

# What Would Plato Think of TV?

Novelist and philosopher Rebecca Goldstein imagines the famous thinker in the modern world with her new book *Plato at the Googleplex: Why Philosophy Won't Go Away*.



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Imagining what the ancient Greek philosopher Plato would think of Google, *Fox News*, Tiger Moms, and neuroscience might seem like the sort of activity that would appeal only to undergraduate philosophy majors after a few drinks. But the novelist and philosopher Rebecca Goldstein has just attempted the feat of imagining Plato in the modern world for the span of an entire book.

In *Plato at the Googleplex: Why Philosophy Won't Go Away*, out this week, Goldstein revives the ancient form of the philosophical dialogue. Plato's dialogues often explore basic questions about the nature of art, knowledge, love, and education, and as a result, Goldstein's book ranges from the amusing (Plato carries a Google Chromebook and struggles with small talk) to the serious and ruminative (the Internet's potential excites him, but he's disappointed by the way it's often used).

Goldstein holds a doctorate in philosophy from Princeton, and she has written studies of Spinoza and Gödel. I chatted with Goldstein recently to get Plato's take on Twitter, the Olympics, novels, and celebrity culture.

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**Your best known works are novels—intellectually rich works that dramatize big philosophical themes. So how did you decide this time to actually assume the persona of Plato?**

It was a way to try to argue that the questions Plato asked are still very much with us. I thought an effective and fun way to make that point would be to have modern Platonic dialogues set in our day about our issues with Plato talking to us. I'm weaving in things he actually said to very contemporary discussions. I decided to impersonate Plato to show the living voice not just of Plato but of philosophy in general. The guy was amazing. If you read him and ask what he would think about this or that, you find you can fit him seamlessly into our conversations.

**How did you create the voice for Plato?**

I'm also a novelist, so voice and characterization are very interesting to me. I think the voice I wanted was the voice of philosophy: engaged and earnest, but also playful, open, and ready to change its mind.

**How do you think Plato would respond to the cultural dominance of television and cinema?**

He'd be very alarmed. You can't help but think immediately of his allegory of the cave in *The Republic*: The lowest form of consciousness is that of prisoners in the dark staring at images. He would be quite in despair. He would think that we were enchanted by the lowest form of thinking. To think is to be active; passivity is the death of the mind.

The Greeks were just as obsessed with celebrity as we are. Fame was a way of defeating death for them.

But he wouldn't oppose all of contemporary culture. Just this past week I [started tweeting as Plato](#); I guess I'm not ready to stop impersonating him. And this kind of thing, the dialogue that happens on blogs and social media, I think he would be into it. I think he'd be intrigued by that aspect of popular culture: the verbal and the written exchanges.

**How has Plato been received on Twitter?**

It's been great. Plato's teacher, Socrates, was the guy who ran around the Athenian Agora having conversations with everyone he could. These days it's a very big Agora, with people from so many countries engaged.

**If you wouldn't mind assuming Plato's persona for a moment, tell me, Plato, why are so many people so obsessed with celebrity culture?**

There's a way in which fame bestows a larger-than-life quality, an almost god-like quality. The Greeks were just as obsessed with celebrity as we are. Fame was a way of defeating death for them. They didn't have a very robust view of the afterlife; they were pre-monotheistic, so they didn't have that consoling view of what comes after death. Many of us are post-theistic altogether, which reopens those questions: What makes us matter? Are we going to be remembered? We're gravitating back to that same obsession that the Greeks had with doing something so that your name will be on many lips.

**Would Plato approve of a culture of celebrity worship?**

I think he would understand where it's coming from, but he would consider it a flimsy way to try and defeat the anonymity of death.

Socrates tells us to transcend sexual love for this higher sort of intellectual love, but then Alcibiades bursts in, drunk and adorable, and you can feel the heat.

**What would meaningful entertainment be in Plato's view? Should we just spend our free time solving geometry problems? How would Plato kick back?**

Good philosophical discussion. Plato makes Socrates quite entertaining in those dialogues. That's why I write novels: to make engagement with philosophical questions as entertaining and emotionally rich as possible. Plato does that too. Poetry of the right sort would count as good entertainment for him. It's a very verbal entertainment, not image-based.

**What would Plato think if someone decided to make movie versions of his dialogue?**

That would be terrific. As long as there's interesting dialogue going on, and not just an onslaught of images. Some of the dialogues are just such dramatic feasts, especially the *Symposium*, his dialogue on love. All these men reclining in a very sexy atmosphere with the oil-lamps lit, making speeches about love. There's all this flirtation going on. Socrates makes a speech telling us to transcend sexual love for this higher sort of intellectual love, but then Alcibiades comes bursting in, drunk and adorable, and you can feel the heat. And before you know it all chaos breaks out and everyone's drinking. A cinematic version could be so much fun with the right script.

