by Jure Zovko

Why Read and Interpret Classics of Philosophy?

A Conversation with Michael Erler[1]

1. Dear Michael, Your new book *Warum alte Texte lesen? Lesen als Mitarbeit am Text* (Heidelberger Akademische Bibliothek 2025*)* provides a good occasion for a philosophical and philological discussion on why it is necessary to study the prominent philosophers of the history of philosophy. I would like to mention two completely opposing views. The first comes from my professor, Wolfgang Wieland, who argued that the classics of philosophy should be studied not for relaxation or entertainment, but because their texts may contain truth, their works may offer outstanding insights, or they may provide better answers than those found in contemporary philosophers. According to Wieland, philosophical texts from prominent thinkers should be studied *sub ratione veritatis*, i.e. on the assumption that truth is contained and conveyed in them. Such an approach to a philosophical work is far more demanding than what philologists and historians of philosophy advocate, who insist on reconstructing the author's intention. The philosophical approach *sub ratione veritatis* considers the possibilities of assessing and announcing the truth contained in a philosophical text. The reader must be able to examine and judge the extent to which what the text deals with meets the criteria of truth. Classics of philosophy, such as Plato, Aristotle, Leibniz, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, whom Wieland studied intensively, are examples on which it can be studied what kind of paths consistent thinking can lead to. The purpose of such study is the cultivation of our power of judgment.

   Wieland is right when he argues that Platonic texts should be interpreted '*sub ratione veritatis*'. I also agree that Plato's dialogues should be studied as illustrations of paths that lead to consistent thinking. Plato, of course, denies that texts – including his own dialogues – allow one to acquire new knowledge. But he agrees that they

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can support the transmission of knowledge. To recognise this, one should focus on the arguments and on the dramatic performative aspects of the dialogues, which primarily illustrate the conditions under which arguments are discussed. I also suggest that features of the dialogues, such as their openness – when the results of the discussions are described as provisional, a more detailed discussion is postponed, or the interlocutors confess their aporias – should be seen in this context.

In my little book, I have argued that, in Plato's time, readers were expected not to remain passive, but to respond actively to the texts under consideration by asking questions about passages of the texts that they found problematic and taking these as a starting point for discussion. Against this backdrop, Plato's call for help with the text (boêthein) in his critique of writing is as significant as is the dramatic 'openness' of his dialogues like aporias, provisional results, or postponements. I think these motifs do not merely entertain the recipients but invite them to engage actively with the text and to learn by finding out for themselves, as Plato's dynamic concept of learning requires.

I find Wieland's thesis – to pay attention to the dramatic aspects of the dialogues – important and helpful. I am not sure, though, whether Plato uses the performative level of the dialogues also to point to the existence of what Wieland calls a non-propositional, practical knowledge, which cannot be put into words but can only be illustrated. Plato, after all, repeatedly requires that one must trust in the logos as the place where truth (veritas) is to be discovered. Nevertheless, I consider Wieland's approach important. I think it is a good example of a modern 'active' reading of Plato and proves this as well as that Plato's dialogues can still inspire contemporary philosophers.

2. In contrast to Wieland's view on the relevance of the history of philosophy, the Oxford philosopher Timothy Williamson advocates the so-called Oxford style of philosophising, which is dominant in analytic philosophy and does not rely on the history of philosophy. Williamson claims that, regardless of which philosopher he engages with, he responds in the Oxford style: *I deal with philosophical problems, not philosophers.* For Williamson, the idea that philosophers should concentrate on the history of philosophy is

self-defeating. I have summarised these two positions in order to hear your opinion on this important matter.

