

The Examined Life

Reading Plato's Interpreters

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LIKE MOST MIDDLE-CLASS INDIANS I was primed from early childhood to value a practical life over a contemplative one. The assumption was that only an education in science can develop one's reasoning capabilities and, more importantly, solve the world's pressing problems. So when I decided to enroll for a master's degree in philosophy, the question that troubled me was less about whether the subject would lead me to the truth and more about how effectively it would help me use my reason. I was conditioned to believe that "reasoning" meant solving complicated mathematical and scientific problems, or figuring out the issues of poverty and development. So I chose politics over philosophy. Most contemporary problems are political, and the solutions to even non-political problems depend on politics, the best example being climate change. Yet, having made this decision, I continued to wonder how we could live well in the world without investigating what a good life is. And that is when I discovered the centrality of this question to the ancient Greeks and to classical Western philosophy, and these philosophers' belief that reason was crucial to living the good life.

Greece had produced philosophers such as Heraclitus, Parmenides and Protagoras before Plato, the protagonist of this essay. But despite the variety in their thought—from the metaphysical to the cosmological—Plato's predecessors are often clubbed together and referred to as the "Pre-Socratics."

Plato was deeply influenced by his teacher Socrates, and Plato's writings are referred to as Socratic dialogues. This is not merely because these works featured Socrates as the main character but also because they were written in a "dialectical" mode—a form of discourse in which characters are in conversation with each other, acknowledging what is worthwhile in the other's argument, while at the same time productively criticising it. Most of Plato's dialogues, including his most famous one, *Republic*, were written to counter some of the philosophical positions advocated by the Pre-Socratics. In taking on such a wide range of ideas, Plato ended up commenting on almost every possible philosophical subject. And it is this immensely rich contribution to the discipline that the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead had in mind when he said, "the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato." Almost every major western philosopher, from Aristotle to Heidegger, has written about his ideas, and Platonic studies is a substantial field within Western philosophy. Some, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, saw Plato as the

quintessential philosopher, while others, such as Nietzsche, felt his ideas represented everything that philosophy should not be.

What struck me most about Plato was his conviction in the superiority of the contemplative life, an ancient belief that seems anathema today, when everyone is chasing quick fixes to problems and busy figuring out how to create “impact.” My fascination with Plato, and his student Aristotle, was rooted in the fact that they really cared about what I had secretly felt to be the most important question—how should we live?

Plato’s guideline to living well is encapsulated in the often-quoted dictum that “an unexamined life is not worth living.” In his dialogue *Apology*, Plato describes how Socrates, a relentless critic of Athenian society, has been found guilty by a jury of “corrupting the youth.” Socrates asks the jury and the Athenians present at the trial if he is being penalised for not caring for the things that others do. He pleads that he would not have been able to survive the vocations of moneymaking or statecraft that the Athenians held in high esteem. “I was going to be of no benefit to you or myself” in such professions, he said. Instead, Socrates wanted to affirm his “greatest benefaction” by “conversing” about virtue and “examining both myself and others.” The good life, Socrates suggests, consists in critical reflection on our everyday actions and a consistent questioning of our opinions and values.

The primary instrument for achieving this good life is reason, which Plato explains in *Republic* and *Phaedrus*. Our souls are composed of three parts—appetite for pleasure; spiritedness, which leads to courage; and finally, reason, which is connected to beliefs about “good” and “bad.” In *Phaedrus*, Plato gives us the allegory of a two-horsed chariot. The two horses represent the faculties of appetite and spiritedness, and the charioteer embodies reason. The implicit assumption here is that “chariot-driving” (living a good life) is inevitably a “painfully difficult business,” because the two horses are wired to go in opposite directions. As the charioteer, our reason helps us not to negate but to harness both our appetite and spiritedness, our strengths and weaknesses, to guide the chariot. Only then can we attain that harmony in our soul which is essential to Plato’s idea of a good life.

