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Platonism as a Philosophical Method

**Ignacio García Peña
Assistant Professor
University of Salamanca
Spain**

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Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr URL:
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Platonism as a Philosophical Method

Ignacio García Peña

Abstract

The concept of Platonism has shown variations throughout history, but generally it has been associated with those thinkers who have accepted, with different permutations, the so-called Theory of Ideas, a theory defended by those who have advocated for the existence of immaterial, universal and transcendent entities. Philosophical doctrines such as nominalism, existentialism or postmodernism have opposed this type of thinking in ways that might be considered anti-Platonic. What will be defended here, however, is that Platonism is not a specific doctrine, but rather a way of understanding philosophy itself. It is true that the meaning of the thought and works of the great Athenian philosopher has been discussed since the first members of the Academy appeared until the present day. This is precisely one of the fundamental features of Platonism, the constant need for discussion and criticism, which, in line with the Socratic method, is always present in Plato. Some philosophers, such as Popper, stressed the importance of conceiving philosophy as a process, a constant search for knowledge maintaining a sceptical and critical attitude, as seen in Plato's dialogues. This concept of Platonism is still very useful in the contemporary areas of education, ethics and politics. Rethinking this matter may allow us to improve our way of understanding, teaching and practicing philosophy more fruitfully.

Introduction

According to the dictionary and popular opinion, Platonism is the school and doctrine of Plato, which defends the existence of immutable entities. These are the basis of all beings and of our knowledge. Obviously, it cannot be denied that this is one of the most important aspects of his thought, also related to his epistemology, political and ethical philosophies.

However, there are many dialogues that do not reference said theory but should not be considered any less Platonic. One of the most archetypical features of the work of the Athenian philosopher is its inherent variety, the complexity and even the difficulty for readers when it comes to interpreting it. From the most immediate disciples of Plato to the most erudite scholars of the last hundred years,¹ Plato's actual thought has been a topic of permanent discussion. Does it correspond to what Socrates affirms in the dialogues?² How is that possible if he defends different ideas in different dialogues?³ Did Plato write his actual thought or did he reserve it for oral transmission?⁴ Are myths really important in his philosophy or should we think that he uses them just for literary purposes?⁵ Is he a dogmatic or sceptical philosopher?⁶

Currently, Plato's interpreters are divided into those who believe that the philosopher did not write down his doctrines and those who believe that the only reliable source we have are the dialogues. In ancient times, the philosophers and readers of Plato most inclined to metaphysics and mysticism built a similar image of the philosopher, hence highlighting the Pythagorean influence and granting great importance to *Republic*, *Parmenides*, *Sophist* or

¹ Due to the enormous amount of studies concerning every aspect of Plato's philosophy, we will only offer some references to a few representative and influential works.

² Although an affirmative answer is very common, the last few years have seriously called this into question, paying special attention to the dramatic and fictional style of the dialogues [Francisco J. Gonzalez, *The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies* (Lanham (Maryland): Rowman & Littlefield, 1995); Debra Nails, Harold Tarrant, ed., *Second sailing: Alternative perspectives on Plato* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica 2015)].

³ Traditionally, the evolutionist interpretation of Plato's philosophy, interested in the development and order of writing of the dialogues, has been opposed to the systematic vision, whose proponents (cited below) generally concede great importance to the oral teachings.

⁴ As we know, according to the Tübingen School, the true thought of Plato was reserved for oral transmission and the dialogues only contain a reference to it. About those "unwritten doctrines" see, Hans-Joachim Kramer, *Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles (Arete with Plato and Aristotle)* (Heidelberg: Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1959). For an overall view is highly recommendable the number VI of the *Methexis Review*.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of this issue, see: Catherine Collobert, Pierre Destrée, Francisco J. Gonzalez, *Plato and Myth* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Luc Brisson, *Plato the Myth Maker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Álvaro Vallejo Campos, *Mito y persuasión en Platón (Myth and Persuasion in Plato)* (Sevilla: Revista de Filosofía, 1993).

