



Necip Fikri Alican

# Rethinking Plato

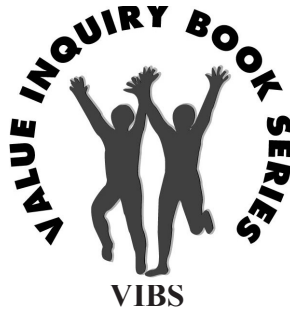
*A Cartesian Quest  
for the Real Plato*

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# RETHINKING PLATO



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# RETHINKING PLATO

A Cartesian Quest for the Real Plato

Necip Fikri Alican



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To my wife  
Banu Beste Bařol Alican





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## FOREWORD

Throwing a bright light of understanding at the real Plato, at the man who hides in the shadow of Socrates and behind dramatic dialogues while asserting his own presence so forcefully as to occupy philosophers from the fourth century before Christ to the present, this work is one of the most comprehensive, systematic, thorough, erudite, and lucid contributions to come out in the past two decades in the field of Plato scholarship. It is comprehensive in its formulation and treatment of the questions, concepts, and views that constitute the field of Plato scholarship and are essential to an adequate understanding of Plato's thought; systematic in its analysis and evaluation of these questions, concepts, and views; thorough in its method of establishing the validity of its claims; lucid and erudite in its scholarly skills; and penetrating yet versatile in its reading of Plato's dialogues.

First, what does it take to delimit the territory that contains Plato's real thought in contrast to that of Socrates and his interlocutors in the dialogues? This question is a request for a methodology by which we can secure the most appropriate means of identifying Plato's thought. In answering it, we should, to begin, proceed from a trustworthy portrayal of the historical Plato, the Plato who lived in Athens from 427 to 347 BC, studied with Socrates, established the Academy, wrote at least twenty-eight philosophical dialogues, tried to educate princes in the art of government, who, in short, was a paradigmatic philosopher and teacher of philosophy. An adequate knowledge of Plato's life, verifiable by the most reliable method of historical investigation, is a necessary condition for paving the way to an adequate understanding of his thought, mainly because there is an intimate relationship between real life and the accomplishments of a human being: One's thought originates, after all, from the bosom of one's life, from the sort of experiences one undergoes. *Rethinking Plato* provides this kind of knowledge. In putting it together, Alican consults, as the text clearly shows, critically, analytically, and evaluatively, the most authoritative sources exploring the life of Plato from antiquity to the present. The outcome is an informative and historically realistic picture of Plato; and this picture is not only consistent with the Plato we glean from the autobiographical remarks we read in the dialogues and the letters, and with the accounts of those who knew him personally, but it also illuminates, and, in fact, increases, our appreciation of Plato's character, ideas, and method of philosophizing. And he lends further clarity, substance, and credence to this picture by an equal delineation of the character and life of Socrates. By showing who Socrates the man, the teacher, and the philosopher was, Alican *ipso facto* makes more visible the line that distinguishes the teacher from the student.

Second, he renders this line still more visible by spotlighting and articulating the central questions, concepts, and views that distinguish the philosophical mind and accomplishments of Plato. But just what are these issues? This is the crux of the problem that underlies our quest for the real Plato, because he hides behind a tapestry of literary and philosophical devices that create a distance between him

and his readers: images, metaphors, speakers, stories, direct confessions, and dramatic frameworks. Add to this, the fact that he did not leave behind a coherently constructed system of ideas but a large number of dialogues seemingly dealing with specific philosophical questions or problems. Confronted with this kind of legacy, how can we penetrate the tapestry of devices and the complex of dramatic presentations in our quest for what the real Plato said? Could it be that the fact that Plato chose to remain distant from his readers is itself an aspect of his philosophical method and aim? For example, the question whether Plato did or did not espouse a philosophical system, and related questions busying scholars for centuries, would automatically be solved if we could determine, to a reasonable degree, what he really said. But answers to such questions are not easily forthcoming, at least not without an adequate methodology. Plato scholars have been developing and refining ways of removing, or making transparent, the literary veils that spread over his thought. Alican's own investigative adventure goes through the contributions of these scholars, qua scholars, both evaluating and utilizing the methodological tools they have employed in identifying the fundamental questions, concepts, and views that are peculiarly Platonic. This is no mean task! With the eye of a metaphysician, the soul of an epistemologist, the heart of a social thinker, and a mind that embraces the dialogues as a philosopher and as an aesthetician, Alican lifts the Platonic veil and exposes the flesh and skeleton of what we have as the Platonic corpus. His synoptic, critical, and probing eyes reach out for both the written and unwritten doctrines, for the ideas that are crucial to a reasonable construction of Plato's thought as well as to an understanding of what they mean. In itself, this achievement is an invaluable service to Plato scholarship, not only in identifying a foundation intrinsically important for philosophical inquiry, but especially in determining the kind of ideas that may, or may not, spring from it or be consistent with it. The point which merits special emphasis here is that a significant step toward understanding what Plato said is uncovering, or reconstructing, the logical and conceptual coherence, or unity, of his thought, for no idea can be attributed to or excluded from Plato's thought if the result does not cohere with his fundamental philosophical intuition and the conceptual structure that arises from it. By exploring the logical thread that runs through the written and unwritten doctrines, and by accentuating the real Socrates in the last four chapters, Alican moves us closer to the real Plato.

