



PLAYING WITH PLATO

Philosophers Eager to Write for Popular
Audiences Are Finding Readers Who Want
Answers Science Can't Offer

Clancy Martin

When I was 21, I was trying to decide whether to become a doctor or a philosophy professor. My older brother, whose advice I usually followed, asked me why I wanted to study philosophy. I was evasive. Finally I admitted that a lot of the books I loved had been written by philosophers and philosophy professors. Plus, one of my favorite books at the time, a book I'd read and re-read since I was a teenager, was Hermann Hesse's *Magister Ludi: The Glass Bead Game*, which unabashedly romanticized the life of the professor.

"Be practical. Books are dangerous things," my brother warned me. "Just because it's on paper, you think it's true. *Moneylove* was one of the most damaging books I ever read. Not to mention *How to Win Friends & Influence People*." (I should probably mention that my brother is a very successful luxury jeweler, who continues to love money and, as Dale Carnegie instructs, to "make the other person feel important—and do it sincerely.") This wasn't what I wanted to hear, so I called my dad, at that time a broke New Age

guru and sex therapist living in Jupiter, Florida—not exactly the oracle of Delphi, and not someone whose advice I usually followed. “Every doctor I know is miserable, son,” he told me. “They work all the time and complain about insurance companies.” (Not much has changed since 1988.) “Be a professor. You’ll never be rich, but you’ll be doing what you love: reading and writing. You get summers off. It’s a good life.”

Note that my father didn’t say the good life, which is how a philosophically minded adviser might have put it to me—except that philosophy in America in the 1980s and ’90s seemed to be losing its way in dry, scholastic debates about the most lifeless of topics (what is the meaning of and?). But he told me what I wanted to hear, and a quarter century later, philosophy is making the kind of comeback that leaves a Hermann Hesse groupie glad to have headed for graduate school and ended up with tenure. Amid hand-wringing about the decline of the humanities, the philosopher (and novelist) Rebecca Newberger Goldstein can write a book like Plato at the Googleplex: *Why Philosophy Won’t Go Away*, confident that she’ll find readers eager to turn to philosophers for help in thinking about the meaning of life and how best to live it. Books like Sarah Bakewell’s wildly popular study of Montaigne, *How to Live*, and the successful New York Times blog *The Stone*, back her up, as does the Harper’s column *Ars Philosopha* (full disclosure: I am a frequent contributor to the last).

But Goldstein wisely doesn’t take philosophy’s revival for granted in a culture committed to an increasingly materialistic worldview—materialistic in the philosophical sense, meaning convinced that the scientific study of matter in motion holds the answers to all our questions. The impetus for Goldstein’s ingenious, entertaining, and challenging new book is the theoretical version of the very practical problem I confronted when I graduated from college: Now that we have science, do we really need philosophy? Doesn’t science “bake bread” (not to mention make money) in a way that philosophy never has? Science is responsible for the grand upward march of civilization—so we are often told—but what accomplishments can philosophy claim?

In praise of Plato, the 20th-century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once wrote, “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.” But this, as Goldstein points out, is precisely what might make us worry about philosophy as a discipline:

Those predisposed to dismiss philosophy—some of my best friends—might hear in Whitehead’s kudos to Plato a well-

aimed jeer at philosophy's expense. That an ancient Greek could still command contemporary relevance, much less the supremacy Whitehead claimed for him, does not speak well for the field's rate of progress.

Or does it? The question that Goldstein's book sets out to consider is what we mean by progress, and also what we mean by meaning. Her goal is to do more than prove how relevant philosophy still is. She aims to reveal how many of our most pressing questions simply aren't better answered elsewhere. Much of what we take for progress delivers answers that miss the point, distort issues, ignore complications, and may be generated by badly formulated questions in the first place. Goldstein also wants to show us that figuring out how to live a meaningful life is something very different from understanding the meaning of special relativity or evolution. We are deluged with information; we know how to track down facts in seconds; the scientific method produces new discoveries every day. But what does all that mean for us? As the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard observed:

Whatever the one generation may learn from the other, that which is genuinely human no generation learns from the foregoing ... Thus, no generation has learned from another to love, no generation begins at any other point than at the beginning, no generation has a shorter task assigned to it than had the previous generation.

Another way to put it might be that every generation could use a Plato to tackle those genuinely human lessons. That is the creative, verging on wacky, premise that has inspired Goldstein's approach to demonstrating why philosophy won't (and had better not) go away. She transports Plato into the 21st century and, adopting his own preferred literary form, puts him into fictional dialogue with a variety of contemporary characters. As Socrates was for Plato—the great philosophical interlocutor, living in literary form—so Plato becomes for Goldstein. She ratchets up the entertainment value (this isn't ancient Athens!), eager for drama and topical issues. Plato is put through his paces with an array of in-your-face conversation partners, from a smart if smarmy young employee at Google, to several experts on child-rearing, to a “no-bull” cable-TV talking head, to a neuroscientist. This sounds dangerously facile and cute, but Goldstein mostly pulls it off, cleverly weaving passages directly from Plato's dialogues into her own.

