reflect upon and interpret the text that is being read. All this notwithstanding, I do not suggest such manner of reading Plato.

object to that. However, there is just one problem, the same one stated in the title above, and that problem is: *How* should we read Plato's dialogues? Is there a special way of dealing with what is written there? Is there a proper or correct way of approaching both their form and their content? Is there some specific and clearly definable procedure and method to be followed while reading the dialogues? A way, a path that leads to that living core of thought mentioned above? Furthermore, it seems that an answer to this question presupposes not only that one knows for sure and before the fact what this meaningful core is and what it looks like, but also that there exists such a thing; and thus we slip into a circular paradox: one asks the question in order to find something out but at the same time he must know the answer in order to be able to ask the question. Thus, we only ask questions to which we *a priori* know the answer.

This circular paradox seems to apply fully to the present case. Namely, if we take that "How?" to be the question of the method of reading understood as the comprehension of Plato's dialogues, then this question can only be and is posed from the perspective of an already acquired answer to it. Simply put, it seems that the only legitimate and meaningful time of asking the question about reading is after the actual reading, only after one has already found a way to read those dialogues and only when he is convinced that he understood them, at least partly. And, of course, this raises suspicion. If nothing else, this reminds of sophistry so hateful to Plato. Why ask, then? What is the point in asking about something we already know? (Not in order to get an answer, for rhetorical questions are not real questions.) It is as if the very act and process of questioning comes down to testing the already acquired knowledge, without the possibility of becoming part of any research method or procedure for acquiring new knowledge. In this perspective, questioning is always just another school exam and nothing else. What is more, this appears quite compatible with Plato's own theory of knowledge as recollection.[5] And the further problem here or, if you like, the question that remains unanswered is: how do we acquire knowledge? That is, the process of cognition remains obscure, or rather obscured by questioning itself and, given that the very form and significance of dialogue is based on questioning, it would follow that it is the dialogue, the dialogical form and method – and, by extension, the dialectical method itself insofar as it is vitally and essentially

[5] Plato's theory of recollection is scattered throughout the dialogues, and is just as complex and versatile as they are. Still, there are a couple of them that focus on the matter more specifically and clearly, and are therefore considered to contain the programmatic statements of this theory. Such are the ones that concern recollection, like the *Meno* (80d-86c — there, incidentally, Meno and Socrates conduct their dialogue exactly around this question about the point, and indeed the possibility, of asking about anything one does not know and around the problem of the degree of previous knowledge needed in order for anyone to be able to ask about anything), the ones that deal with memory, like the *Theatetus* (163d-164c), and those that establish the difference between recollection and memory, such as the *Philebus* (34a-d).

connected to and dependent on the dialogue – that the dialogical form itself obscures the essence of knowledge. And again, this does not go against Plato's own propositions regarding knowledge, truth and the very nature of philosophy. For he never misses to point out the divine origin and status of knowledge and truth,[6] which among other things means their being beyond the reach of human intellectual and psychological faculties and abilities (thus one could infer that, for Plato, the Greeks were just as inadequate and incompetent to grasp the meaning of his statements as we are, and just as much in need of any help and favors they could get; and hence, probably, his feeling obliged to write the dialogues down: for them, for us and for the rest of humanity); whereas, on the other hand, he explicitly regards dialogue and dialectic as indeed the major (if not the only) means of acquiring this divine knowledge and truth, or the knowledge and the truth of the divine, the absolute and necessary being and reality.

Now, even though he recognized and acknowledged this crucial contradiction within philosophy and theory in general, Plato obviously did not think of it as an unsurpassable obstacle for thinking. So, the vexing question for any reading of Plato is exactly this: how could these extremely opposite consequences ever be reconciled, let alone united into a consequent whole? Thus, if anything, reading Plato means a call for comprehensive thinking (and consequently reading and understanding as well), a thinking that tends to keep all options open and in play, a total all-inclusive thinking; quite contrary, that is, to the popular image of Plato as a totalitarian and exclusivist philosopher.