Third, it is not enough to map the territory of Plato's thought; the scholar should also offer a systematic, critical, and interpretive analysis of the questions, concepts, and views that make up the structure and soil of this territory, for without this kind of analysis the territory would remain vague, dubious, and unintelligible. Implied in this condition of scholarship is the need to take into serious consideration all the texts—past, modern, and contemporary—necessary to an adequate reading of the dialogues. This condition raises the question of authentication: the extent to which the dialogues themselves and the works of the historians and commentators that deal with their genuineness or meaning repre-

sent the real Plato. It also raises the question of inclusiveness, or comprehensiveness: Successful research requires two types of analysis, external and internal. The first relates to what others have said about the authenticity and meaning of the dialogues. The second, once the question of authenticity is settled, relates to what Plato really said and how others have understood the texts. Let me at once state that *Rethinking Plato* is a spectacle of respected scholars. Whether in weaving Plato's life or in examining the formal and historical aspects of the dialogues, Alican organizes symposia to which he invites major scholars who have something to say about the authenticity and meaning of Plato's ideas. He plays two different roles at these symposia. Stepping into his first role, he creates a dialogue between the participants, and, with a skillful touch, he draws the reader into the ensuing discussion. This is a lively way of disclosing the insights implicit in their arguments and points of view. Switching to his second role, he acts as a philosopher: On the basis of what transpires in the proceedings, he contributes his own understanding of what Plato said or what was said in reference to his life, thought, or work, be it by historians or by analysts. He, in other words, performs the function of the critic, the synthesizer, and the creator. But how do we determine the reliability, or authority, of the scholars? The demand implicit in this question is exactly what makes *Rethinking Plato* distinctive in its approach and contribution to Plato scholarship. The general criteria in meeting this demand are logical coherence, critical analysis, and sound interpretation, the sort that reveals Plato's meaning and philosophical aim. Alican provides a most elaborate and systematic methodology for evaluating the logical, critical, interpretive, and historical aspects of Plato's dialogues. His coverage of the rich repository of scholarship preceding him reaches deep and far enough, not just in exposition but also in evaluation, to enrich his own work. Yet the mark of a serious scholar is loyalty to truth rather than to tradition. The two need not be in conflict, but when they are, it is best not to be caught on the side opposite the truth. No agenda—philosophical, ideological, or religious—is indispensable for the scholar, and none expendable without critical consideration. Implicit in this ideal is objectivity in the search, evaluation, and determination of knowledge. No one who reads *Rethinking Plato* can miss this feature in Alican's scholarly achievement.

Fourth, and a corollary to the preceding point, is thoroughness in establishing the validity of both Platonic and non-Platonic claims—theories, views, assumptions, and judgments. It is a generally accepted principle among philosophers that logical reasoning, formal and empirical, is the instrument we employ in ascertaining the truth or reasonableness of any claim about any aspect of reality. This is the light which reveals the validity of such claims. But when we focus our attention on research in the field of Plato scholarship, we discover that the quest for the real Plato is an elusive one, quite different from quests for truth in mathematics, physics, biology, social science, or theology. This is because, advanced twenty-four hundred years ago, Plato's thought is enmeshed in an excessively complicated web of vague and often uncertain historical facts—dubious and sometimes fragmentary historical texts, interpretations, theories, and methodolo-

gies—and a bewildering compendium of literature on the subject. How can one find one's way into this web, into this compendium? A Plato scholar has to be both a philosophical analyst and a historical investigator. His or her quest for the truth is twofold: ascertaining the validity of external commentary and working out what Plato meant in all that he said. A significant contribution of *Rethinking Plato*, which no Plato scholar can overlook, is the method Alican adopts, first, in delimiting the historical and philosophical fields that are relevant to our quest for the real Plato, which clearly shows an erudite scholarly mind that possesses a synoptic vision of Plato scholarship, and, second, in the keenness of his analytical mind, in his ability to dissect the ideas and theories under consideration with amazing logical acuity and profundity of intuitive comprehension. I would not be exaggerating to say that he is a philosophical anatomist who, following Descartes, penetrates deep into the logical relations, assumptions, and implications of the different views of scholars, and then, on the basis of what this penetration yields, makes a judgment, a generalization, or hypothesis. For how can one be an anatomist if he or she is not a taxonomist? Indeed, *Rethinking Plato* is a mosaic of logical relations and reasoning. The point of this kind of design, which is a vivid example of intellectual beauty, is simply to expose the relations in terms of which we can see what is said by Plato and by the philosophers who lived during his time and the succeeding epochs. There is a running interplay between the two types of analysis required, the external kind dealing with the strand of works, both historical and philosophical, about Plato, and the internal kind dealing with Plato's works. The one is not possible without the other. But how can we proceed with either one of them without a measure of certainty of the validity of both? Here, we cannot afford to run into a vicious circle. To avoid this trap, Alican follows a strategy enabling him to keep his philosophical eye on the two domains of investigation, so that analysis in one of the domains is intertwined, sometimes by implication, with the other. Beginning with Plato's life, onward to his main philosophical ideas, then to his works from a structural perspective, and finally to an in-depth analysis of four major dialogues, always coordinating results in historical and critical discussion with direct reference to the Platonic texts, is an illustration of what Plato would call dialectical thinking. And what better use for dialectical thinking than in dissecting the very field of Plato scholarship it inspires? The pillars of this kind of thinking are logical analysis and philosophical intuition, or comprehension. Analysis without intuition, always abstract, can be accurate, even flawless, while leaving the reader without concrete understanding; intuition without analysis is informative, but it leaves the reader without objective, valid knowledge. Both of these extremes are avoided in *Rethinking Plato*.