⁶ For a sceptical view of the development of Platonic philosophy, see: Harold Tarrant, *Scepticism or Platonism?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Tarrant, *Plato's first interpreters* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Julia Annas, "Plato the Skeptic," in *The Socratic movement*, ed. Paul A. Vander Waerdt (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Ramón Román Alcalá, *El enigma de la Academia de Platón: escépticos contra dogmáticos en la Grecia clásica (The enigma of Plato's Academy: skeptics against dogmatists in classical Greece)* (Córdoba: Berenice, 2007).

Timaeus. On the contrary, those whose focus was on the first Socratic dialogues (*Theaetetus* and the difficulty of extracting solid conclusions from the texts) thought that Plato studied all philosophical matters without establish anything definitively.

However, this article's goal is not to clarify the true philosophy of Plato, nor is it to discover what the philosopher thought, as was indeed the goal for the hermeneutics of the 19th century. On the contrary, keeping in mind the passage of *Phaedrus* (275d-e) where it is said that a written text is like an orphan - because it becomes independent and autonomous and does not have his father's help at its disposal - this study intends to enact and to set in motion those dead and static characters, which are like the seeds planted in the garden of the soul.

Therefore, the Platonism mentioned in the title is not related to academic philosophy, nor to the later interpretations and schools based on Plato, but to content that is philosophical and logical, mythical and poetical, ethical and political, scientific and metaphysical, sophistic, pre-Socratic and Socratic. In addition, it is connected to the form and style of the dialogues, its diversity, difficulty and complexity, to its capacity to stimulate, surprise, anger and to inspire love and passion.

New Concept of Platonism

Leonardo Tarán's⁷ attempt at a definition can serve this study as a starting point:

"By Platonism I mean Plato's philosophic thought as it is expressed in his dialogues, including not only his doctrine of absolute ethical standards, his conception of the soul, the theory of ideas, and so forth, but also his method. For in Plato's case it is impossible, if one wishes to do justice to the evidence, to separate the doctrine from the method and vice versa. His method includes the elenchus, the procedures of hypothesis and of collection and division, and the very way in which he chose to present his thought: the dialogue."

Plato is a philosopher who compels us think about what philosophy is. And, probably, this is the main problem discussed among scholars: Plato's conception of philosophy itself. Maybe it is a way of living, a path that never ends or an object of knowledge. If the latter is true, maybe it could be transmitted and written down, but perhaps not. The Athenian philosopher is such a great writer that he makes us think about writing and reading, about what can be transmitted and understood. His literary style is so peculiar that even more than two millennia later, we are not sure about what aspects we

⁷ Leonardo Tarán, *Collected papers (1962-1999)* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 218.

should pay more attention to in order to understand the message that the author wants to express. It is not even clear if he wanted to express any message at all.

Thus, Platonism can be seen as a kind of hermeneutics. From a theoretical perspective as well as in practice, according to the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*, Plato forces us to face the problem of interpretation. Any reader of the dialogues must answer the questions that the text suggests. Sometimes it is difficult to understand the opinions of the characters; in addition, the doubt concerning the actual thought of their author is unavoidable and it seems impossible to decide. Therefore, the history of Platonic interpretations and the different notions of Platonism involves dozens of questions that happen to be fundamental still today: Is philosophy a perpetual search for knowledge which may never offer conclusive answers or should we compare it to the scientific method, which aims to offer universal, accurate and true answers? Are there objective, absolute and immutable values that allow us to guide our individual and collective behaviour? Can politics become similar to other technical activities, so that the government of the States is based in some kind of accurate knowledge?