**So it's not that he would reject all movies, maybe just those that rely on special effects and spectacle.**

Right. Movies with dialogue that would awaken in us a kind of inner drama that makes us ask important questions, like "What are we doing with our lives?" He would like that.

### **What's so bad about enjoying quality special effects in a movie?**

He'd think that it's very hard to think and that we'll use any excuses not to think. We can use many forms of enchantment to avoid having to think. These enchantments can make us sleepwalk through our lives and never consciously stop to think about what we are doing. Any image-transfixed form of enchantment he would disapprove of.

### **Plato lived in Greece in the time of some of the earliest Olympic Games, but today we know a totally different version of the Olympics than Plato did. What would he think of people hurtling down mountains on skis at 80 miles per hour to win medals?**

He did think sports were important. He'd buy into the philosophy of a sound mind and a sound body. There are even stories that Plato himself was quite a good wrestler.

He says some critical things about professional athletes, though. I actually have him tweeting his surprise that the Olympics are in Russia and that the athletes are wearing clothes. One of his surprisingly egalitarian statements shows up in *The Republic* when he argues that women should be training naked in the gymnasia alongside men. There's a funny passage where he says even women who are old and wrinkled should exercise naked, too.

### **What about music? What would be on Plato's iTunes playlists?**

There are a few movies that I'd like to think would receive Plato's imprimatur. Top of the list: *'Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.'*

I have to say, I really can't stand him when it comes to music. His puritanism comes through very strongly there. There's a way in which he's afraid of our capacity for emotion. According to Plato, we're much better at feeling emotion than being reasonable. He'd be worried about music's tremendous power to awaken emotion and drown out reason.

He also says all sorts of horrible things about the music the ideal state should play. It's mostly militaristic music. He sounds like a crotchety old man talking about the kind of music kids like today.

In his defense, Plato changed his mind constantly, so it's somewhat hard to say what Plato would say about this or that. He constantly subjected his own views to self-criticism, and that's really the spirit of philosophy. That might be the most important lesson he has to teach us; when you think you've arrived at the truth, think again.

### **Which novelists might he recognize as kindred sensibilities?**

We live in a great age for novels, and also an age when philosophers have given up on producing philosophy as an artistic form. They largely write only for each other in a way that is completely inaccessible to people without the training. So there are many novelists who have

taken up the call and are continuing to do what Plato did. One of my favorite novels is Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. I really do think of that novel as on a continuum with Plato's dialogues.

David Foster Wallace also has that kind of very questioning, incredibly erudite approach. Plato had such harsh things to say about artists, and yet he did produce art; so that's a kind of intriguing paradox.

### **And are there particular movies or directors that would earn his approval?**

In the book I have him being very excited about the Internet at first, but then he becomes despairing because of the factionalism.

There are a few movies that I'd like to think would receive Plato's imprimatur, since they're disturbing in the right way and take up questions he himself found interesting enough to be conflicted about. Top of the list: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. It's almost like Plato's *Phaedrus*, the dialogue where Plato reverses himself right in the middle on the question of whether romantic love is worth it. That dialogue is such a window into inner turmoil that the philosopher Martha Nussbaum speculates that Plato had to have been in love when he wrote it.

I'd also include *The Story of Adele H*, and the extraordinary adaptation by Visconti of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*.

*A Clockwork Orange* is certainly filled with a great deal of spectacle that Plato would probably disapprove of, but it's also filled with Platonic questions about what it means to be good and what it takes to be a moral agent. Bird's *The Incredibles* and *Ratatouille* both might have appealed to Plato's meritocratic tendencies; there's something of Plato's *Republic* around the edges of these movies, though maybe Plato shading off into Ayn Rand.

There are the obvious examples of movies that call Plato to mind—especially those like *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show* that are reworkings of Plato's Myth of the Cave, where it turns out that everything that people accept as reality is really rigged. But my feeling is that these movies wouldn't cut it with Plato, since they're playing with cool ideas rather than sending us into a tailspin of questioning our assumptions about the way we're living our lives.

### **What would Plato think of the Internet?**

In the book I have him being very excited about the Internet at first, but then he becomes despairing because of the factionalism. Everyone's going to their own blogs and their own sources of news. So initially he'd be excited by the prospect of a great dialogue and the refusal to accept opinions without philosophically testing them, but that's exactly the opposite of what's really happening on the Internet. People tend to get their news from sources they agree with. I think Plato would have a lot to say about why that's very dangerous in a democracy.

**Do you think Plato would have gotten tenure at an American university today?**

*[Laughs]* He certainly published a lot. He did know how to do the very technical stuff. I think he would have. He certainly would have gotten tenure at the Academy, since he founded it. Socrates, I don't think so. He would have created too much of a stir.

**If Stephen Colbert called and asked you to appear on his show as Plato, would you be ready to go?**

Oh gosh... Yeah. That would be a lot of pressure. Colbert is already a lot of pressure for authors, so to appear as Plato... Geez. My motto has always been there's no challenge I won't foolishly attempt.