Fifth, a condition, and, we can say, a basic feature, of scholarship is lucidity—the ability to communicate an idea, an emotion, a feeling, or an experience of some kind clearly, transparently, distinctly, and, where applicable, expressively. Lucidity is a necessary condition of human communication in general, as the very process of communication would be obstructed without it. But it plays a pivotal role in scholarship because one of the aims of scholarship is the discovery and

communication of a truth that has been buried under the dust of time, typically distorted by personal, philosophical, ideological, or religious bias, and requiring the clarification or interpretation of mystical, oracular, intrusive, or difficult ideas, views, and feelings. What is the point of writing a book or an essay, or even a letter, or of creating a work of art, if it cannot be understood or appreciated by the ordinary and educated public, or if it is not understood or appreciated adequately? Is it an accident that the most lucid writers and artists, for example, Plato, Augustine, Descartes, Phidias, Michelangelo, and Van Gogh, have always commanded the attention of the ordinary and educated public? Is it an accident that a literary genius such as Tolstoy has argued that clarity and sincerity are necessary conditions of good art? And can we separate these two conditions from each other? A lucid work, be it scientific, philosophical, or artistic, reflects a lucid mind, a mind that thinks clearly and expresses its ideas or feelings articulately. The scholar's task is to illuminate what is hidden behind a dramatic, linguistic, artistic, religious, or cultural veil; it is also to make the vague linguistic or artistic forms clearer, and to make the difficult ideas easier to grasp; it is, moreover, to liberate certain ideas, forms, and images from their accidental or intrusive associations. Lucidity is a virtue of human communication, and *Rethinking Plato* is an example of this virtue; and it is such an example, not merely in the way Alican structures his work; in the way he organizes the historical texts and facts and draws clear charts and tables that enable the reader to grasp the myriad relations between them, thus making them relevant to logical analysis; in the way he examines the chosen dialogues critically and insightfully; but also in the way he constructs his sentences, paragraphs, and chapters. The outcome of his effort is a lucid work of scholarship.

When scholarly skills and philosophical understanding intersect, that is, when rational analysis intersects with intellectual depth, when reasoning intersects with passion, when clarity intersects with expressiveness, when logical form intersects with creative insight, and when the truth of the particular intersects with a synoptic vision of the whole, we are likely to have a worthwhile philosophical adventure. *Rethinking Plato* is such an adventure.

Michael H. Mitias  
Emeritus Professor of Philosophy  
Millsaps College



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is a product of isolation more than collaboration. It was not inspired by students or teachers or colleagues. It is not the organized accrual of lecture notes. Nor was it occasioned or stimulated by a particular symposium, conference, or colloquium. It is the result of a spontaneous impulse in the process of reading and reflecting.

Still, debts accumulate. And notable intellectual debt is hardly ever unique to a particular project. It is timeless.

If one is lucky, gratitude starts with the family. I have been lucky. Both my father and my mother have been caring, attentive, and supportive parents. But their influence goes beyond that. My father, Fikri Alican, a physician, scientist, and scholar, one of the global pioneers of organ transplantation, impressed upon me from an early age that knowledge, specifically, its pursuit, acquisition, and dissemination, opens up a magical world, not to be valued merely for the professional success it may bring, nor even solely for the personal growth it promises, but always also as an end in itself. My mother, Halide Ihlamur Alican, a champion of the underdog, partly in reflection of her vocational dedication to nursing, was responsible for my moral education, teaching me basically the same ethical principles as the past masters, falling short, if anywhere, perhaps in the area of rational justification, which she still finds superfluous, because, after all, “what’s right is right.”

But education rises to its full potential outside the family. The earliest and most compelling force in my intellectual development was Feridun Baydar. To him, I owe a fair amount of proficiency in mathematics, which has withered away over the years, and an analytic mindset, which has not. In an educational system rewarding memorization, he taught me not just to answer the questions, but, more urgently, to question the answers. He even insisted on questioning the questions. He fully immersed me in the Socratic method years before I found out the name for it. He was my teacher and my hero, and I miss him dearly.

As with most professional philosophers, my first institutional encounter with philosophy was in college. Michael H. Mitias and Robert E. Bergmark were responsible for my initiation into philosophy as a formal discipline, guiding me through an undergraduate major in the field. They helped shape my ability to recognize and analyze philosophical problems, while introducing me to the philosophical classics with a childlike enthusiasm that has remained an enduring source of attraction. First teacher, then mentor, and always friend, Mitias was singularly influential in my decision to pursue graduate studies in philosophy. And this through inspiration rather than instruction. He mesmerized me as a freshman in a liberal arts curriculum, he stood by my side as the best man at my wedding, and he honors me still with encouraging words in the foreword to this book.

I was likewise fortunate to have two grand sources of inspiration in graduate school. Roger F. Gibson, Jr., showed me that philosophy could be just as enchanting at the graduate level as it is at the undergraduate level, and that the transition need not replace the charm with rigor, as there is room enough for both. At a critical juncture, when I was starting to feel pressure to write like a magician, conjuring up words to suit my purposes, or at least embracing the gobbledygook already in place, he endorsed my faith in the alternative of simplicity, with a superlative flair for clarity, cogency, and coherence. His classes were a pure joy as are his numerous publications. My other role model, Carl P. Wellman, was, and still is, one of the leading ethicists in the country, and, in fact, in the world. In the department, however, he was also revered as a rather demanding pedagogue, one to be avoided for the sake of a respectable academic transcript. This challenge, together with admiration for his steady output of extremely well-received publications, convinced me that I had better take anything he was willing to teach. I feel all the richer for that decision. Not only was he a major part of my graduate studies, but he was the single greatest contributor to my previous book.