> It is, of course, legitimate and necessary to examine the arguments presented in ancient philosophical texts for their formal correctness when one looks for the truth. However, I wonder whether this focus on arguments alone is sufficient to appreciate the intention of Plato's dialogues. For Plato chose to embed the arguments in different literary contexts. I believe he did this to signal that he is interested not only in formal aspects of arguments but also in how and for what reason arguments are used, for what reason and what effect arguments might have on the addressees in the texts and the readers of the texts. I believe philosophical authors such as Plato, Lucretius, Seneca, and Epictetus show that they are not only concerned with the arguments themselves but also with illustrating how philosophy is put into practice, and to reflect on the role the people's predispositions or the situations (kairos) in which problems and discussion occur, might play in the search for truth. Plato repeatedly shows how Socrates is confronted with various situations and challenges in life to which he must respond as a philosopher who is able to apply philosophical theory into philosophical practice. For that reason and as a philologist, I consider it most important to relate both aspects, the philosophical-analytical and the literary aspect of the dialogues, to each other to better understand Plato's philosophic message and the conditions for an appropriate search for and the communication of truth. After all, in the Phaedo, the narrator is asked to tell everything that Socrates did and what he said on his last day.

3. Why, in your opinion, is Plato the unsurpassed classic of philosophy? Is it because of the depth of his thought and the sharpness of his arguments, because of his use of dialogue as a form of philosophising that invites reflection, or is it due to something even more important? All attempts by philosophers to write in the form of dialogue remain, in comparison with Plato, unsuccessful and on a much lower level. Let us consider only the attempt by the already-mentioned T. Williamson in *Tetralogue: I'm Right, You're Wrong*. The examples are dull, the conversations artificial, and the names arbitrary. By contrast, in Plato's works, we usually encounter historical figures, most often in conversation with Socrates.

Socrates speaks with generals about courage, with an Athenian priest about piety and holiness, and with sophists—who sell their knowledge to Athenian citizens for money—he discusses the question: What is knowledge?

For me, Plato is an unsurpassed classical author of antiquity, because I consider a work to be 'classic' if, in addition to an exemplary combination of form and content, it also possesses lasting, timeless validity and continues to inspire readers across different periods. Plato's dialogues are exemplary. Although Plato embeds his philosophical discussions about, for instance, courage, piety, justice or knowledge in historical contexts and presents time through historical figures, readers of his dialogues still feel that the questions he raises remain relevant to our own lives even today. In other words, his dialogues appeal to readers of all eras, much like early poetry or tragedy, whose tradition Plato in many ways seeks to continue.

This aspect of the contemporary relevance of Plato's dialogues does correspond to what active readers expect from engaging with them, as I argue in my book. Modern philosophers such as Gadamer and philologists such as Friedländer and Jaeger often criticise traditional philologists for failing to address the relevance of the classical texts they study for their own time. I would argue that these problems were already recognised and discussed in ancient times – and by Plato as well and that Plato's dialogues are classical precisely because Plato, as a philosophical writer, is not only concerned with the artistic pleasure of reading his dialogues, but with illustrating and reflecting on the influence and impact of the arguments presented on the interlocutors within the texts and on the readers of those texts. I would further argue that the reason why no other philosophical dialogue author in European history equals Plato in importance and quality is that none of them interact with their readers in the same way Plato does.

4. Throughout the history of philosophy and culture, we have seen several different receptions of Plato's philosophy. We will begin with the sceptical reception: the virus of scepticism also affected Plato's Academy after Arcesilaus of Pitane was elected its head in 264 BC. With him begins the period of the Middle Academy, marked by the dominance of scepticism, which lasted until 90 BC,

when Antiochus of Ascalon became head of the Academy and rejected scepticism as an anti-Platonic worldview. The model for the discussion was the early Socratic dialogues, with the ironic awareness of not knowing, the limits of knowledge, and the inexpressible at the forefront of the Academy's teaching.