Still, one does not have to look at it that way. One does not have to suppose that it is necessary to have already read the dialogues in order to find out how to read them. Someone may be inclined to think that a possession of a method of interpretation and understanding would suffice, or that it is enough to possess some method or technique in order to know how to read Plato. It is just that, in this case, it is questionable whether that would be real reading. For we tend to expect to learn something new when we read. Of course, not necessarily in the absolute sense of some brand-new knowledge or something unheard of ever before, but at least the manner of communication and the combination of facts, the outlook should not be the same as in another written document we have read. In other words, we expect to read something different from the writings we are familiar with, for otherwise it would be like reading the same book over and over again.

When we approach some writing, any writing, already fully equipped with methodology, worldview and formed opinions – which all comes dangerously close to being

[6] That the proper knowledge of truth belongs only to God is explicitly stated by Plato, for example in the *Phaedrus* (278d3-6). In this Plato faithfully and literally follows tradition, more precisely the statement ascribed first to Pythagoras who, when once called a sage and a wise man responded by saying that only God is really wise, whereas he is just a "lover of wisdom."

prejudiced – there is not much different or new, if anything, that we will be able to find and recognize as such. In and from any possible text we would always be getting only that which we ourselves put in it. Such reading would actually be the reading-in of existing, prejudged and preset things, opinions, insights, interpretations, views and conclusions. And that is the main danger of an informed reading, for such reading – which is necessarily *a priori* equipped with certain methods, manners and procedures – may well turn into an obstacle to understanding and interpreting a text. And, in that respect, any preconceived or preformed method of reading Plato is just as good as any other; and if one has previously held a specific methodological position, he is bound to find corroboration for it in the dialogues. Of course, this practically amounts to the same as the hypothesis discussed above. For, whether one has already read the dialogues or possesses predetermined views and approaches it with methodological and theoretical preconceptions, it comes down to the same thing: one will find nothing new in the dialogues and in both cases the actual reading becomes redundant – once because we have already read it, the second time because there is no point in reading the dialogues at all. That is why, put in a somewhat simplifying manner, all the analytical readings find in Plato their ancient but nevertheless direct predecessor, the precursor and patron of analysis and analytical methodology, just as the hermeneutical ones recognize Plato as a proto-hermeneutical thinker, or structuralists find scarcely anything but the first ever articulations of structuralism in Plato.[7]

[7] Not to mention existentialists or phenomenologists. Theirs are such predictable and obvious cases that they are hardly worth mentioning at all. However, for the sake of clarity, the unexpected proximity of the concepts crucial for the phenomenological description of the essence of consciousness (the transcendental *epoche*, the "bracketing" and the "disconnection" as the procedures and the tools that are supposed to secure a clean slate for the phenomenological investigation into the essence of being and consciousness, e.g. the essence of truth) with the comprehensive thinking and reading mentioned above, certainly deserves a comment here. *First of all*, it does resemble our plea for the beginning without prejudice, but only to the extent in which it opposes "the natural standpoint," which is teeming with the naturalistic, empricistic and positivistic preconceptions and prejudice. However, as soon as it comes to inclusion of one's previous experiences and knowledges, or of one's personal situation and motives for undertaking a reading of Plato, the similarities end. From that moment on, the phenomenological reading actually rejects the wealth of knowledge, opinions, beliefs and experiences that every individual reader brings to his/her reading. What I suggest above is, then, quite opposite to reduction and abstraction. *On the other hand*, there is a distinct similarity between our propositions here and the implicit phenomenological conviction that the natural, immediate, non-"anticipatory" reading or comprehension tends to transcend itself, i.e. to transcend its own character and boundaries. The latter could also serve as yet another proof that Phenomenology *is* Platonism, for it seems to repeat and revive the very itinerary of thinking that was undertaken in Plato himself. (For all this see E. Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* I, in: *Jahrbuch für phänomenologische Forschung* I, 1913, Ch. 3, esp. §§ 30-32, 47 – English