Regarding the present work, I am indebted to several philosophers for their generosity with their time and effort in helping me develop, evaluate, or finalize specific points of interest. My gratitude to them includes moral admiration as well, because they each came to my aid on a cold call, with no prior personal relationship. Eric Brown was kind enough to share his views on Plato's argument for the immortality of the soul in the tenth book of the *Republic*. Debra Nails provided guidance regarding competing positions on the chronology of Plato's works. Holger Thesleff graciously accommodated my persistent questioning of his thoughts on the matter of chronology. I consider the book the better for their input, but any shortcomings are, of course, my own.

I am obliged to Charles Allen Scarboro for reading the entire manuscript, primarily with a view to weeding out the typographical errors and other infelicities that tend to creep in during the process of converting reasoning into reporting, but also, as it turns out, with an appetite for substantive disagreement. A sociologist by trade, Scarboro assures me that he had read the *Republic* ten times by the time he finished his doctoral program. So far, Plato is ahead: I could only get Scarboro to read my book once. But just the once has saved me much embarrassment. Any mistakes that actually made it into print most likely originate with material introduced after his editorial intervention.

Above all, I am indebted to my wife, Banu Beste Başol Alican, for her loving support and encouragement. This is not the obligatory tribute authors pay their spouses for letting them get the work done, to wit, for leaving them alone. Quite the contrary, I am grateful to my lovely wife for not leaving me alone, for forcing me to make time for life, and for making that life, our life together, the happiest that one could wish for. Combining the splendor of a Greek goddess, the intellect of an empirical scientist, and the passion of a Renaissance artist, her sheer presence has been the highlight of my own. She is, more than anything, Diotima reincarnate, showing me here on earth a love fit for the gods in heaven.



## NOTE ON DOCUMENTATION

Serviceable renditions of the works of Plato, no matter the language, contain marginal references to the pagination of a standard volume known as the Stephanus edition (1578), named after its compiler and publisher, Henri Estienne, or, Henricus Stephanus in the Latinized version. These references, bearing the notation of an alphanumeric string, usually placed alongside the outside margin, indicate not only the page in the Stephanus edition but also the quintile on that page. Starting the sequence, the numerals stand for the page number, while the accompanying letters (“a” through “e”) denote a particular section equivalent to a fifth of the corresponding page, so marked in the original edition. For example, “*Apology* 38b” designates the part of the text where Socrates is sentenced to death. Such standardization of references facilitates dialogue between interested parties as they engage one another in queries, comments, and debates.

This is how references to Plato work in this book as well. A systematic exposition of the scheme follows in chapter three (§ 3.6). Still, a point worth noting here at the outset, even at the risk of redundancy, is the existence of a secondary practice within the main convention: Stating the name of the work is not necessary in a Stephanus citation where the context is an essay or chapter dedicated entirely to that work. In such cases, giving the Stephanus pagination is sufficient documentation, provided that all other references in the same chapter come with the title of the relevant work. To illustrate, chapter five of this book is on the *Apology*, and references in that chapter to the *Apology* omit the title of the dialogue, while references in the same chapter to any other work of Plato provide the appropriate title. Thus, the sentencing of Socrates would there be simply “38b,” while elsewhere always requiring the title before the page number.

All translations of Plato are from the Hackett edition (1997) of the complete works. This centralization should make it convenient for readers to consult the sources. However, in order to avoid repetition, the identity of the publisher is not announced each time a direct quotation is occasioned. Instead, citation details for each quote are limited to the Stephanus pagination and the name of the translator.

Other references, specifically, the modern ones, employ the author-date system, producing examples such as Brown (1997, pp. 211–238), Nails (2002, pp. 243–250), and Thesleff (2009, pp. 397–410). The first number indicates the year of publication, the second number, or range, gives the pagination relevant to the passage in question.

Classical sources, of course, constitute an exception because the publication year is seldom available. Here, academic practice requires combining the name of the author with that of the work. Page numbers are usually supplemented, and sometimes supplanted, by book, chapter, section, and even paragraph numbers, which are uniform locators, unaffected by physical variations introduced by changes in typesetting or page layout. Some of these layers partitioning the whole have traditionally been represented by Roman numerals, but that custom is no

longer as inviolable as it used to be. The developing trend, even among classicists, favors a full set of Arabic numerals. The following entries, for instance, would be fairly representative of current practice: Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 987a32); Cicero (*Academicae Quaestiones* 1.12.46); Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria* 2.17.4).

On the less trendy side, proper classical citation follows a rigid routine of abbreviation, not taken up here. The correct form for the entries just listed is rather less familiar than indicated above: Aristotle (*Metaph.* 987a32); Cicero (*Acad.* 1.12.46); Quintilian (*Inst.* 2.17.4). Actually, the names of the authors also require abbreviation. Depending on whether the author is explicitly mentioned in the sentence in question, the parenthetical reference may absorb the name of the author: (Arist. *Metaph.* 987a32); (Cic. *Acad.* 1.12.46); (Quint. *Inst.* 2.17.4). By the same token, the Platonic example regarding the sentencing of Socrates should actually be "(Pl. *Ap.* 38b)," or "(*Ap.* 38b)" where the context is exclusively or primarily about Plato, and simply "(38b)" if it is about the *Apology*. Sometimes, only one work by the author will have survived, or only one will have been produced in the first place, in which case the title of the work is customarily omitted, though not so here in this book.