Republic is, among other things, a canonical text of political philosophy. It is conventionally interpreted as asking the question: what kind of society should we aspire for, and who should take up the mantle of ruling it? The majority in an ideal city will be engaged in producing goods to sustain life in it, but more important for Socrates are the guardians who protect it. And it is the best among these guardians, the men of reason—the “philosopher-kings”—who should rule the city. In maintaining this balanced division of labour between the philosopher-kings, the lesser guardians and other inhabitants, the city attains a certain harmony, similar to the harmony required within our own individual souls among reason, spiritedness and appetite.

Two recent books, both by professors of philosophy, attempt, in different ways, to rehabilitate Platonic reason and demonstrate his relevance to contemporary political questions and concerns about the good life.

Plato as Critical Theorist by Jonny Thakkar seeks to show how Plato's philosophy can help us, as citizens of liberal democracies, to envision a better society for ourselves. In *Plato's Labyrinth*, Aakash Singh Rathore undertakes a reading of Plato that leads him to discover hitherto suppressed strains in Plato's thought, such as the significance of physical virtues. Though Plato stressed gymnastics in education and the training of one's body as crucial to living the good life, Rathore sees a deliberate effort within philosophy to sideline the physical and prioritise only the mental or intellectual virtues.

Thakkar reads Plato's *Republic* to uncover ideas that can "guide" us today, while Rathore's interpretation of the "labyrinthine" writings of Plato, subtitled "Sophistries, Lies and Conspiracies in Socratic Dialogue," rereads some of Plato's well-known dialogues with the aim of recovering the intended meaning behind them. Since Plato wrote at a time when there was "less freedom to philosophize," as Socrates' persecution had shown, his writing can often be veiled.

Rathore's is a self-professed "radical" interpretation of this "esoteric" element in Plato's dialogues. He draws on techniques borrowed from the German-American philosopher Leo Strauss, as well as the French philosopher Jacques Derrida and the Italian writer Umberto Eco. His interpretations help us make sense of the significance of an education in philosophy, and this book is an exciting creative exercise that reinterprets Plato's texts "in terms of their dialogic and dramatic form." It is a lucidly written work that can serve as a useful introduction to Plato and get the uninitiated reader interested in classical Greek philosophy. At the same time, it provides useful insights to those who already have some exposure. By comparison, Thakkar's is a complex, dense and significant academic study aimed at recovering Plato for today. It is written primarily for the academic community and intervenes in some of the most crucial debates in contemporary political philosophy.

IN PHAEDRUS, Socrates made the controversial claim that writing weakens our intellect—it limits our ability to recollect because it encourages a dependency on the written word. More importantly, he argued that words on the page cannot simulate the author's intended mood or intonation, and therefore invite misinterpretation. It is assumed that Plato wrote despite these criticisms because he had managed to develop a method of writing that transcended them. And in this sense, his dramatic dialogues can be understood as a well-thought-out response to Socrates' opposition to writing. Scholars have suggested that Plato only wrote about others and never put down his own ideas or opinions, as he was convinced of the truth of his teacher's views. The Neo-Platonists, who concentrated on the "mystical" elements in Plato's philosophy, believed that he wrote with an "intentional esotericism"—a conscious attempt to hide the true meaning coupled with a preference for vagueness over clarity. They stressed the need

for a deeper hermeneutics while reading Plato. Strauss is a twentieth-century representative—and Rathore a twenty-first-century one—of this school of thought.

However, Rathore avoids detailing the history of the esoteric readings of Plato preceding Strauss, perhaps for good reason—an account of that history through the ages may have made for a much less readable book. As for Strauss, Rathore says he is presented in the book because his is “by far the best and most profound” take on Plato that the author has come across. Strauss is an inspiration for Rathore’s broader re-readings of Plato, while he also moves beyond Strauss’s interpretative techniques and draws on other methods of linguistic analysis.