Depending on different interpretations of Plato and Platonism, different answers will be given to those questions. This fact could serve as proof of the richness of Plato's thought and also of the hermeneutical nature of our understanding because it presents a variety of answers to those who approach the texts with different prejudices, questions and expectations. As a result, the validity of the Athenian philosopher cannot be denied. His work suggests a great number of answers, but especially poses questions related to the process of understanding and its interpretative character, as well as the possibility and the kind of knowledge that can be transmitted, which is particularly interesting in the field of humanities. According to the *Phaedrus*, including its content and its structure, to know is to recollect, to recognise and to merge what we already knew and expect with all we read and hear.

Platonism understood as a philosophical method has both a hermeneutical aspect and a sceptical one, in line with its etymological roots rather than the Hellenistic School and definitively away from the popular meaning of the term. Originally, the word *skepsis* indicated researching and investigation; however, it did not refer to doubt, denial or the suspension of judgment, which is why Platonic scepticism is also a type of renewed Socratism.

Platonic scepticism is far from being Pyrrhonian or using the *epoché*; the Athenian philosopher does not seem to be afraid of making mistakes or being wrong. It is a kind of scepticism and a critical attitude that is fed with the continuous exposition of ideas and opinions. It is precisely what usually scares us, from an intellectual point of view: mistakes, aporias and contradictions. So, in a different way from the Heraclitean sentence, war is the father of all things, an intellectual fight. It is not my intention to present Plato as a sophist or a postmodern philosopher who rejects the existence of the truth (if it is really possible to do so). I believe he was not someone who gives up the hope to find it, but neither was he a simple dogmatic thinker who wrote his ideas in stone so as not to be called into question. He is the one who complained about the

immobility of writing as a format that repeats the same thing over and over. It cannot be denied that Plato would have composed excellent essays had he wanted. That way, he would have simplified our task of interpreting his thought. However, we would have lost one of the most inspiring aspects of his thought. Plato is a polyhedron of multiple faces, a kaleidoscope that cannot be reduced to unity or uniformity. Gerald A. Press has studied in depth those singular and modern aspects of the Platonic style, and he adds:⁸

"The set of literary devices Plato employs is both extensive and in ways so strangely familiar that we may think of him as the original post-modern writer, since the dialogues regularly deploy irony, playfulness, intertextuality, historiographic metafiction, temporal distortion, unreliable narrators, the author as fictional character, and avoidance of traditional thematic closure."

For this reason, the interpretation of Platonic philosophy and everything we can learn from it becomes an almost endless source, one that is constantly renewed. This is an advantage as well as a disadvantage because diversity of texts and interpretations makes it difficult to reach agreement or generate an accurate and complete picture of Plato's thought. Precisely in our contemporary context we may be happy with a collage or an impressionistic portrait of Plato that combines multiple elements and perspectives, even though not in an entirely coherent way. The words of the prestigious translator of Greek philosophy and scholar, Emilio Lledó point us in that direction:⁹

"Plato's philosophy is the sum of the speeches of all the interlocutors of his dialogues, the sum of all their contradictions. Hence its unfinished richness, hence its modernity. For that very reason we are still interested in it, not for the possible solutions that it may offer to so many problems that appear in his work, but because he posed the majority of the questions that have continued concerning philosophy."

Of course, Plato's works do not only include questions without answers. The multiple and diverse solutions proposed in the dialogues have been and still are the subject of fruitful debates, but the author himself is an enigma and a problem for all the interpreters; there is little doubt that his ability to generate problems and philosophical discussions has no paragon in the history of philosophy.

Reading Platonic Dialogues

⁸ Gerald A. Press, "Changing Course in Plato Studies," in *Second sailing: Alternative perspectives on Plato*, ed. Debra Nails, Harold Tarrant (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 2015), 191.

⁹ Emilio Lledó, introduction to *Diálogos, I*, Platón (Madrid: Gredos, 1985), 11.

If we pay attention to the most important testimonies preserved, Plato's dialogues, it seems obvious that we must consider their structure before trying to extract the author's thought. First of all, they are extremely complex and carefully composed fictional works. Secondly, we often forget not just that they are dialogues, dramas with characters situated in a particular context full of significance, but also that Plato, as we can read in *Sophist*, 264a, expresses the opinion that thought is defined through dialogue, for thought itself is nothing more than the internal and silent dialogue of the soul. Therefore, this soul has the ability to argue with itself, to pose new questions, to reject what had previously been thought and believed.