However, apart from the apriorism of method and interpretation mentioned above, there is also another reason for Plato's being receptive and responsive to all (and literally all) kinds of reading and understanding; a reason that renders all the different methods, approaches and interpretations equally valid. This reason is the fact that Plato actually founded and articulated philosophical methodology on the whole and as we know it, including its known varieties.[8] Therefore, one can find some basis for any conceivable method or way of thinking in his work; on account of the simple fact that each and all of them are most likely (at least) touched upon or hinted at in the dialogues. And all manners, approaches and methods of reading and interpretation are hence equally acceptable, but one again has to recommend the *comprehensive reading*, i.e. the reading that tends to make use of all or any of them, according to each particular dialogue and (within each of them) each particular case or subject matter. Such reading tends to be all-inclusive, one dare say total, reading; for it not only includes full introspection and self-examination, our being self-conscious and aware of what is going on in our mind while reading, but the use of all of one's knowledge, imagination and experiences at the time of reading as well. It requires, or better demands and forces the reader to get fully involved in the text. It does not allow one to take it easy and relax, and yet it presupposes our complete surrender to the flow of the text and its argument(s), as if one is simultaneously hyperactive and submissive, thus letting himself be guided and led by the text while being in complete control of it. As if saying: sit back, relax and take control!

This comprehensive reading is not so difficult to realize though, and in fact is much more feasible when one is not yet acquainted with available methodologies. All it really requires is alertness of mind, perceptiveness and receptiveness for the dialogues themselves, and that includes both their various forms and their contents, their literary and theoretical aspects and levels at once. Contrary to what might seem the most reasonable thing to do, the best reading (one that grasps the most and covers the widest grounds) is an uninformed reading. Paradoxically enough, an *uninformed* reading informs the most. And this is not just a nice turn of phrase, but rather a claim and an appeal for unprejudiced reading, a reading without preconceptions which tries not to take anything for granted.

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translation in: *IDEAS. General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, transl. W.R. Boyce Gibson, New York and London: Collier Macmillan 1962.)

[8] Of course, there is a thing or two to be said in favor of Aristotle as well, since he then further elaborated and defined the meaning of philosophy and its methods by categorizing and codifying the latter. Plato, on the other hand, stands as the first synthesizer and spokesman of philosophy as a comprehensive intellectual activity or a discipline of mind, and therefore remains its first completed, articulated and self-conscious appearance. Plato would then be the inventor, while all others could only qualify for discoverers. Strangely enough, Plato never thought of himself as an inventor, especially not of philosophy and its truth, but rather as a simple and humble apprentice and follower of great philosophers.

Thus, immediately after the problem of method, and following directly from the problem of that "how," one is confronted with the *reading*. One has to ask what it means to read (Plato or anything else). What is reading? What kind of fact or activity is it? How does one read, or better what does one do when we say he/she reads something? Of course, one could also ask what we read, that is, what things can be read and what do we read when we do (read)? Do we read a text or something else; something contained within the text or pointed at by it? In the latter case we would be reading something beyond the text, but the question is: what exactly? What could there be beneath or apart from the text itself? What else could there be apart from the letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, pages? Therefore, one could and should ask: What else could be read besides that which is written in words and symbols? Or, perhaps a different question is in order: What cannot be read? Is there anything that cannot be read?

Before we attempt to answer these questions, let us take a look at things that have already been mentioned here. First of all, *reading* has already been amply exposed as interpretation and organization of the text, as its reconstruction and reproduction, and in that sense as also the final and crucial completion of the text (every text). Just like mind and the understanding it provides come as the final steps in the creation of the world, just like the world is not considered complete or integral until it has been thought and explained, thus also the text is not complete if it is not read. And reading here does not mean plain and simple gaze at the graphic signs and symbols inscribed on a surface, but a whole series of actions and operations on and with these signs and symbols. After all, whatever they may be, they always remain exactly that: symbols; and a symbol is never exhausted in and by itself, its very nature is to be incomplete, unfinished, to be in need of something else and other than itself in order to be itself – to be what it is, or better what it is supposed to be. In other words, sign and symbol point at or refer to something other than themselves, something beyond and outside themselves. That is what makes them signs and symbols. Therefore, it is only understandable that they should never be complete or completed in themselves, but essentially and necessarily in need of the other for their completion and closure.