Strauss’s 1952 essay “Persecution and the Art of Writing” is a classic study of how philosophers historically relied on a method that combined the exoteric—meanings that are easily and publicly retrievable from a philosophical text—with the esoteric. Only an informed or initiated reader is likely to uncover the latter. Behind the rigorous contextual and textual analysis on which Strauss based this claim, there was a deeper belief that no matter how liberal or tolerant the political regime, philosophical writings are “never at home” in any city. There is a grave tension between philosophy and politics, between the philosopher and the city.

Rathore’s central argument rests on this theme of conflict. This conflict marred ancient Athens since the day its elected democrats sentenced Socrates to death. The censure against Socrates may have forced Plato to mask the real teachings of his dialogues, thus requiring readers such as Rathore to reinterpret him. Through the lens he applies to the Platonic dialogues, *Republic* seems to be a text about “laughing and ludicrousness” and Kallipolis, Socrates’ model of an ideal city, a project in absurdity. Rathore surveys *Republic* for eight Greek words connected to laughter, and finds that the text features much more laughter than Plato’s other works. This shows something he feels a “strictly analytical reading” cannot—that “some of the moves Socrates makes while constructing the ideal city are designed to amuse” rather than make sense.

Plato’s Labyrinth should not be only read as a book about esoteric readings and conspiracies. It is also one written by a teacher to highlight to his students the significance of the method we employ in the interpretation of a text. For instance, Rathore introduces the reader to the lack of consensus around the meaning of Plato’s dialogue *Parmenides*, which he calls a “logical labyrinth.” He points out how scholars have tended to disagree on the “very *raison d’être*” of this dialogue. For AE Taylor, the dialogue is “hardly more than a joke,” whereas Gilbert Ryle reads this as Plato’s “exposition of antinomies of reason.” Neo-Platonist philosophers such as Proclus felt that *Parmenides* represented a “philosophical quarrel” between the “intelligible” and the “sensible” realms, and Nietzsche read the dialogue as a “confrontation between a healthy soul and a sick one.” For Rathore, such diverse interpretations exist because interpreters tend to concentrate on “what is said,” the actual content of the statements in this dialogue, as opposed to “how these statements are made, by whom, where, and

when.” Rathore’s reading of *Parmenides* relies on the latter approach and succeeds in moving from content to context.

Rathore posits that laughter and sexual desire, which are generally considered peripheral to Socratic dialogues, are actually central to understanding them. He also relies on etymological analysis, tracing the origins of certain concepts and terms, and the development of their meanings. In one of the most exciting chapters of the book, he undertakes a rereading of Plato’s dialogue *Meno* to argue that the real meaning of virtue is “bellicosity,” rather than “knowledge” as is commonly taught in classrooms, thus highlighting the “contentious” nature of teaching virtue. For Rathore, Plato’s idea of virtue is “fundamentally political.” The teacher of virtue is likely to contradict the “reigning morality of the polis,” thus inviting punishment from authorities. At the heart of such Platonic virtue, then, lies courage—to stand up and struggle against a powerful opposition in times of conflict. And this requires us to tap into our spiritedness as much as our reason.

Rathore’s most radical finding from his readings concerns education. He holds that Plato’s idea of an education in philosophy was not limited to training the intellect, but also stressed the rigour of the body—a “unity of intellectual and physical” that aimed at the development of one’s reason as well as spiritedness. Rathore claims there has been a deliberate attempt in the previous readings of Plato to blunt this “radical and revolutionary” proposal. Courage is enhanced by the presence of physical virtues such as athleticism, and this courage helps us stick to our convictions and fight for them, which can be radically transformative. And “very few people” want us to develop such transformative agency. Genuine education would allow us to understand that we are being “bound and chained” when we should be “flourishing and free.” If educated, we would not only call out injustice, but also “initiate our dynamic agency” to correct it, a possibility that threatens the privileged.