> Although Plato rejected texts as a means of attaining philosophical knowledge, his dialogues were later accepted as a substitute for the author and source of truth and wisdom. They were read '*actively*' according to the perspectives of the respective readers. In the early Hellenistic period, the authority of Socrates and his aporetic approach in early dialogues and his cautious attitude towards claims to knowledge confirmed and legitimised a sceptical stance toward any claim to any dogmatic truth, like that of the Stoics. In the so-called '*exegetical phase'* of Middle Platonism, this actualising reading of the dialogues led to a systematic interpretation of Plato's unsystematic dialogues in contrast to the philosophical 'systems' of other Hellenistic schools such as Stoicism or Epicureanism. In the subsequent period of Neoplatonism, this systematic approach to reading the dialogues was supplemented by a theological-soteriological dimension. Platonists such as Plotinus and Proclus sought, through their critical reading of certain passages from Plato's dialogues, to help recipients move from the world of appearances to its origin in the world of forms. One could say that each time the recipients discovered, by active reading, aspects of Plato in his dialogues, they regarded as relevant for their own problems.

5. Christian Platonism, to use the expression *Plato Christianus* (E. von Ivánka), appeared already after Clement of Alexandria and his claim that the Greek philosophers prepared humanity for the coming of Jesus Christ as saviour, just as the Hebrew prophets prepared the Jews for the coming of the Messiah. Christian Platonism, thanks to Augustine and the Christian Neoplatonists, became a part of European culture. European culture consists of transformations of idealism as variations of the reception of Platonic thought (Florence, Cambridge, Jena). What is the secret of Platonism's appeal to philosophy?

> Plato and his dialogues seemed well suited to the Church Fathers (apologists and theologians) for expressing Christian doctrine (the

concept of God, the soul) in philosophical terms. The Platonic search for the One Origin, the ability to think in images – insofar as the world as appearance derives its value from an otherworldly authority – and the insight that this One Origin seems attainable only through negation, because it is inaccessible, yet must nevertheless be expressed, all allow for a convergence with Christian ideas. Furthermore, the Church Fathers, especially those of the 3rd and 4th centuries, readily adopted the forms of argumentation and terminology of Plato as developed by Middle and Neoplatonism, and attempted to use them for the propagation and articulation of the Christian faith. One could say that Christian thinking and Platonic and Neoplatonic concepts are in a dialectical relationship with each other, even though contradictions in detail cannot be ruled out. Perhaps the relation between Christian faith and Platonic philosophy could be described as 'palintonos harmonia', which I personally consider to be one of the most fascinating periods in the history of Platonism and one that, in my opinion, had a major influence on European cultural history.

6. On the other hand, we have an unusual reception of Plato in hermeneutic philosophy –Schlegel, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Gadamer, Wieland. All of them were inspired by Plato's dialogue as a mode of reflection that served as the basis for developing philosophical hermeneutics as a form of philosophising. In your opinion, as a classical philologist, is this a departure from Plato's original intention of philosophising? It is important to emphasize that all representatives of philosophical hermeneutics are strong opponents of the relevance of the so-called "unwritten doctrine" (*agrapha dogmata*) for understanding Plato's philosophy. In your view, how seriously can we take the position of the "Tübingen School" (H.-J. Krämer, Konrad Gaiser, Th. A. Szlezák) that the core of Plato's teaching is contained in secondary reports of the lectures he gave at the Academy, which he did not present in the dialogues? How relevant is Aristotle's critique of Plato's philosophy – which we do not find in Plato's dialogues – for understanding the philosophy contained in Plato's written works at all?

I do not believe that hermeneutic philosophy represents a genuine departure from Plato's intentions, although the terminus occurs

much later. I would argue that Plato himself practises active hermeneutics in his dialogues as part of his philosophy – or rather as part of his way of communicating his philosophy to others. For example, when he reflects on the different approaches to a poem by Simonides in *"Protagoras",* or when he uses verses by poets such as Pindar to articulate his own philosophical position, i.e. as *ancilla philosophiae* in the *Republic*. I think that Plato expects the reader of his dialogues to also employ a kind of active hermeneutics as well, in order to deal with the philosophical and literary questions raised therein. Plato offers self-reflective hermeneutical considerations that can and should be applied to his own dialogues in order to better understand their literary and philosophical dimensions. This kind of self-reflective hermeneutical advice can already be observed in Homer and Hesiod, as well as in lyric poets such as Pindar and tragedians such as Euripides. They too combine the craft of poetry with reflections on the rules they follow in composing their poems, in the form of hermeneutic advice. I would argue that Plato as an author continues this tradition, and that his dialogues, as prose poetry, bear witness to it.