The practice of abbreviating, and even partly omitting, citation information in classical scholarship obviously saves space and standardizes references. Yet a little indulgence in terms of space promises substantial returns in terms of accessibility without sacrificing standardization. The aim of this book is to attract people to the study of Plato, not to impress those already attracted. Full documentation seems far more consistent with this aim than does proper abbreviation. Anyone lacking a training in classics, whether a college freshman, a doctoral candidate, or a full professor, will surely be inconvenienced by references that cannot be followed up without the aid of a classics dictionary. This book does not require one.

Another standard that is violated, though not consistently but as needed, is the tendency to use the last name alone after first mention with a full name. The last name usually suffices in citations, even on first mention. But the full name can be more appropriate where the intention is to talk about the author, however briefly, rather than merely to cite a passage. Although reserving the full name for first mention is a popular rule, slavish obedience to it rarely sometimes interferes with readability, and even intelligibility, or at least clarity.

Moreover, violating the rule of first mention cannot be such a crime, given that some transgressions are expected and encouraged, not just tolerated. Kant hardly requires a full introduction as if there could be, especially in a philosophy book, the slightest risk of confusion with some other Kant. The same may be said of Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. And the list can be extended indefinitely. Besides, the rule itself admits of various interpretations, where the first mention can be absolute, that is, anchored to the entire book so that the full name is never repeated, or it can be periodically restarted, say, by indexation to each chapter, or even to each section.

However that may be, the rule is violated here, though not persistently. The tendency here is to use last names alone, whether on first mention or on every mention, in citations geared toward documentation of the source rather than discussion of the author. Other than that, most references actually follow the rule of first mention, but anyone mentioned or discussed gets the full treatment wherever a reminder seems necessary, regardless of how many times the name has come up.

The bibliographic appendix at the end is also rather unconventional. Following the customary documentation of works cited, it encourages and facilitates further study by opening up multiple gateways to scholarship. Organized in convenient categories, it is a kind of manual for rethinking Plato beyond the intellectual adventure shared in this book. As a bibliography, it is both longer and more detailed than what might be expected of a book of this length. This is partly by design and partly by accident. The length, as in any other publication, was eventually determined by necessity, naturally growing beyond the first draft. The level of detail, on the other hand, was planned from the beginning, on the conviction that a guide or companion to such a major philosopher ought to acquaint readers as closely as possible with the relevant literature. Not all of it will have been cited in the main body of the text, but the reader should not be cut off from valuable sources just because the author cannot make room for all of them.



## INTRODUCTION

Plato is an elusive writer. He does not address his audience directly. Instead, he hides behind the anonymity of the dialogue form, never positioning himself as a character with a speaking part, and, with the rarest of exceptions (*Apology* 34a, 38b; *Phaedo* 59b), never even mentioning his own name. Most of his dialogues are named after a character in the corresponding dialogue. Thus, we have Plato's *Phaedo*, Plato's *Phaedrus*, Plato's *Philebus*, and the like. But how do we get at Plato's *Plato*, so to speak?

Or, setting aside the metaphorical finesse, how do we get at Plato without the italics, whether in reference to the character that might, in a perfect world, have taken center stage to make life easier for us, or in deference to the writer silencing that character and keeping him out of sight? How do we interpret, or reconstruct, the Plato, mute as a character and invisible as a writer, communicating with us through a myriad of other characters, collectively engaged in philosophical drama? How, in other words, do we enter the mind of the man who issued a universal invitation to philosophy but refused to attend his own party?

The target may well be beyond our reach. To cover all bases, we might go through the entire corpus, comparing each dialogue with every other, in an effort to stitch together an overarching philosophical outlook. Even then, we will often be told, we cannot be sure we have penetrated into the thought of Plato himself. All the same, the attempt is worthwhile as an end in itself.

Where, then, should the study of Plato start? With what work? Time was when the answer pointed unequivocally to the *Alcibiades*, the standard introduction in antiquity to Plato. Then, for centuries, the center of attraction was the *Timaeus*, the only Platonic text available in Latin through much of the Middle Ages. Nowadays, critical focus seems to favor the *Republic*, widely hailed as the pinnacle of achievement in ancient philosophy. But surely the most enchanting and inspiring experience of all awaits in the *Symposium*, just the place to fall in love with Plato, for the art if not also for the thought. Then again, perhaps the *Parmenides* would be a good place to begin, laying out, as it does, the most nagging questions in Plato studies. We could probably commence equally well with the *Meno*, or the *Gorgias*, or the *Protagoras*. Just about anywhere would be a good starting point, especially if the intention is to go far.

The aim of *Rethinking Plato* is to make that start. This is a quest for the real Plato. Yet it is not a mission of estrangement, envisaged to abandon the received wisdom, or to cast aside the prevailing platform of Platonism. The impetus for the project is not a collective failure, real or imagined, in previous efforts to uncover the real Plato, who might, instead, be exposed for the first time here. On the contrary, the quest reflects and celebrates the accretion of academic appraisal in the area. The goal is to expand that body rather than rejecting it, or, what is worse, ignoring it. And the mode of inquiry is constructive rather than destructive or dismissive.