Moreover, Plato himself is probably his biggest critic that has ever existed and dialogues such as *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus* or *Sophist* are undeniable evidence of his capacity to criticize and correct himself, as a good Socratic disciple always partook in self-examination.

To use the same words that entitle the famous work of Karl Popper, it could be said that every Platonic dialogue, as well as his texts as a whole, implies the constant use of conjectures and refutations. Besides defending one's ideas, as is common practice, he is also willing to attack them, to call them into question in order to improve them, qualify them or even refute them. As stated by Professor Press¹⁰ this makes it very difficult for us to talk about Platonic doctrines and turns Plato into a different philosopher from the rest. In spite of the fact that we have preserved such a big number of works, it is not easy to decide whether he was convinced about the ideas that appear in the dialogues. In fact, he continues, it is not a good idea to look for doctrines in texts as peculiar as the dialogues:

"It was assumed that, for philosophical purposes, one could separate and exclude literary and dramatic elements as mere "form" as opposed to the logical-dogmatic "content" with which alone philosophy is taken to be concerned. One could ignore both the evident artistry of Plato's use of language, of drama, and the dialogism of the dialectical exchanges, their polyphony and intertextuality. In short, the dialogues were not taken to be literary or dramatic in any sense relevant to their philosophic interpretation."

In this regard, an interesting consideration was made by the Spanish philosopher Julián Marías. In an article about the literary genres in philosophy, he points out that the readers modify the style and structure of the texts, since they are interpreted in agreement with what every era or individual means by "philosophy."¹¹ The readers of the 20th century seemed to read the pre-Socratic poems and Plato's dialogues looking for thesis, judgements and doctrines, considering their way of expression to be something incidental and, sometimes, even annoying.

¹⁰ Press, "Changing Course in Plato Studies," 188.

¹¹ Julián Marías, *Los géneros literarios en filosofía. Ensayos de teoría (Literary genres in philosophy. Theory Tests)* (Barcelona: Barna, 1954), 9-11.

Along with the meaning of the Greek term "logos," which includes thought, language and word among other things, Marías states that an idea is not like the liquid that is poured into a jar or a glass, as if there could be a thought without any linguistic form. On the contrary, words and writing are the incarnations of our thought.

Even though Plato is usually pictured as an idealist philosopher engaged in matters beyond the reality we live in, he is the one who through his works reminds us that thought is always linked to an individual and a specific situation. It should not surprise us that the great disciple of Socrates stressed the need to join thought and life, and also the importance of focusing in context on problems to be resolved. He emphasises the need to know the character and even the feelings of individuals in order to understand their way of thinking and living. In accordance with this, Professor Francisco J. Gonzalez seeks a third way of interpretation that is not limited to philosophical arguments and does not portray Plato as a sceptical philosopher who wants to abandon all belief. Instead, he urges us to consider the dramatic context of the dialogues, the developing action and the traits of the characters. These were aspects carefully considered by Plato, since they are also an important part of the philosophical message, which cannot always be expressed through concepts and abstract reasoning.

It seems obvious that sometimes Plato wants us to make use of our rationality and he is well aware of the essential role played by proofs and deductions in philosophical activities. Our purpose is to defend the need to present Platonism without the reductionism that makes it a one-dimensional philosophy.

According to these poetic words of Martha C. Nussbaum:¹²

"Dialogues, then, unlike all the books criticized by Socrates, might fairly claim that they awaken and enliven the soul, arousing it to rational activity rather than lulling it into drugged passivity."