Despite the book’s novelty, the reader is left wanting more from it, partly as a result of the expectations the author sets up at the beginning. Rathore claims to draw on the interpretative methods of Derrida and Eco, the two philosophers to whom the book is dedicated, but his engagement with them is extremely limited, unlike his detailed appropriation of Strauss. Nevertheless, *Plato’s Labyrinth* poses some very interesting questions. Is there a conspiracy in the history of philosophy to privilege moral and intellectual virtues over physical virtues? Should we continue to abide by the prevalent definition of Socratic virtue as “knowledge”? Are the philosopher and the city always in tension?

PLATO AS A CRITICAL THEORIST is an interesting attempt to read Plato’s *Republic* as an instance of critical theory, whose practitioners rely, among other things, on what British philosopher Raymond Geuss referred to as *ideologiekritik*—“unmasking wrong rationalizations” of power and injustice in society. In practising *ideologiekritik*, critical theorists often end up recommending alternative ordering

principles for a more just and equal society, principles which tend to gravitate towards the left.

Critical theory, as a philosophical approach to studying culture, has not been as influential in India as it has been in the West. Inspired by Marx and his analysis of capitalism, critical theory is often seen as competing with postcolonial theory, which has a significant following among Indian scholars. Yet both schools share an emancipatory agenda as well as analytical tools that focus on probing power relations to show how things actually are.

Today, there is a broad consensus within the government and among policy professionals on ordering Indian society on liberal democratic principles and market capitalism, amidst increasing demand for accommodating a narrow idea of nationalism. As a result, critical theorists in India are forced to limit themselves to making apparently provocative statements in public, and those who really undertake ideologiekritik and provide alternative visions of society end up being sidelined or are brandished “anti-nationals.” Yet there remains dissatisfaction with our conditions.

Jonny Thakkar’s hypothesis that there has been a decline in recent times of “political idealism” as a “practice of working out and orienting oneself toward visions of the best *possible* society” acquires significance in such an environment. This lack of an alternative vision of an ideal society makes available critiques seem like mere publicity stunts. Thakkar suggests a way to revive critical theory by returning to ideal theory, which is aimed at changing the world based on “how things might best be,” ideas that critical theory was forced to forego following the liberal democratic consensus that swept the world after the end of the Cold War. He finds inspiration for this endeavour in Plato. And through Marx and Plato, the former a perennial critical theorist and the latter an unlikely critical theorist, at least as per conventional wisdom, Thakkar’s book sets out to revive idealism, and in turn critical theory.

Thakkar wants to “breathe life into the Marxian critique of capitalism,” which is at the heart of critical theory. The author notes in his preface that Plato and Marx are often seen as “founders of competing schools within political philosophy,” that is ideal theory and critical theory respectively. But “close introspection” leads Thakkar to commonalities between them, and thus, the “possibility of resolving this opposition into a higher unity” that can “illuminate our own world.” In the last chapter, one of the best in the book, Thakkar highlights how Plato’s insights on “moneymaking” in societies, coupled with Marx’s account of capitalism, can produce a powerful critique of capitalistic societies as one destined for a “systemic malfunction.”

Rather than a “perfect” already existing society, or a “utopia” that is premised on the logic of impossibility, an “ideal” society is one that provides room for “possibility”—that is, it has not yet come into being, but it *could*. This is a judgment of possibility that we, as citizens, must make together. Thakkar convincingly argues that practitioners of critical theory and political philosophy cannot avoid the creation of an alternative

paradigm of “counterhegemonic ideology,” built on normative foundations of an “ideal society.” Thakkar’s skillful disentangling of the “ideal” and his step-by-step countering of the various strands of anti-idealistic arguments are highly original.

Having foregrounded the importance of the “ideal” in critical theory, Thakkar sets out to recover it by turning to *Republic*. In his interpretation, the true nature of ideal theory involves abstraction and modelling, and its real purpose is critique. Plato’s Kallipolis, Thakkar argues, is not an image of a utopia but rather a model developed to critique Athens. In effect, the goal was never to reconstruct Athens to resemble Kallipolis. Thakkar believes Plato’s nuanced ideal-critical theory can also serve as a model for us in India, and recommends more extensive debate and discussion about the kind of ideal society we envision, while avoiding the trap of preexisting perfectionisms or utopian thinking. Once we really grasp the nature of such an ideal society, we will be able to perceive our current conditions better.