On the other hand, little progress can be expected where the approach caters primarily to philosophical preservationism, treating Plato studies as revolving around a core of sacrosanct scholarship. Regrettably, this tendency has been so strong that the canonical corpus now comes with select secondary literature, perhaps not appended *per se* to the dialogues themselves, but imposed through interpretive paradigms, becoming especially inhibitory from the twentieth century onward. Staying within the confines of certain reconstructive traditions has been nearly as important as avoiding contradiction with the original text. Establishmentarianism of this sort is not peculiar to the study of Plato, but it is common to it.

This book, then, is an initiative to make a fresh start. It is a proposal and a map for rethinking Plato. The goal is not to replace old paradigms with a new one but to demonstrate that we do not need any particular paradigm for the study of Plato. We may undoubtedly need help, especially at the outset, but this must not be in the form of predefined patterns of understanding that suffocate the intellect instead of stimulating it, or that condition the imagination instead of cultivating it. All we really need is a critical outlook and an open mind, thereby combining an artless and unscripted analysis of problems with a willingness to consider all alternatives as if they were our own.

As the subtitle suggests, this is a Cartesian project. It is at once rational, reflective, and foundational. What makes it quintessentially Cartesian is that it looks for Plato independently of the prevailing patterns already tracing his whereabouts. Another distinctive mark is its meditative progression, not merely sampling, or even devouring, the canonical corpus, but getting to know Plato on a personal level, treating him like a human being instead of like an ancient library. However, for all its Cartesian aspirations, the book does not remain firmly outside the established web of belief, as evidenced by its tendency to make heavy use of secondary literature, perhaps not so much in turning to it for confirmation, but certainly in deferring to it for information.

Even so, if it appears strange that a Cartesian quest should be attuned to mainstream standards, it need only be remembered that Descartes himself was anxious to reaffirm many of the judgments he suspended. Moreover, he was not operating from a standpoint of disagreement, but from one of dissatisfaction. He was bothered by the uncertainty, not by the actual dogma. Otherwise, he was just as attuned to the web of belief confronting him as we are to ours. But not everyone has a reputation for erudition rivaling that of Descartes, who could skip a survey of the relevant literature without being accused of either ignorance or insolence. The rest of us would do well to confront the scholarly output pertinent to our project, even if we really are conducting a Cartesian experiment. The objective here is not to tear down the web but to illustrate what can be done without it, which calls for a demonstrable, and preferably demonstrated, understanding of what is and can be done with it.

What this requires, more than anything, is a relationship with Plato. While that cannot be built on what third parties have to say, it also does not require an academic vacuum. As in any relationship, mutual acquaintances might initiate or

facilitate the process, but the strength of the end result is commensurate with the personal engagement. Mere acquaintance is obviously not the richest relationship imaginable. And habituation and inculcation are no substitute for understanding. Plato scholars may, most assuredly without shame or folly, and often with much benefit, subscribe to one school of thought or another. But this should follow personal deliberation and reflection rather than shaping it. Their considered opinions should be the inspiration for that subscription, not the other way around.

Indeed, a quest for the real Plato would end up as a simulation, far short of a relationship, if left to enlightenment through commentary alone. Yet it would also be unlikely to reach fruition if conducted through a solitary reading of dialogue after dialogue. Fortunately, these are not mutually exclusive alternatives. Nor are they jointly sufficient means to the desired end. Understanding the man fully, or even adequately, requires understanding the circumstances of his life, the nuances and depths of his thought, and the details of his work, not merely on the level of individual dialogues, but also in regard to the whole of the corpus, that is, its structural intricacies. Only then will an examination of this or that dialogue be adequately informed. Any attempt to understand a particular dialogue, as it is essentially an episode in a developing relationship with Plato, will flourish with the holism of the effort.

A caveat is in order here: Despite the recommendation not to approach Plato from any particular perspective before approaching him through the dictates of reason alone, the attempt to find the real Plato might itself be construed as a subscription to a predefined pattern of thinking about Plato. This is because of a schism between those who claim that Plato's dialogues impart doctrine and those who claim that they do not, the first view being labeled "dogmatism," and, the second, "skepticism," or "nondogmatism." Thus, the proposal to rethink Plato and to forge a relationship with him may seem to be taking sides on this issue from the beginning, presumably, the side of the dogmatist. And this may appear to be at odds with the claim that we do not need to approach Plato from a predefined angle in order to understand him.

However, the recommendation here is not to ignore the skeptical position and instead to pretend that each and every dialogue is a direct gateway to the mind of Plato, who delivers dogma after dogma throughout the corpus. The suggestion, rather, is that we should be interested in this difference, not to mention other significant methodological issues, only as a problem dividing scholars and not as a solution demanding adoption. If the mere attempt to understand Plato counts as taking sides, simply because it implies that there is something, as opposed to nothing, to be understood, then, skepticism be damned, *Rethinking Plato* is a veritable manifesto of dogmatism.

In actuality, though, the quest here for the real Plato is not an attempt to settle methodological questions but a discovery mission making use of all the available evidence. Bringing together the essential components of a proper exegesis, an integrated platform for rethinking Plato constitutes the first part of the book. This interpretive substructure devotes a chapter each to the life, thought,

and works of Plato. The natural complement to this is a demonstration of where this might lead in the analysis of individual dialogues. This is the theme of the second part.

The second part of the book proceeds with a selection of four dialogues, each in its own chapter: *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*. Each of these chapters is a critical commentary on the dialogue to which it is dedicated. How they stand out from existing conceptions is not necessarily in a revolutionary deviation from what may be expected but in a rogue exploration of where we can end up, independently of what is expected, in pursuing a personal relationship with Plato. The book itself is nothing if not the exposition of a developing relationship with Plato, a kind of friendship.

