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## BOOKSHELF

# Book Review: 'Plato at the Googleplex' by Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

*The ancient philosopher takes Manhattan, gets a brain scan and tries to make sense of the Internet.*

By COLIN MCGINN

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Rebecca Goldstein has written a timely book about our own age by taking us back to an earlier age—that of the ancient Greeks. She wants to know what the works of Plato can teach us about the life worth living, about politics, child rearing, love and sex, about knowledge and reality, brain and mind, truth, goodness, and beauty. Ms. Goldstein's book is felicitously written, impressively researched, insightful, important, entertaining and glowing with intelligence. Plato is brought marvelously to life, and, as a welcome corollary, philosophy is vindicated against what Ms. Goldstein aptly labels the "philosophy-jeerers"—those who rashly claim that philosophy has no intellectual substance or future in this scientific era.

## Plato at the Googleplex

By Rebecca Newberger Goldstein  
Pantheon, 459 pages, \$29.95



Ryan Inzana

"Plato at the Googleplex" consists of chapters of scholarly discussion followed by fictional accounts of Plato appearing in various contemporary venues. Thus we see Plato at Google headquarters on a book tour, Plato in a panel discussion at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan, Plato as a consultant to an advice columnist, Plato interviewed on cable news and Plato's brain being examined in a neuroscience laboratory. Here Ms. Goldstein employs her novelistic skills to sparkling effect by weaving abstract concepts into concrete modern narratives. At a cable news station, he is grilled by one Roy McCoy, who is not a bit intimidated by his distinguished Greek guest: "Okay, so they tell me you're a big deal in philosophy, Plato. I'm going to tell you up front—because that's the kind of guy I am, up-front—that I don't think much of philosophers." Plato coolly responds: "Many don't. The term attracts a wide range of reaction, from admiration to amusement to animadversion.

Some people think philosophers are worthless, and others that they are worth everything in the world. Sometimes they take on the appearance of statesmen, and sometimes of sophists. Sometimes, too, they might give the impression that they are completely insane."

Of course, Plato wins every argument hands down, though his interlocutors generally fail to see that. For

instance, in a well-aimed chapter on the pretensions of contemporary neuroscience, Plato volunteers as a subject in a brain-imaging experiment. The smug and overbearing Dr. Shoket treats Plato and philosophy with jocular contempt, all the while demonstrating his utter ignorance of that whereof he speaks. Plato has no trouble refuting his naïve reductionism, according to which there are no persons, intentions, beliefs or other psychological states but only synapses firing mechanically in the void. The neuroscientist is confusing the physical mechanisms that make mental phenomena possible with mental phenomena themselves. I recommend this chapter to all those zealots who think they are on the verge of replacing traditional philosophy with brain science.

Ms. Goldstein's conceit may seem a bit contrived, but Plato's own dialogues were equally stagey, presenting Socrates in conversation, and frequently in conflict, with the figures of fifth-century Athens. Ms. Goldstein has forged something similar, hoping to cover an equal variety of subjects in an engaging manner: just government, the education of children, influence and persuasion, the unseen world of universals, the meaning of life.

About the possibility of moral experts, Plato argues against the idea that "crowd-sourcing"—relying on the aggregated responses of a large group—would be a good way to reach moral decisions, advocating instead the training of sound moral judgment in an elite group. Ms. Goldstein deftly deploys a comparison between expertise in orthodontics and expertise in morality—no one would choose an orthodontist who had not been especially trained in the field. Equally, Plato argues (and Ms. Goldstein agrees) we should make room for the idea of a professional training in ethics—straightening out our ethical teeth, as it were.

The education of children must, for Plato, appeal to the sense of beauty innate in every human being, so that the beauty of mathematics is essential to a proper mathematical education. Ultimately, education seeks to liberate us from illusion and egocentricity: We must come to see reality for what it objectively is, independent of our own subjective perspective on it. This contrasts with more pragmatic views of education, which emphasize skills and know-how, as well as with the idea that education should be a kind of self-exploration.

The distinction between persuasion and influence is vital to Plato's outlook, because only the former engages the reason of the person being persuaded; the latter, deplorably practiced by the sophists, brings only psychological pressure and prejudice to bear and is mere propaganda. The application to present-day culture is obvious: political ads, Internet rants, shrill Twittering and so on. Ms. Goldstein treats practical issues that are as alive today as they were back in Plato's time; and in each of them what matters is the exercise of systematically trained rational judgment, not "gut reactions" or polling data.