In her analysis of *Phaedo*, she clearly indicates that the purpose of the proofs proposed in order to demonstrate the immortality of the soul is to make use of a rational procedure as opposed to those used in tragedies. As she indicates, *"Creon learns not by being defeated in an argument, but by feeling the loss of a son and remembering a love that he had not seen or felt truly during the loved one's life."*¹³

On the contrary, Simmias, Cebes and the rest of the Socratic friends do not learn through the affection that they feel for their master, but rather through comprehending concepts and following the argumentative order of the demonstrations. However, it is Professor Nussbaum, in her suggestive comment on *Phaedrus*, who pays special attention to all those beautiful passages at the beginning of the dialogue, where Plato immerses us into a

¹² Martha C. Nussbaum, *The fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 127.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 133.

Dionysian environment both so close and so strange for Socrates. In this environment, we can almost smell the fragrance of the flowers and feel the breeze on our skin and the water on our feet. The depiction is so vivid that it is almost possible to enjoy the cicadas' song and be transported by the muses under the pleasant shadow of the plane tree. We should remember that one of the main topics of the dialogue is love and how the memory of Beauty is awakened by the shiver generated by the vision of the person we love, in whom we notice a fragment of divinity and eternity. In this very dialogue, we are told that the soul is a set of forces that advances united and that must be harmonized, so the soul is not just pure intellect, but instead it resembles a chariot driven by passion and desire. As a result, it should not be surprising that Plato applies all kinds of resources, because the complexity of the human soul allows us to learn in so many different ways. That is the reason why love, pleasure, amazement and imagination are a key part of his literary works and his notion of philosophy.

All those elements, along with the fact that they make us conscious of how difficult it is to make general evaluations of Plato's thought and work, open the possibility to generate a new image of this philosopher, one that goes beyond the rationalist or the creator of dogmas and doctrines, even though we should probably include these features in the indefinable mosaic that is the Athenian philosopher.

As was highlighted above, one of the most remarkable aspects of the Platonic dialogues is their complexity. Currently, in so many different philosophical, political and pedagogical contexts, the idea of diversity is mentioned very often. It is considered that complex thought (and the diversity of thinking) is one of the most relevant achievements of the human spirit. While it makes the tasks of finding easy and accurate solutions nearly impossible, this type of thought contributes to a more enriching world.

In sum, these issues are part of Platonism if we understand Platonism itself in this specific manner. We find more than one hundred characters in the dialogues, ideas repeated and modified, returns to the starting point, conversations without a defined conclusion, and an author who refuses to take part in his own fictional works. Every one of these elements is situated in the context of continuous investigations about aspects such as virtue, the improvement of political conditions, the nature of human knowledge and its objects, nature itself and art, language and music, and finally, our own actions and passions.

Plato and Aristotle

Through the revision and modification of the traditional conception of Platonism, we will not only change our way of reading and interpreting Plato's texts, but we shall also modify our understanding of his heritage and his

disciples, especially of the most important one. I agree with Professor Gerson¹⁴ in the idea that any inquiry about Platonism and its significance must face the question of the Platonism of Aristotle. Despite not having enough space here to investigate this issue in depth, this article shall, at least, put forward the following argument.

According with a non-doctrinal interpretation of Plato, or with the one we are suggesting that includes formal, literary and methodological aspects as part of the Platonic philosophy, Aristotle could appear as the most brilliant and important outcome. We could picture him as another interlocutor of the dialogues who, like everyone else, is allowed to introduce modifications and add details to whatever had been said, to reject some previous opinions and support others on new and more solid bases. From this perspective, Diogenes Laertius' words sound very reasonable when he asserts that Aristotle was the most important of Plato's disciples; we may also suggest that he was the first Platonic philosopher. As the excellent studies Lloyd P. Gerson¹⁵ have shown, a great number of Neoplatonist philosophers attempted to synthesize the works of both philosophers by considering that there was a *symphonía* between them. Most of the works and explanations of these philosophers tend to assume an opposition, despite underlining the influence of Plato in Aristotle's thought.¹⁶

However, in line with the arguments put forth in this paper, a true Platonist would not be the one who repeated and defended the same as the master, but the one who continued to investigate and aim to correct and improve his thinking as much as possible. Aristotle follows in Plato's steps, starts from his principles, his ideas and his vocabulary, although his genius takes him to places unknown by Plato.