Why these dialogues instead of others? And if the aim and approach are purely demonstrative, why not just one of these dialogues? First, with respect to the demonstration in question, this is not a specific method to be applied or formula to be instantiated. Rather the reverse, the intention is to get away from methods and formulas. This kind of demonstration calls for more than one example. In fact, rather than an example, it calls for an experience. Second, with respect to the particular selection, these happen to be the very dialogues, almost always taken as a unit, constituting a student's first, and often only, experience with Plato. That alone makes the selection appropriate. But it also creates a special responsibility: an obligation to extract the Plato from the Socrates.

In a way, this is the opposite of the more fashionable endeavor of extracting the Socrates from the Plato. Socratic studies are at the height of their popularity, and Plato is the place to turn to for any project in that area. As for mining the Platonic corpus for pure Plato, this will never be an exact science. Presumably, throwing out everything staked out by the Socratic scholars should do the trick, leaving behind the Platonic core, and thus saving a lot of time. But there are specialists in this area as well, indicating that sifting through philosophical leftovers is not the way to go, and suggesting that their Socratic counterparts have no better claim to methodological precision. At any rate, the aim here is not to make a science out of either, but to urge sensitivity to a tendency among students exposed to these four dialogues to idolize Socrates without understanding Plato.

Idolizing Socrates, of course, is no crime, at least not of the hemlock variety. No one better can be nominated for a firm grounding in morality, and historians of philosophy would be hard pressed to come up with a more able debater. What would be a shame, however, is to let students walk away with this impression as the full extent of their intellectual return on investment in a course, or module, on Plato. Yet this is not far from what goes on in introductory philosophy courses covering Plato in any detail.

Hardly anyone graduates from college without having been exposed to Plato in some manner or degree. The exposure usually comes from the cluster of dialogues built around the story of the trial and execution of Socrates, the four dialogues taken up in this book. While this constitutes the standard collegiate introduction to Plato, it quickly turns into, and typically ends up as, an immersion



course in Socrates. Granted, students understand that Plato is the author, and, Socrates, the protagonist, but the fact that Socrates is also a real person, and a singularly admirable one at that, immediately inspires hero worship. Plato can no more compete with his protagonist than Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John can with theirs. As a result, the typical orientation process scheduled for Plato often turns out to be mostly about Socrates.

The present work fortifies the Platonic side of the equation, treating the disciple as more than a narrator of the life and death of the master. An alternative would have been to let Plato shine for himself by focusing the second part of the book on a few of the works in the late period. But going there would probably be more fruitful in a later stage of rethinking Plato. Moreover, showing that Plato shines just as brightly in the presence of Socrates is a greater service, thus validating the selection of the four dialogues constituting the academic module familiar from introductory courses. In this spirit, the second part of the book can be taken as a Platonic guide or companion to standard compilations of the Socratic saga.

That said, even in its auxiliary function in that capacity, it is not a substitute for reading the dialogues themselves, and it is not a study guide for the next midterm. Nor is it an instructor's manual. Plato is so much fun that hardly anyone should be tempted to seek an alternative to reading the original, at least in translation. He is also often so easy to follow as to require no instruction or assistance. Understanding Plato does not depend on a special teacher or pedagogical approach. Nor does the effort call for spoon-feeding or sugar-coating the details. In fact, Plato can be so deceptively simple that the student, or any other reader, often needs to be shown the difficulty rather than being helped out of it. Hence, the approach here does not necessarily simplify the material. It does not even shrink from complicating what may appear to be simple. It does, however, aim to bring out all that is pertinent to the message in each work discussed and to the treatment of each topic considered.

The only obvious barrier to direct access is that Plato wrote almost exclusively in dialogue form. This is not to say that his philosophy cannot be discerned from his work but that guidance toward that end would be useful. The most common trap in drawing out the philosophy from the literature is to treat this merely as a matter of separating the logic from the drama. Indeed, a Platonic dialogue can be stripped of everything extraneous to the logic, and studied exclusively through the arguments it contains. That, too, would be doing philosophy, but it would no longer be the philosophy of Plato. Reading Plato purely for the logic would be like reading Shakespeare purely for the grammar, or, possibly worse, like studying physics purely for the math.

What is required is a balanced approach, taking stock of the logic, the drama, and the historical circumstances, all at once. This is particularly important in a typical Socratic dialogue such as the *Euthyphro*, which ends in apparent failure and frustration, and perhaps even more so in the opposite case presented by a dialogue such as the *Phaedo*, which ends in boundless and undisguised satisfaction, not to mention an infectious optimism and enthusiasm, all resting rather

precariously on a series of arguments that are not very convincing. In between, what are we to make of the *Apology*, where we find the master of debate failing to win his most important argument, the one for his life, and what of the *Crito*, where we encounter an uncompromising advocate of authoritarianism? For a major philosopher, Plato can come across as embracing one too many an argument that seems questionable, to say the least, plus a position or two looking surprisingly untenable, or even unpalatable.

Yet appearances can be deceiving, especially in a Platonic dialogue. Students midway through their first course in logic revel in picking out errors in the reasoning of published writers, especially of philosophers, showing off their newly acquired skills in recognizing such faults and in identifying them as one fallacy or another. In contrast, the object in reading Plato is to determine how apparent mistakes, if any, might contribute to the overall aim or message of the dialogue, not how they might have been avoided in the first place. Plato, after all, while predating the birth of formal logic in Aristotle, is not known for outlandishly stupid arguments. Where any are found, it is better to look for an explanation than for a pat on the back.