The modern hermeneutic approach seems problematic to me as a philologist when it neglects the aspect of the 'foreignness' inherent in texts. For me, the interpretation of ancient texts means understanding what is foreign in an author or a text, and this is precisely what makes it appealing – not finding myself in them, as Gadamer at times seems to assume. For sure, ancient active modes of reading often introduce one's own perspective, when reading, for example, Plato, yet they do so with the conviction that one thereby gains a perhaps clearer conception of the truth which is to be discovered in Plato's dialogues, as for instance Plotinus claims.

As for the unwritten doctrines, as a philologist, I take the relevant testimonies and the critique of writing seriously. It is indisputable that Plato's critique of writing includes his own dialogues, although, I think Plato only denies that texts play a serious role in the *acquisition* of knowledge, not in the *communication* of knowledge. Of course, the doctrine attested in the ancient reports of the so-called unwritten doctrine is difficult to reconstruct and controversial. For example, it still seems unclear to me whether the two distinct principles – the One and the Indefinite Dyad – make Plato a dualist

of principles. Gaiser's observation on the significance of mathematics in the ontological structure of the doctrine of principles remains helpful to me, particularly the convergence that arises with the increasing mathematization of ontology in Plato. A supposed opposition between a systematic, mathematical worldview and the open dialectic that Plato advocates as a method for attaining secure knowledge – even in his later works – may be avoided if, with Gaiser, one assumes that mathematics provides a model.

7. In the Anglo-American interpretation of Plato, there are intense debates between proponents of the developmental model of Plato's philosophy and those advocating a holistic approach. What is your position in this regard? What do you think about the segregation of Socrates' philosophy in Plato's early dialogues (Vlastos)? Is that hermeneutically and philologically sound?

   Certainly, the long span of Plato's philosophical and literary activity suggests that his thought underwent developments. And many interpreters will agree that his dialogues reflect a certain progression. However, in my view, this raises a fundamental problem: how can a development of the author be recognised in literary texts such as Plato's dialogues? Transferring observations from his dialogues to Plato's intellectual biography presupposes that these dialogues necessarily always reflect the current state of his supposed development, i.e. that he always wrote down precisely as much as he knew at that particular moment. But the dialogues themselves tell a different story. In his *Critique of Writing*, Plato's Socrates presents intellectual restraint as a central characteristic of philosophical communication. According to this view, the addressee-oriented manner of discussion employed by his protagonists in the dialogues does not allow them to say everything they know at all times – and thus, I would argue, not everything the author himself knows. Plato does not speak in his own name, but his proto-philosopher Socrates behaves as a true philosopher would. Moreover, I believe that the structure and literary aspects of the dialogue structure make it even more difficult to draw conclusions about the author and his mental biography. I would argue that differences in positions proposed by Socrates – when they occur – are often the result of differing dramatic or argumentative contexts, which must therefore be taken into account

before drawing conclusions about Plato's intellectual development. I would even argue – and have done so elsewhere – that Plato, much like a Hellenistic poet, highlights this fact by linking such passages through deliberate literary strategies. In addition to this, Plato frequently shapes the dialogue and the behaviour of the characters in such a way that they serve as illustrations of philosophical topics that will later be discussed explicitly. In these cases, it is necessary to relate the performative and the argumentative levels of the dialogues. From this perspective, I find it difficult to link the chronology of the works to the intellectual development of the author Plato.

8. Which Platonic dialogue do you like the most for the beauty of its writing style, and which do you consider the most original contribution to philosophy?