Much as we can say that Aristotle is Platonic, we can say that Plato is Socratic. Although we believe that Plato went far beyond the Socratic search for concepts and universal definitions, offering different solutions to ontological problems on the basis of absolute and immaterial entities, no one considers it a problem to describe Plato as a Socratic. We even use the word Socratic for schools and thinkers of very diverse types, such as is the case with the Minor Socratics, who are so different from each other and from Plato. This is because the Socratic element seems to be their method and way of philosophizing more than the particular content of their thought.

¹⁴ Lloyd P. Gerson, "What is Platonism?," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 43 (2005a): 269.

¹⁵ Gerson, "What is Platonism?"; Gerson, *Aristotle and other Platonists* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005b); Gerson, "Harold Cherniss and the Study of Plato Today," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 52, no. 3 (2014).

¹⁶ Since the appearance of Jaeger's famous study in 1923, there has been a tendency to accept an evolution in Aristotle, which would pass from the acceptance of Platonism in his youth to the rejection of it in his maturity. Of course, some scholars have opposed this view, reversing the meaning of this evolution, as von Arnim immediately did, or denying it, as is the case of the most relevant work of Düring [Hans von Arnim, *Die drei aristotelischen Ethiken (The Three Aristotelian Ethics)* (Leipzig-Wien: Sitzungsberichte der Wiener Akademie, 1924); Ingemar Düring, *Aristoteles. Darstellung und Interpretation seines Denkens (Aristotle. Representation and interpretation of his thinking)* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1966)].

Undoubtedly, when we use the terms "Platonism" and "method," the word "dialectic" is what comes to mind. This is not the place for the discussion of a subject which so many scholars have dealt with so thoroughly, especially Julius Stenzel¹⁷ and Richard Robinson.¹⁸ However, it could be said that dialectic, beyond the Socratic exchange of questions and answers that we find in the first dialogues -although related to it- is the method that seeks the universal in the particular and that must distinguish the species included in each genus, in order to give an adequate explanation for particulars, as exposed in *Phaedrus* (265d-266c) and *Sophist* (253d-e). Maybe what dialectic actually means and what is essential to the classical conception of Platonism could be summarised in the famous words pronounced by Socrates in *Phaedo* (97c-100a), where he states that he has begun a second sailing and he will search for the truth and reality in reasoning and concepts rather than in material things. It was the Socratic path which Plato and Aristotle continued, since it is based on the assumption that knowledge of things, as well as its reality, even if they possess matter, depends on the formal and universal. Essence, or *eidos*, is what makes things what they actually are.

In short, the idea, which is to some extent seen in pre-Socratic thought, is that the constitutive principle of things is not identified with its material dimension. The Aristotelian task, continuing the Platonic project, is to find the place that corresponds to the forms, taking into account that their separation from that material principle makes it difficult to explain nature and particular entities. Setting aside this metaphysical dilemma, Aristotle, rather than opposing Plato, follows in his steps, trying to improve what his master had done. Therefore, we could consider him a Platonic philosopher, even if we maintain the doctrinal interpretation of Plato. What really matters in this case is his ability to propose new and clever solutions to the problems that appear so often in the dialogues, and that probably were discussed in the Academy.

Something that both philosophers also seem to have in common, apart from their characterization of philosophy itself, is the idea of its origin and the attitude of those who practise it. Surprise, perplexity and amazement, as explicitly recognized both by Plato and Aristotle, constitute the starting points of every activity that deserves to be called philosophical. There is no doubt that Plato succeeds in producing this effect on his readers, with all the aporias, changes and even many ambiguities. Once again, we believe that they should not be considered to be ancillary or anecdotal, but a key part of Platonic philosophy. We tend to pay attention to the content instead of the procedures, forgetting again that Socratic philosophy as a whole was based on a method that almost lacked any content.