For the same reasons, a *text* (any text, all possible texts) is always in need of something else, which we usually call reading, but regularly mean exactly this completion and finishing. For the simple truth is that every text is written in order to be read. There is no text without an addressee, without some reader as a receiver. This receiver, or a receptor, is always pre-calculated in the act of writing itself, and that indeed from its very beginning. Whether or not the author is aware of that, he always writes for someone. And that someone finishes the work. The work, the writing is never finished in its mere existence, but only when and after it has been read, thought about and interpreted by someone. Now, given the unlimited number of possible readings and interpretations, one could say that a text, a writing, a work, is never

really finished, never complete, at least not definitely and forever. A work is thus always a *work-in-progress*.

As such, on the other hand, a text appears before us as a living thing and genuine reality, as permanently renewed subject-matter and object of thought, or as a perpetually reproduced presence.[9] Furthermore, this means that text is a world in its own right – a world of its own, on its own, in its own. It is the world within as well as beyond the pages. But this at the same time renders the totality of existence (that which we normally call the world) as text. The world is, therefore, something that exists as a (possible) subject-matter and object of reading, ready and available for interpretation, reconstruction and reproduction. The world is thought of and understood as a text, that is, according to this textual model or approach, which enables us not only to use different metaphors and, for instance, talk about "the book of nature" or "the book of life," but more importantly helps us find and explain our situation and place in the world – a place which otherwise, in terms of food chain or natural necessity, seems totally redundant and superfluous, leaving us with the role of useless and meaningless predators. When we understand the world as text, however, human role becomes the crucial one, for we then appear as the completion of that world, as the ultimate instance of existence which brings the meaning and sense into it, the one that retroactively produces the world by and through the logical-literary reproduction called interpretation.

As for the world itself, this line of thinking preserves its integrity exactly by preventing the existence of unnecessary things in it. In other words, by assigning a place and a purpose to human existence, interpretation re-creates the world as a unique integral totality endowed with meaning, necessity and purposefulness[10]; and thus provides not only the much-needed closure of the world, but also the possibility of a creative, productive relationship between man and nature. Of course, on account of the above-noted character of all interpretations of all works, this relationship itself has no closure, it must remain in-progress as long as there are men and as long as there is a world. One could almost say that interpretation presents the basis for man's perpetual dialogue with nature and indeed demands it for the sake of both, that is, for the sake of the world.

Which brings us to the last keyword from the title question, and that is: *dialogues*. Plato wrote dialogues, not narratives, not stories, not monologues, not poems nor epics. And that is a very important thing. For, among all other forms of writing and speaking, dialogue takes a special place in that it comes in and represents the middle

[9] Incidentally, this seems to be Plato's opinion as well. For example, in the *Phaedrus*, he explicitly says that "any discourse ought to be constructed like a living creature" (264c3-4), which is not exactly the same thing but does lead to the same conclusion.

[10] Exactly in the sense in which Aristotle and Kant used to say that nature does nothing by chance or without reason.

of the path called discussion, deliberation, argumentation, thinking in general. Dialogue is supposed to be an open form and structure. All other forms come as an exposition of the results of a discussion and argumentation, they give us the final stance, the conclusion, or the position of the winner in this imaginary (or not so imaginary, in any case very real) fight, struggle, war even. The other forms are therefore historical in their structure, scope and tenor. They narrate the conqueror's version, even when they do provide us with information about the defeated position and side (for even then they present it as defeated, surpassed, overcome, overwhelmed by the winner). Dialogue, however, comes before the final showdown and only has yet to produce the result, it has yet to lead to the final score.