The intermediation needed, then, is somewhat more expository than argumentative. This being so, the aim of the second part of the book is to explain each work, not to defend or attack it, and even less to wrestle with another commentator who defends or attacks it. The analytical and exegetical execution is not entirely devoid of opinion, but opinions are, as much as possible, identified as such, instead of disguised as fact. The corresponding chapters, whether in expressing opinions, advancing arguments, or reporting facts, are not interdependent. Appreciating one does not require perusing another. Inspecting just one and ignoring all the rest, hence, treating the book as a companion or a reference guide to be consulted as needed should not present any problems, though that is not the primary intention.

The primary intention, as intimated earlier, betrays a more holistic concept, a scholarly exercise in rethinking Plato. The most accurate characterization of this project is, at the risk of being cryptic, the public exposition of a personal relationship with Plato, a friendship, really. How can we become friends with a dead philosopher? The same way we do with a living one: by collaborating in pursuit of the truth. In the spirit of a legendary appraisal ascribed to his greatest student, Aristotle: Plato is a friend, and is dear to us, but the truth is dearer. This anecdotal juxtaposition of friendship and truth is quoted differently by different sources, but a strict quotation is out of the question, especially if Plato is to be identified by name. The closest we come to this in the Aristotelian corpus is a general assessment in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1096a11–16), where the reference to Plato is only implicit albeit obvious. If we prefer to name Plato, the best we can do is to paraphrase Aristotle, not to quote him. Curiously, the aphorism has come down to us in some rigid formulations, the most popular of which seems to be this: “Plato is dear to me, but dearer still is truth.” No matter what the best reconstruction may be, the spirit in which the original expression was uttered has been a guiding force

here, where the aim is not to defend Plato but to show what it takes to become his friend. Hence, the aim, or rather obligation, of that friendship, has been to lay out the truth about Plato, not to glorify his thought, which, everyone knows, even when it strays from the consensus, and perhaps especially then, is glorious enough as it is. This was so for Aristotle, and it is so now.

The truth is for everyone, but a scholarly monograph usually is not. We are all laypersons about one thing or another, indeed, about well nigh everything, and we all tend to approach the expert with the same dreaded cliché: “Explain it to me as you would to a two-year old!” The age reference may vary, but the nature of the request does not. We want the explanation to be short and simple yet definitive and comprehensive. And we demonstrate the same patience with books as we do with the professors we accost at cocktail parties. No doubt, there is a perceived need for that sort of information, and perhaps, therefore, for a simple book on Plato that can be read on an exercise bike while watching television. This is not that book.

This is, however, a book for any serious student of Plato. And that category includes college professors no less than the people they teach. If students find the material a bit challenging, so much the better, for they will find it all the more useful. If Plato scholars find the material rather familiar, mission accomplished, for there is nothing new under the sun, nor inside the cave. No new book on Plato can surprise the experts; not anymore, at least not in a good way. And it is not the aim of this book to do so in any way.

Explanations, illustrations, and elaborations may often exceed the requirements of Plato scholars. But this is inevitable. Plato scholars hardly need Plato explained. And this book is not meant to educate them. Quite the opposite, it purports, with sincere appreciation and open gratitude, to be the reflection of an education by them.

What places them in the center of the target audience is the nature of Platonic scholarship as dialectic, just the way Plato himself intended. Expertise, even at the highest level, is not a terminal achievement. It is not a static state but a dynamic process. Plato scholars are not frozen in academic stasis, instead, flourishing in interaction, often with disagreement but always in dialogue. This, then, is a new voice in that dialogue.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Jackson, Mississippi, to Turkish parents, the author started life as a stranger in a strange land, as he explored the Bible Belt of the Deep South with a name like Necip Fikri Alican. His formative years also included exposure to Turkey, where the name seemed more familiar, but, the land, even stranger.

Thus conditioned from childhood with a taste for odd combinations, he got a chance, as he entered college, to test the workable limits of eclecticism. The first step in this direction was undergraduate studies at Millsaps College, where he earned a B.B.A. in 1985 and a B.A. in 1986, graduating *magna cum laude* with a triple major in business administration, economics, and philosophy. The next step was the M.B.A. program of Vanderbilt University, where he finished up in 1988 with a concentration in finance at the Owen Graduate School of Management. The final touch was graduate work in philosophy, a field in which he received an A.M. in 1990 and a Ph.D. in 1994, both at Washington University in St. Louis, where his specialty was ethics, broadly conceived, but his work was decidedly historical, and, his approach, distinctively analytic.

His intellectual pursuits continue to include scholarly work in philosophy and economics. He is interested in several periods and figures in the history of Western philosophy, particularly in its nascency with the Greeks and in its revival with the Enlightenment.

He is the author of *Mill's Principle of Utility: A Defense of John Stuart Mill's Notorious Proof*. As intimated in the title, this is a scholarly monograph vindicating Mill's proof of the principle of utility. The motivating spark for it was not that the principle is so compelling but that the proof has been so misunderstood. Hence, it is more about the proof than the principle. To elaborate, the book examines and endorses Mill's approach to ethical theory from a strictly methodological perspective, that is, from the standpoint of the viability of the moral reasoning inherent in the ethical system advocated, independently of the strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism itself as a school of thought.

Alican has also been pursuing less defensive and more constructive projects. Plato and Kant account for the bulk of his current research interests in philosophy, while his recent studies in economics focus separately on Turkey and the European Union as well as on relations between the two.



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