   That's a difficult question, because almost every dialogue by Plato combines philosophical depth with extraordinary literary artistry in a way that has never been surpassed. Often, the dialogue I am currently reading is the one that fascinates me the most. Of course, I always find dialogues such as the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium*, the *Republic*, the *Parmenides* or the *Theaetetus* particularly impressive, because they combine fundamental and existential questions such as death, right action, the pursuit of *eudaimonia* in life in the sense of a successful life, or ontological or epistemological problems with an unsurpassed brilliance of literary composition. These dialogues have inspired not only European philosophy but also literature and the visual arts.

   But I also find lesser-known dialogues such as the Crito or the Euthyphro inspiring for various reasons. When I wrote a commentary on the *Euthydemus*, I began to love this dialogue as well, even though its eristic context seems bizarre at first glance, as many interpreters have noted. But I learned how Plato's artistic mastery – and his philosophical insights – are on display here too, and above all, I realised that in the *Euthydemus*, playfulness (paidia) and philosophical seriousness (spoudê) are closely intertwined, as already Ficino appreciated. I would argue that *Euthydemus* is structured like a philosophical comedy and reveals Plato's remarkable sense of humour.

9. Plato's political philosophy is a story of its own. He is one of the greatest and most consistent critics of democracy, while democracy

has today become a universal civilizational achievement. There are philosophers inspired by Plato's critique of democracy, such as Dewey and Fukuyama, who see in Plato's criticism a call for the rule of reason – for deliberative democracy. Citizens should be educated in the spirit of Plato's philosophy to exercise sound judgment in choosing the politicians who will govern the state.

Plato's political philosophy was indeed much discussed – and still is today – not the least because of its rather anti-democratic stance. I agree that Plato's class-based model, *Kallipoli*s, contains questionable elements, such as the use of 'noble lies' as a political tool, the exclusion of certain age groups, eugenic aspects, and the censorship of poetry. However, it should also be borne in mind that Plato's most important 'political' work, the *Republic*, is primarily concerned with defining justice in the human soul of man, that is as an ethical problem. For educational reasons alone, the discourse in the Republic widens its scope to include the design of the ideal polis *(Kallipolis*). Significantly, the *Republic* deals hardly at all with institutions or laws, but rather with human disposition. Socrates even refuses to discuss whether his concept of the ideal city could ever be realised. Nevertheless, I believe the Republic can be described as a political manifesto in the sense of politics as Socrates understands it, for example, in the *Gorgias*. In this dialogue, Socrates speaks of 'true politics', as he calls it, which is less about changing institutions or gaining power for oneself. True politics aims rather at 'improving the souls' of fellow citizens (Gorg. 513e) and is guided by Socrates' "beloved" Lady Philosophia (Gorg. 481d). This focus on the members of a polis community rather than on institutions fits well, in my opinion, with Plato's understanding of what 'polis' or city-state represents. In Plato's time, a city-state did not primarily refer to the institutional organisation of a territory, but rather to an association of persons – Athens stood for *hoi Athenaioi*, that is, the citizens of Athens. True politics is therefore concerned with justice and *eudaimonia* for the citizens. In this way, educational philosophy and practical politics merge. Despite certain aspects that merit criticism, I find Plato's attempt to link politics with stable norms that should guide a good life genuinely impressive. It has impressed interpreters such as Dewey and Fukuyama, despite their different philosophical perspectives and despite Plato's scepticism towards democracy,

perhaps not least because of Plato's emphasis on rational insight and education.