Goldstein's Plato, like Socrates before him, is less interested in teaching those with whom he converses than he is in helping them see that they don't know what they think they know. In sending

Plato to Google, Goldstein deftly exposes the conceptual presumption at the heart of what looks like the latest high-tech methodology. On his visit with the new masters of gathering human knowledge, Plato considers a (fictional) algorithm they have developed called the Ethical Answers Search Engine, or EASE, which does just what its name suggests: it crowd sources answers to ethical problems, the same way businesses now employ crowdsourcing to predict political outcomes and stock-market fluctuations, or to select marketing strategies.


But ethical solutions are not as, well, easy as the search engine might have its users believe. Plato points out that EASE uses a preferential ordering system, so its designers have already begged the philosophical question: they have built into their design their own ideas about what the good life looks like. Furthermore, EASE assumes that the crowd will collectively possess greater knowledge about moral matters than an expert will—but when it comes to the hardest questions, is that the case? After all, most of us would admit we don't know what the good life is—that's why we turn to philosophers—so why would we trust a crowd of strangers who are likely just as confused about morality as we are?

Plato certainly did not think the crowd was a reliable source of ethical insight. It was the crowd, after all, who put Socrates to death. And one of Socrates's favorite moves in Plato's dialogues is to expose moral amateurism for the confused amalgam it is. Plato never managed to say exactly what counted as ethical expertise, but in *Theaetetus* and elsewhere, he has Socrates successfully undermine the moral relativism that was as popular and incoherent in fourth-century-B.C. Athens as it is today. In a similar spirit, Goldstein has Plato reduce his Google interlocutor to a sweaty, defensive mess after 30 or so pages. The whiz kid realizes that behind his clear-cut, EASE-derived answers lie dilemmas that demand a kind of pondering his sorting program can't begin to manage. At one point, for example, Plato's media escort remarks, "We don't do slavery," a view that any crowdsourcing approach would endorse. EASE might get it right sometimes: the moral prohibition against slavery that emerged in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries is surely an example of philosophical progress. But EASE can't explain why it gets it right. And we expect more from truth than just collective agreement—because we often collectively agree in morally mistaken ways.

Like Socrates in the dialogues, Plato emerges from the Googleplex unflustered, looking "more than ever like he was carved in marble, sitting so still and staring so intently," eager to investigate further. At first it struck me as odd that Goldstein's Plato didn't experience

more culture shock in his American travels, but his aplomb is crucial to the point she's trying to make—which echoes Kierkegaard's. Philosophy, at its best, probably doesn't have to progress that much, because the most-difficult and most-important human problems don't change that much. The quest for answers bumps up against obstacles that don't seem to diminish. And now as ever, the quest benefits from—as Goldstein's Plato says, cribbing from Meno when he joins a panel discussion on the topic of “How to Raise an Exceptional Child”—“the teacher who [knows] how to ask the right questions and awakens in his mind a love for the beauty of logical connections.”

Goldstein, like Plato, is at her strongest when showing us that some questions just won't go away. But she's not about to deny philosophy plenty of credit for coming up with its share of answers, too—and for setting scientists on their way in searching for theirs. The list of philosophical leaps is impressive: most notable, perhaps, is the 17th-century idea of individual rights. Goldstein reminds us that virtually every scientific area of inquiry began with a question or an insight from a philosopher. Democritus proposed the atom; Ionian philosophers invented what we now think of as the scientific method; Aristotle founded biology. In mathematics and physics, she observes, the metaphysical problems considered by Plato are still being debated.

My brother was wrong, of course. Books often do tell the truth, as I learned long ago when I read *Magister Ludi* and was seduced by sentences like this one: “This same eternal idea, which for us has been embodied in the *Glass Bead Game*, has underlain every movement of Mind toward the ideal goal of a *universitas litterarum*, every Platonic academy ... every effort toward reconciliation between science and art or science and religion.” The eternal idea here is philosophy. Goldstein is with Hermann Hesse. Philosophy doesn't merely tell us about the subjective, leaving the objective world to science. For Goldstein, who has also written splendidly on such highly abstract thinkers as Spinoza and Gödel, the finest scientific thinking will always be driven and informed by the philosophical spirit. The grand forward push of human knowledge requires each of us to begin by trying to think independently, to recognize that knowledge is more than information, to see that we are moral beings who must closely interrogate both ourselves and the world we inhabit—to live, as Socrates recommended, an examined life. 

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

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A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

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