In that respect, and from this character of the dialogical form of speaking and writing, we get a double benefit as readers. First of all, it is much livelier and therefore easier to read and take in; that is, it is easier in some respects, but much harder and difficult in other. In any case, the language itself is much more alive there. But, the second benefit is even more important for us as readers, and it concerns thinking and ideas. Namely, by inserting itself in the middle of the dispute, or more often from its very beginning, it gives us the opportunity to see and follow the thinking process itself,[11] not just its results. Dialogues, at least Plato's dialogues, give us a vivid, living image of how rational thinking is done, they present us with a picture of the path thinking passes over every time it tries to reach a conclusion, or to acquire knowledge. Dialogue is all about inquiry and very little about the results. And Plato's so-called early dialogues represent such cases to the full (some "middle" dialogues do that too, but not all). And, exactly these "aporetic" dialogues are truest to the essence of dialogue as a literary and generally expressive form.

Now, what this means (or at least may and should mean) for us as readers is plain enough. It means that perhaps we should concentrate more on the form and the process of acquiring knowledge, positions, conclusions etc., than on these themselves. Differently put, perhaps this is to say that the way to knowledge is more important than this knowledge itself. Well, without going to that extreme, one could certainly claim that this way to knowledge largely and essentially determines the end, the result. This brings us back to what we said at the beginning of this Introduction, namely that the dialogical form clouds and obscures the knowledge itself and may (to a degree) prevent its acquisition. More precisely, we said that the process of cognition remains obscure because of the concentration on questioning and that

[11] Plato himself points that out on numerous occasions, by comparing thinking and meditation with dialogue and discussion. Thus, in the *Theatetus* he says that "when the mind is thinking, it is simply talking to itself [διαλέγεσθαι], asking questions and answering them, and saying yes or no" (189e8-190a2) and therefore describes "thinking as discourse [λέγειν]" (190a4); and in the *Sophist* (260a6-7) he says, for example, that "to deprive us of this [discourse – τὸν λόγον] would be to deprive us of philosophy".

therefore the dialogical form itself obscures the essence of knowledge. It seems that both these propositions cannot be compatible with what we are saying now. In other words, either it is the process of cognition that remains blocked by dialogue or the essence of knowledge. For, if the process of cognition is best represented in the form of a dialogue (with an interlocutor or with oneself), then the essence of knowledge[12] has to remain unrepresented and absent; and vice versa.

But there is a way out of this contradiction, and a pretty easy one for that matter. One easily avoids contradiction, even a plain opposition here if only the essence of knowledge were understood in a slightly different way, which is probably more correct anyway. And it indeed seems more in line with Plato's own understanding of knowledge. All one has to do is realize that the essence of knowledge does not depend upon nor is identical with any one or all of its particular objects. Knowledge has to do with ideas and concepts, it grasps notions of things and not those things themselves, not even their spatial-temporal qualities and characteristics or their empirical existence. Knowledge, just like cognition, is a mental, intellectual process. In that sense, one could say that knowledge actually has no other object or subject-matter other than itself, so every part of that process is simultaneously a presentation of its essence. In fact, Plato seems to teach us exactly and primarily that knowledge is a process, a dynamic unfolding of cognition in and over itself, a process that finds its purpose and end in its self-confirmation and, even more importantly, self-appropriation. Thus, in all its dynamic and liveliness, it never leaves, it permanently remains in one and same place, it remains in and with itself.[13] The knowledge, then, that so faithfully and accurately presents itself in and as the mind's dialogue with itself is equal to pure rationality.

Hence, the significance of Platonic dialogues' being exactly that (dialogues) lies in the fact that these are the first elaborate displays of our (western, European) rationalism, that they are the first major documents of the process of thinking itself and of the tools available to it. By following the development of these dialogues, of each and every one of them, we find all the standard logical procedures, including those of dialectical logic; and we find them *in actu*, as they are being applied and performed. Therefore, if nothing else, Platonic dialogues show us *how* we mostly think, they reveal the habits and behavior of our mind when it is confronted with the *other* (other

[12] The essence of knowledge is normally understood as identical with the essence of the known (object, idea, entity of some kind) and can therefore reside only in the result of knowing, in that final judgment (see *Theatetus* 190a3 – Plato uses the term "δόξα") or conclusion with which knowledge reaches its destination: the truth of and about things.