10. In your opinion, in which area of philosophy did Plato have the greatest impact and influence? Was it ethics and moral judgment, or perhaps his sophisticated theory of knowledge with its synthetic-analytic method (synopsis & dihairesis)? Cassirer claims that the entire European aesthetic that has appeared in the history of philosophy to date was and remains, in reality, Platonism, and that it is essentially mimetic in nature. One of the most influential philosophers of science, Pierre Duhem, in his book *To Save the Phenomena: An Essay on the Idea of Physical Theory from Plato to Galileo*, emphasises the rich reception of Plato and his influence in the philosophy of science. According to Duhem, Plato is the founder of "scientific instrumentalism" because he conceived of ideas as instruments of explanation, and through his philosophy of uniform circular motion, he significantly influenced the science of astronomy. The Neoplatonist Simplicius (c. 490–c. 560) attributed to Plato the famous requirement to "save the phenomena" (*sōizein ta phainomena; σῴζειν τὰ φαινόμενα*). Alexandre Koyré claims that in the Renaissance, besides the representatives of the Platonic Academy in Florence, there was another, fruitful reception of Plato in Galileo's philosophy of science.

    Plato's influence on philosophy, literature, and art is difficult to overestimate. In ontology, epistemology, political philosophy, and aesthetics, his teachings remain central – especially when they encounter opposition. In aesthetics, for instance, his influence is often expressed in attempts either to justify or to refute Plato's criticism of poetry. I believe, however, that his influence on modern natural science is sometimes underestimated. Yet the view that mathematics provides the language of nature – an axiom of physics since Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler – goes back to Plato and Pythagoreans. Accordingly, leading figures in modern physics, such as Werner Heisenberg and Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, have emphasised Plato's impact on contemporary physics.

    Plato's mathematization of nature and his insistence on assuming a harmonious, metaphysically grounded order underlying and structuring phenomena are considered fundamental to many

developments not only in mathematics but also in physics. Even if Plato's teleological view of nature (in the *Timaeus*) is hardly shared today, the mathematization of nature, which he proposed in order to explain or 'save' phenomena, remains fundamental. I would argue that Plato's mathematization of nature is epistemologically motivated, but also has ethical connotations as the *Timaeus* indicates (Tim. 90ad). According to Plato, contemplating the structures underlying the phenomena can lead to *eudamonia*. Although in this respect, Plato differs from modern physics, his influence on the natural science is, I believe, particularly fascinating.

11. Plato is one of the few philosophers whose works have been mostly preserved. The question of the authenticity of authorship remains. Did Plato write the *Seventh Letter*, an important testimony about his journey to Sicily and his unsuccessful involvement in politics? Some well-known Platonists, such as Myles Burnyeat, deny that Plato is the author of the *Seventh Letter*. What about *Alcibiades I*, which deals with one of the most beautiful themes: knowing oneself? Were these works also written under Plato's influence?

    Both *Letter VII* and the dialogue *Alcibiades I* are disputed with regard to their authenticity. Nevertheless, both texts address central aspects of Platonic philosophy: *Alcibiades I* deals with the problem of self-knowledge and played an important role in the ancient Platonic curriculum. The *seventh letter* is of great interest because it appears to offer insights into Plato's political thought and his views on philosophical inquiry – for example, on the problem of how philosophical knowledge can be transmitted. Since the letter emphasises the weakness of the written word – as Plato does in Phaedrus – but additionally stresses the weakness of the spoken logos as well, which is not explicitly discussed in the dialogues, some interpreters take this as one indication that the letter was not written by Plato. I agree that *a critique of orality* is not explicitly treated in the dialogues; however, it can be shown – as I believe I have shown elsewhere – that the problem of the limitations of orality is addressed and illustrated on a dramatic level through certain motifs in the dialogue that indicate, for instance, that oral messages are not to be relied upon.

    Even if the letter is not authentic, it remains important because it comments on phenomena that indeed can be observed in the

dialogues. This is, in fact, often the case with the so-called spurious or dubious texts within *the Corpus Platonicum.* I believe that those texts deserve attention as early components of the Platonic tradition, since their authors often draw deliberately on Platonic motifs – though often adapting them to their own philosophical perspectives. These writings, I suggest, should be regarded as early results of an active reading and reception of Plato's dialogues. They, therefore, offer valuable insights into the literary culture of the time and into the early reception of the philosophy of Socrates or Plato.