It is not that Plato wants Philosophy to be a mere formal procedure, or that he tells us not to learn philosophy but to philosophize. On the contrary, his method is certainly full of content. His scepticism is very far from the use of *epoché* since his investigation is based on the constant proposal of doctrines: his method, like the Socratic one, is actually impregnated with a set of

¹⁷ Julius Stenzel, *Plato's Method of Dialectic* (New York: Arno Press, 1940).

¹⁸ Richard Robinson, *Plato's earlier dialectic* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1953).

preconceptions. The process of asking questions endlessly allows us to suppress mistakes and perhaps, remembering Popper again, able to move closer to a truth that we will never reach completely.

Teaching and Learning

The most important issue for us is the pedagogical lesson that we can learn from Plato. Generally, few teachers intend to create doubt in their students; in fact, their goal is to clarify, explain and transmit, not to make the students confused or baffled. However, these procedures, as Plato teaches us, are extremely fruitful in the field of thinking. A highly suggestive example is the set of dialogues from the first Platonic period, the so-called Socratic or aporetic, due to the fact that they end without a conclusion. They do not offer conclusive answers to the questions that arise within them. This becomes a challenge for readers, who, in a certain way, are forced to seek a solution by themselves. The literary genre that Plato chose, or rather created, demands more than any other the attention of the reader. It stimulates the critical capacity and autonomous thinking like no other, although, at times, it does so through myths, refutations and even mistakes and confusions.

Plato, as Aristotle would later argue explicitly (*NE*, 1094b), points out that we should request each type of study the accuracy that its subject allows: we cannot ask a rhetorician for demonstrations nor a mathematician for the use of persuasion. Plato, despite not being as explicit as his disciple, flees both from strict dogmatism and radical scepticism by using myths, which answer extremely important questions, though admitting in advance the need for imprecision and conjecture in certain philosophical issues. In several contexts, the philosopher must abandon demonstrations and introduce himself into the nebulous field of conjecture, imagination and poetry. Sometimes, as if we were interlocutors of Socrates, we become angry with those who lead us into a situation of disorientation, since we are seeking answers and certainties. Yet, philosophically and pedagogically, they play an essential role in intellectual development.

Miguel de Unamuno, a Spanish philosopher of the 20th century, who used to refer to the Athenian as "The divine Plato," invites us to create myths, *mythologeîn* according to the expression of *Phaedo* (61e), as the only available solution to the uncertainties of our existence. Employing a poetic metaphor, one of his most famous novels is entitled *Mist*, suggesting that human knowledge is similar to glimpsing through mist and clouds. Science is like the rain that dissipates this nebulous uncertainty, but most of our actions, beliefs and hopes are immersed in a mist that cannot be dispelled.

He was also an advocate for the ability to generate amazement through confusion and imprecision. He opposed the rise of Positivism in the 19th

century and the attempt to reduce everything to the scientific perspective. Thus, he tells us:¹⁹

"It is said that what the Hellenic tradition does is to distinguish, to separate, to define; my own take is to undefine, to confuse."

He would have been a great character of the Platonic dialogues, saying one thing and then the opposite, and standing out for his feelings and traits as much as for his thoughts and opinions. In the following passage, he seems to make an apology for the Platonic portrait that we have tried to outline in these pages:²⁰

"Among all the intimate rights that we have to conquer, not so much related to laws but to habits, it is not the least precious the inalienable right to contradict me, to be new every day, without ceasing to be always the same; to confirm my different aspects working for my life to integrate them. I find more compact, more equal and more coherent in their complexity paradoxical and contradictory writers rather than those who spend their lives being immovable apostles of a single doctrine, slaves of an idea."