Conventional readings of *Republic* suggest that the text calls for “philosopher-kings”—unselfish men of reason and contemplation—to rule the city, a sentiment that smacks of elitism. Key portions of Thakkar’s book aim to resolve this tension between Plato’s elitism and a contemporary liberal democratic ethos. He succeeds in doing this by highlighting how philosophers can actually aid the governing of a liberal democracy. For Thakkar, ruling in the Platonic sense means shaping human character. This requires philosophers to direct our “perception of the world” to a particular conception of “what is beautiful, just and good,” thus “shaping our desires.” As philosophers play a key role in disseminating ideals in democracies, they can influence the citizenry to be sensitive to liberal democratic values. And, more importantly, as philosophers are conscious of the ideal conditions of human flourishing, they prioritise those ideals that promote a balanced social division of labour, and this in turn is most conducive to sustaining a liberal democracy. Skewed division of labour results in the exploitation of the many by the few and excessive concentration of wealth among some individuals, pushing a society from order to “malfunction.” In Thakkar’s interpretation, philosophers are equipped to anticipate potential tensions between different parts and the whole of the liberal state, thus spelling out warning signs and suggesting measures to improve its coherence, and in turn its legitimacy.

Plato as Critical Theorist is systematic and thorough in its interpretation. The book’s uniqueness lies in its bringing one of the first canonical philosophers to the forefront of debates in contemporary political philosophy. Though densely academic and argumentative, Thakkar is, at the same time, welcoming of disagreements, pointing out that he only intends to enrich the ongoing conversation on Plato, and hopes to “yield the floor” when a better argument is offered. Such engagements will not merely further our understanding of Plato but are also beneficial to the field of political philosophy itself.

One such engagement could begin by questioning Thakkar’s delicate delineation of three categories—the perfect, the ideal and the utopian, which is at the heart of his

conceptualisation of ideal theory. Though very enticing, it does raise the question of whether such strict compartmentalisation is even possible while analysing politics and society. Though nature, logic and experience are clear guides for making a judgment concerning whether a vision is ideal or utopian, would not such judgments differ from person to person, depending on their assessment of human capabilities and limitations?

CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE in philosophy is broadly of two kinds. There is a growing, non-academic readership for books that inquire into what philosophy is good for. These titles, which are sometimes a cross between self-help and philosophy, highlight the teachings of well-known philosophers and show us how their ideas can help us live well. Alain de Botton and Sarah Bakewell, or contemporary proponents of Stoicism such as Massimo Pigliucci and Ryan Holiday, are among the most widely read authors of this type. The recent *Letters to a Young Philosopher*, by the Iranian-Canadian philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo, is also an example of this genre. Written along the lines of *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke, this correspondence between the master philosopher and his young apprentice covers topics such as education, truth, love and death.

Alongside, there is the much larger corpus of scholarly works in the discipline. Unlike academic books on the sciences, which are by nature technical, a majority of canonical works in philosophy are comprehensible to an uninitiated reader. All the same, academic philosophy continues to come across as largely specialised, primarily as a result of the style and vocabulary employed by scholars, thus limiting their reach. Further, the fact that these texts often analyse and question aspects of our life that seem quotidian lessens their appeal. Contemporary readership has gravitated towards self-help literature that makes sense of our human condition through new findings from disciplines such as neuroscience, psychology and economics (as opposed to philosophy).

In post-independent India, much scholarly attention has been paid to philosophical analyses of modern political thinkers such as Gandhi, Tagore and, more recently, Ambedkar. Academic philosophers such as Daya Krishna and Jitendra Nath Mohanty have also contributed substantively to the revival of classical Indian philosophy. There are also wholly original studies such as the recent *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, an exposition of the Dalit experience from a philosophical point of view by Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai.