Ms. Goldstein focuses on the "Ethos of the Extraordinary" that prevailed in ancient Athens, describing how Socrates challenged Athenian conceptions of what made life worth living. Socrates sharply distinguished between genuine virtue from mere good reputation. It is not enough to be revered, celebrated and remembered, as military heroes were in ancient Greece; it is necessary to live a life that merits such approval—and this means that merit and reputation can in principle come apart. A person can thus live an exceptionally good life while receiving no credit for it and may even be reviled. According to this Socratic position, developed in the "Apology," the individual's moral quality stands above the *polis* in which he or she is embedded. It was hard for Athenians to accept this divorce of virtue and reputation, because of their intense trust in the *polis*, and we today seem equally shaky on the distinction between fame and virtue.

Ms. Goldstein also outlines religious and secular responses to the existential questions of the so-called Axial Age, the period (circa 500 B.C.) when the key questions of human civilization began to be crystallized. When people began seriously to wonder what makes human life worthwhile, one group (represented by the

Hebrews) conceived the idea of a single God to whom all human life matters, while another group (the Greeks) conceived of human life having meaning on terms internal to itself. As Ms. Goldstein observes, this fundamental choice is still being played out today: Do the Abrahamic religions have the right view of the good life for human beings or were the Greeks onto something better?

Plato expounded in the "Republic" the view that the value of human life comprises knowledge of an objective reality that is endowed with mathematical perfection and inner beauty, not by way of a supremely powerful supernatural being oddly obsessed with our welfare and moral standing. The only eternal life available to us, according to Plato, comes in the form of absorbing the eternal timeless forms of an impersonal reality, not by continuing to live and breathe for all eternity. Plato's heaven is not somewhere nice that we smoothly ascend to when we die but rather a superior ontological realm that can enter our souls as we live. Today we might describe him as a secular mystic, since the perfect universals are both sublime and impersonal, objects of worship but not any kind of agent.

Just as the trial and execution of Socrates is the central organizing event in Plato's dialogues, so it is in Ms. Goldstein's book about Plato. She writes: "Plato presents Socrates as always maintaining a certain distance from the personal crisis in which he finds himself. He is not going to let a contretemps like being brought up on a capital offense interfere with his pursuing the philosophical subjects that interest him." Socrates was charged with the capital crimes of impiety and corrupting the young, which basically meant that he questioned the establishment view of the good life, thereby undermining proud Athenian exceptionalism. When asked what punishment he deemed appropriate for his "crimes," he suggested free meals at the Prytaneum, a kind of city hall, in appreciation of his lifelong contributions to the city (he was 70 years old at the time). This piece of impudence seems to have sealed his fate. Not only was he found guilty of a capital crime; he remained unrepentant about his crime! All he was doing, of course, was being a true philosopher to the end, questioning and questing, if sometimes a touch querulously. The authorities just didn't care for his unorthodox teaching methods, even though he brought more wisdom into the world than anyone else had ever done before. He was thus condemned to death for the crime of excessive truthfulness, by a city that prided itself on its enlightened democratic virtue.

It is no accident that Socrates propounds what has come to be called the "Euthyphro argument" on the way to his trial. The pompous Euthyphro confidently tells Socrates that the holy is to be defined as "what the gods love." Socrates points out that this gets things backward: The gods love the holy because it is already holy, not because they regard it so. In other words, things are not good because a supposed God approves of them; rather, God approves of what is good in itself, quite independently of his will. This Socratic argument undermines the entire idea that theology can provide a basis for morality and opens up a quite secular way of thinking about the nature of virtue. As Ms. Goldstein remarks, this was a seminal moment in the history of moral philosophy and indeed in the development of human civilization; it showed the power of pure rational thought. The philosophy-jeerers of today need to be reminded of this philosophical achievement of long ago.

Socrates claimed to have no positive views of his own, while he went about undermining the complacent convictions of others. But Plato had many views of his own, which can still claim our attention. He held that truth, beauty and goodness are inextricably connected; that there is a mathematical beauty to nature, which makes nature intrinsically intelligible; that there is an abstract world of universals, perfect and unchanging, in addition to the changing empirical particulars that we perceive; that education consists in ascending intellectually to the invisible world of universals, ultimately encountering the form of the Good; that this ascent was to be achieved by means of a rigorous mathematical training, combined with athletics and music, and prompted by the child's natural sense of beauty; that such an education produces moral experts who are alone suited for government (the Guardians); that virtue requires knowledge, and hence education is what

properly leads to virtue; that the life worth living is accordingly the life of knowledge; and that what matters most is to merge ourselves in thought with the objective cosmos, not to cultivate our human inwardness.

We need not agree with all these Platonic doctrines, but they should command our close attention, for they provide a worldview to be set beside the religious and secular worldviews that have culturally supplanted Plato's philosophy. Plato may have died more than 2,000 years ago, but he lives on, vibrantly, in these piquant pages.

—Mr. McGinn is the author of many books of philosophy and "The Making of a Philosopher: My Journey Through Twentieth-Century Philosophy."

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