All this leaves us with many doubts about Plato himself, although it encourages the doubt, quest and critical spirit that we consider to be the very basis of Platonism. Obviously, I cannot resolve the question related to the importance of Plato's oral teachings, his doctrine of the One and the principles, nor can I solve my own doubts about it. It is certainly an important issue, but it will probably never have a satisfactory solution. However, I consider that, from the hermeneutic point of view, what we can do is take as reference the philosophical jewels of the Platonic dialogues. Of course, indirect testimonies are valuable in the task of improving our understanding of the Athenian philosopher, but the dialogues are the only things we can consider genuinely Platonic. Professor Thesleff²¹ and his disciples have even questioned the authenticity of the dialogues, which may contain later additions and modifications to what Plato himself wrote. Even that would not diminish a bit the value and usefulness that the dialogues continue having for us, because what interests us is not the concrete individual, the philosopher or the writer, but the learning that comes from the richness of the texts.

"Now, some claim that these poets and philosophers, and especially Plato, did not understand these matters in the way their words sound on the

¹⁹ Miguel de Unamuno, "Prólogo", *Niebla* ("Prologue", *Mist*), in *Obras completas, II. Novelas* (*Complete Works, II. Novels*) (Madrid: Escelicer, 1967), 545.

²⁰ Unamuno, *La ideocracia* (*Ideocracy*), in *Obras completas, I. Paisajes y ensayos* (*Complete Works, I. Landscapes and essays*) (Madrid: Escelicer, 1966), 956.

²¹ Holger Thesleff, *Studies in Platonic Chronology* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1982); Thesleff, *Studies in Plato's Two-Level Model* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1999).

*surface, but wished to conceal their wisdom under certain fables and enigmatic statements. Moreover, they claim that Aristotle's custom in many cases was not to object against their understanding, which was sound, but against their words, lest anyone should fall into error on account of their way of speaking. So says Simplicius in his Commentary. But Alexander held that Plato and the other early philosophers understood the matter just as the words sound literally, and that Aristotle undertook to argue not only against their words but against their understanding as well. Whichever of these may be the case, it is of little concern to us, because the study of philosophy aims not at knowing what men feel, but at what is the truth of things" (Aquinas, *In libros Aristotelis De caelo et mundo expositio*, I, 23, 228).²²*

Conclusion

Plato is a fundamental and decisive author like no other in the history of philosophy. His metaphysical theories are and have been an issue of discussion for centuries, on the objectivity of the essences and the ideal and mathematical entities. His political theory continues generating supporters and detractors; and the same could be said about his theory of art. He is a point of reference both in the theory of science and in mystical and religious matters. This is all the case without us actually being able to be sure about his statements or being able to prove that he was convinced of all those theories. As we have tried to show, the most valuable thing about Platonism is its ability to astonish and to stimulate thinking, through the continuous answers proposed to the incisive Socratic questions. In my opinion, it is a method, a way of thinking and philosophizing, rather than a specific content or thesis. However, it is not a method of imposition or demonstration, but a reasoned contrast of opinions and arguments, which allows us to adapt it to our time, to our political, scientific and pedagogical context, in which we tend to have little disposition to attack our own ideas, to reject what we advocated, and to face our mistakes, inconsistencies and contradictions. That is the reason why we can still profit from it more than two millennia later; Plato's work constitutes a path that we can continue and that will help us understand the world we live in and, above all, how to live in it.

I deem the importance and topicality of Plato all encompassing since every reader has much to learn from his texts, even if they reject the so-called "theory of Ideas," or any of the doctrines traditionally attributed to Plato. Whilst Whitehead's famous assertion may be seen as an exaggeration when he said that the History of Western Philosophy is a set of footnotes to Plato's dialogues, I firmly believe his writings possess such variety, richness and depth that any page in the History of Philosophy could include a footnote mentioning Plato.

²² Thomas Aquinas, *Exposition of Aristotle's Treatise On the Heavens* (Columbus, Ohio: College of St. Mary of the Springs, 1963).

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