But the majority of philosophical writings in both India and the West continue to be reinterpretations of canonical texts or thinkers. Discussions related to Western philosophy often receive more space in Indian classrooms than those on Indian philosophy. More student theses are probably written on Aristotle, Karl Marx or John Rawls than on Kautilya, Ambedkar or even Gandhi. Yet few supplementary readings on any canonical Western thinkers are produced at Indian universities.

Rathore's earlier book on Hegel and this book on Plato both seem to have been produced during the time he spent in India alongside an international teaching career. These

works serve as gentle reminders to Indian philosophy students of the possibility of contributing serious scholarship to the study of canonical Western thinkers.

Both Rathore and Thakkar show that rereading canonical texts is not merely an exercise in extending academic literature. They grapple with the concerns of our time via Plato and their books serve as lenses through which to understand and critique our own societies. But in doing this they are also specifically addressing questions that are personally important to them. For Rathore, the significance of the synthesis of our intellectual and physical virtues is not merely a pedantic highlight made while discussing Greek philosophy. As a triathlete himself, and as someone who has completed some of the world's toughest sporting events, the unity of virtues may well be the guiding principle that drives him to action every day. Similarly, for Thakkar, investing time and effort in probing the relationship between ideal and critical theory is not just about conveying an academic point. In addition to being an academic philosopher at an American university, Thakkar is also a founding editor of *The Point*, a magazine that aims to blend "memoir, criticism and journalism to examine ideas and beliefs that shape our world." His book could be seen as an extension of his belief in the importance of ideals to shaping our lives.

Many of us are wired to believe that academic aptitude amounts to intelligence and that jobs are markers of success. We work to save money, invest, take loans and raise a family. In the midst of all this, at some point, some of us realise that we need to impact others' lives positively so that we can attain more fulfillment. And then we chase alternative projects and vocations—teaching, writing, entrepreneurship, social work. What ideals drive these choices? It seems we are merely living according to a pre-set template or else imagining that we are breaking out of it by following that oft-used phrase—our passion. Plato's significance for us today lies in his pointing out that our lives should be governed by reason, not passion, which only helps us identify what we value, a mere first step. The real work begins when we subject what our appetite values to the scrutiny of reason, questioning why it is that we value it. Such Socratic questioning will inevitably lead to self-awareness, and that is when we would have really used our reason to live an examined life.

Start studying Examined Life: Plato. Learn vocabulary, terms and more with flashcards, games and other study tools. This Greek term can be translated as happiness or flourishing. For Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas, it represents the ultimate end that human beings seek. Aristotle: human excellence. For Plato, it is a goal we all aim for but may never achieve (the cave thing). "examined life". Socrates: The examined life is not worth living. (from Plato's Apology). Theological Rationalism/Objectivism. God approves of right actions just because they are right and disapproves of wrong actions just because they are wrong. Theological Voluntarism/Subjectivism. Plato was an ancient Greek philosopher who produced works of unparalleled influence. What was Plato's family like? Plato did not have children, and it is assumed based on textual evidence that he never married. He did have a number of siblings, however: three brothers, Glaucon, Antiphon, and Adeimantus of Collytus, and one sister, Potone. His father, Ariston of Athens, died when he was young, and his mother, Perictione, remarried with her uncle Pyrilampes. Read more below: Life. Straussian interpreters of Plato and have glommed on to the idea of the noble lie, but they believe that the government/elite rulers can lie about anything, and not just about the different classes and why they're in that class, as Plato's noble lie does (we'll read it later).] In favor of view D: You can hold the view that Plato had some oral teachings he passed on to the worthy and still hold other interpretations above to be true. This is not a view that is incompatible in principle with any of the other views, depending how it is construed. E. Against view E: ORALISTS: These interpreters f