[13] Which later came to be the very definition of the absolute spirit and its, equally absolute, knowledge. Hegel, for example, calls it the "being-in-and-by-itself [an-und-bei-sich-selbst-sein]" of the mind.

minds, other realities, everything other than ourselves) as well as with its own *self*.[14] One could hardly think of or recommend a better schooling for thought.

So, finally, with this "how we mostly think," we have drawn the full circle and returned back to the first issue discussed here: to the question of method. And that is where our reading can begin, at last.

However, before the reading begins, there is just one more thing to be mentioned about the dialogues, and that concerns their characters. With very few exceptions (such as the *Laws*, where the mysterious "Athenian" is introduced) Plato uses real persons and sets. In the dialogues, men who really existed converse in real places. And most of them are indeed significant historical figures. Now, one can only guess his motives and reasons for doing so, but one thing is certain: our image and idea of what these men were like largely depends on Plato's description. In fact, his is the most influential one exactly because it is dramatic, because it depicts them in theatrical and yet real-life situations. Thus Plato remains one of our main historical sources regarding many things. But that is not the most important thing about the characters of the dialogue.

By far the most important feature here is the voices of these men. Dialogues preserve and reproduce their voices, which of course does not mean their actual sound or sounding, but rather voices in the crucial sense of calling, addressing, communicating and expressing something to the environment. These voices act as an invitation and a proposal to engage in the exchange of words, thoughts, experiences, opinions and knowledge. These voices ask to be spoken to, they seek a response, and thus point out the fact that thinking is essentially a collective enterprise, a communal undertaking that presupposes and creates a community. In Plato's case, this community acquires a whole variety of forms or characters, depending on the occasion. Sometimes it is a friendly, sometimes an almost hostile and strife-ridden community, but it never ceases to be just that: a community. Sometimes it is a company of friends sitting or walking around together apparently just chatting about things of common interest or telling stories about old times and old meetings and gatherings (which is the case with the majority of the dialogues), sometimes it looks more like a trial (and in the *Apology* it *is* a trial), then an arena with intellectual contestants struggling for recognition and admiration of the gathered audience (like, for example, in the *Protagoras* and the *Symposium*), whereas often they are *ad hoc* companies formed by a chance meeting somewhere in Athens. And regardless of the possibly provisional character of those communities, they always preserve not only their communal but also their *urban* character.

[14] For it can be and is other to itself whenever it becomes the subject of reflection and deliberation, for example in the cases of apperception and self-consciousness. In this way, the dialogues confirm and reconfirm not only those others but the one (ourselves, the thinking mind of a thoughtful individual) just as much.

Almost all Plato's dialogues take place in Athens or on its outskirts, but the city is much more than just a location, it is their main character. There, the city of Athens certainly appears in the literal, material sense of streets, squares, buildings, agoras and gymnasiums; but it is also present in the form of its ultimate embodiment: Socrates and other citizens. Plato was an Athenian and, just like his fellow citizens,[15] he knew very well that the city cannot be anything but the real people that occupy it, that the city is one of those few things on Earth that completely depend on human presence and coexistence. Hence, in the dialogues, the two are one and the same, and the depiction of the city is at the same time also the depiction of characters and personalities that make it, and vice versa. That is probably why those real people remain so very much alive as dramatis personae of his dialogues and the places where these are conducted are still there echoing with their voices. And although the men are not there anymore, those places can still be visited and their voices can still be heard. All one has to do is listen or, in our case, read.

[15] The very same realization was succinctly expressed in the famous Nikias' saying that "men make the city [πόλις]" (Thucydides, *History* VII.77.7.6). See also Aristotle, *Politics* III (1274b41): "polis is a body of citizens [ἡ γὰρ πόλις πολιτῶν τι πλῆθός ἐστιν]."

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