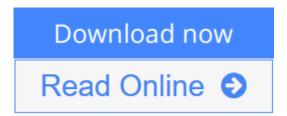


Essential Dialogues of Plato (Barnes & Noble Classics)

By Plato



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Pedro De Blas holds degrees in Law and Classics. He has worked as counsel for several international organizations, including the United Nations and the World Bank, and he is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Classics at Columbia University. He has taught classical languages and literature at Columbia, the CUNY Latin and Greek Institute, and New York University's Gallatin School.



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Editorial Review

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From Pedro de Blas's Introduction to Essential Dialogues of Plato

The extraordinary range of Plato's interests and his formidable command of the Greek language and cultural tradition make him appear as the inventor of philosophy, and make classical Athens appear as its birthplace. Yet some of the questions that Plato addressed had been opened in different ways by other thinkers elsewhere in the Greek world, many still remain open, and no systematic elaboration of his thought has proved possible—partly because Plato is almost never present, and he certainly never speaks in the first person in any of the dialogues that he wrote. Consequently, reading Plato's dialogues is a rather unusual experience, perhaps more akin to reading drama than to reading philosophy, at least as the latter is conventionally understood today: On the one hand, we are drawn into the dialogues in order to witness discussions about the nature of love, the power of language, the best way to live one's life, and the best way to face death, among many others; on the other hand, it takes a considerable interpretive effort to be reasonably certain about what Plato himself thought about these questions.

The open-ended nature of Plato's dialogues has prompted other thinkers to continue the tradition of philosophical discussion for twenty-four centuries: Plato died a long time ago, but we still rely on ordinary language in order to deal with the most profound questions of human existence. Hence A. N. Whitehead's famous characterization of the history of Western philosophy as "a series of footnotes to Plato," which is commonly taken as a praise of Plato but can also be taken as a statement of a state of affairs that later thinkers have regarded as a problem (the list includes Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida). In this respect, I have assumed that the readers of this volume are less interested in taking sides in this controversy than in getting to know what the fuss is all about in the first place.

There can be little doubt that Plato's claim to fame today is the utopian vision of the ideal city that Socrates (on whom more shortly) puts forward in the dialogue *Republic*. Many universities include this dialogue in their undergraduate reading lists, and it is the one most frequently translated and printed in popular editions. Unfortunately, readers who do not go further in their exploration of philosophy or the ancient world may not read more by Plato than *Republic*, which is, in my opinion, misleading about what Plato was really up to, although that dialogue is admittedly an important and memorable work.

In the history of philosophy, other dialogues have been considered to provide readers with a better approach to Platonic philosophy. Sometimes this role has fallen to *Timaeus*, the dialogue about the origin and structure of the universe, or to *Alcibiades* (of disputed authenticity), which deals with the moral education of the eponymous Athenian military and political superstar. Recently, the scholarly attention paid to sexuality in the ancient world has caused the fascinating discussion of the nature of love in *Symposium* to be regarded as a suitable introduction to Plato's thought.

The truth of the matter is that no single dialogue is the best way into Plato. Readers familiar only with *Republic* will soon discover that Plato dealt with important issues addressed in that dialogue more extensively elsewhere. For instance, the limits of verbal persuasion are more amply discussed in *Gorgias*, and both the discussion of the Ideas and the theory of knowledge become a lot more elaborate in the conversations that take place in *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, and *Sophist*. Moreover, those willing to venture into

the dialogues that Plato wrote later in life (for example, *Statesman* and *Laws*) may come to pose themselves the question of whether Plato agreed with everything Socrates says in Republic about the ideal city and the ideal ruler.

Philosophical thought in general hardly ever follows a straight line or can be condensed at the rate of one work per author, but there is a peculiar "networking" quality to Plato's writings: Only after reading (and rereading) enough of his dialogues does a tentative outline of his enterprise begin to emerge in the reader's mind. Whitehead was right: To a large extent, the practice of philosophy (at least in the Western tradition) consists of striving toward an ever better definition of that enterprise, even if that means jettisoning part of the baggage during the journey. Any traveler knows, however, that the items you leave behind on your trip may be the ones you later find yourself most in need of.

In view of all the above, it would be irresponsible to pretend that a sufficient discussion of even a selection of Plato's dialogues can be contained in the span of this volume; therefore, I have limited the scope of this general introduction to what I consider an essential historical and cultural background for a first reading. In the individual introductions that immediately precede each of the dialogues, I have identified the speakers and suggested condensed outlines of the arguments, since a continuous reading of any but the shortest of the dialogues is too difficult for most of us in the beginning. Although a few critical insights are given, my aim has been to facilitate an intelligent and enjoyable first contact with the dialogues themselves, rather than to put forward interpretive views. Footnotes and endnotes follow the same principle. Readers who want to engage more deeply with the background and intricacies of Plato's thought will find guidance in the recommendations for further reading.

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