



Towards Nazism: On the Invention of Plato's Political Philosophy

Mauro Bonazzi

To cite this article: Mauro Bonazzi (2020) Towards Nazism: On the Invention of Plato's Political Philosophy, *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, 12:3, 182-196, DOI: [10.1080/17570638.2020.1855406](https://doi.org/10.1080/17570638.2020.1855406)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17570638.2020.1855406>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 10 Dec 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 4597



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

Towards Nazism: On the Invention of Plato's Political Philosophy

Mauro Bonazzi

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT



The image of Plato captured in Raphael's *School of Athens* as the champion of contemplative life has been celebrated for centuries. Such a description of Plato, however, would probably be surprising for most readers who are used to a very different Plato. For many current readers, Plato is a political philosopher. The contrast could not be sharper. The goal of this paper is to reconstruct the origins of the political interpretation of Plato's thought. Prior to Popper, this interpretation was first developed into a mainstream presentation by some important Hellenists in Germany (such as Wilamowitz and Jaeger) in the first 30 years of the twentieth century, and it quickly became dominant outside the universities. One interesting example of the attempts to popularize Plato's political thought is that of K. Hildebrandt, a member of the George Kreis, who sought to harmonize Plato and Nietzsche in order to derive a new politics of the German state.

KEYWORDS

Stephan George; George Kreis; Hildebrandt; Jaeger; Third Humanism; Wilamowitz

Introduction

The most famous visual representation of Plato is probably Raphael's, in *The School of Athens*. Nothing is left to chance in this wonderful fresco. Serious, old, with a long white beard, Plato occupies the center of the painting. In his hand, he has the *Timaeus*, the cosmological dialogue; his finger points upwards, towards the sky and beyond. Next to him Aristotle holds the *Nicomachean Ethics* with his hand pointing downwards. The message is clear. Plato is the metaphysical philosopher, leading towards the perfect world of the Forms, whereas Aristotle is the practical philosopher, the guide for the human world. Clear as it is, this representation of Plato would probably be surprising to most contemporary readers of the dialogues, who are used to a very different Plato, at least from Popper onwards. For many current readers, Plato is first of all a political philosopher, and the important dialogue is the *Republic*, "a topical

CONTACT Mauro Bonazzi  m.bonazzi@uu.nl  Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University, Janskerkhof 13, NL-3512BL, Utrecht, The Netherlands

A draft of this paper was first presented in Nijmegen at the conference on "Plato and Contemporary Thought: From Nietzsche to Badiou" and later benefited from seminars in Utrecht and in New York, at the New School for Social Research. Special thanks are due to Cinzia Arruzza, Antonio Cimino, Simona Forti, Jaap Mansfeld, Marina Marren, and Paul Ziche for their many helpful comments.

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

manifesto” for action as Popper (1966, 144) wrote. As scholars have now shown, this interpretation was not solely Popper’s belief. The Plato that Popper was reacting against was the Nazi Plato: namely, Plato as he had been interpreted and defended in Nazi Germany during the 1930s and 1940s. Taking the political relevance of his philosophy for granted, the scholarly and philosophical debates of the decades following WWII, which Popper took part in, sought to establish whether Plato was compatible with the ideals of modern liberal democracies. One might agree or disagree with Popper’s harsh attack on Plato’s political philosophy and his reconstruction of it as the first form of totalitarianism. But these interpretations have been so influential that, for decades, few would have dared to disagree with the basic idea that Plato’s philosophy is eminently political.

In this paper, I will investigate the genesis of the reading that renders the political dimension of Plato’s writings primary and casts a long shadow over any metaphysical claims. The goal of this analysis is to present and discuss some key moments that have contributed to this interpretation inside the world of the German universities, including the contributions of two of the most important figures, U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff and Werner Jaeger, as well as to consider the role of larger literary circles outside of the German academy. Particularly relevant is the contribution of K. Hildebrandt, who was first an active member of the George Kreis and then a committed Nazi. As I hope to show, this is an interesting story from several points of view, and it has the further merit of bringing readers’ attention to some aspects of Plato’s philosophy that have not always received due consideration.

Pursuing Political Ends by Other Means: Wilamowitz on Plato

If we look for a date of birth of the political interpretation of Plato, this is surely 1919, the publication year of Ulrich von Wilamowitz’s *Platon*, in two volumes.¹ Undoubtedly, these were important years, as Wilamowitz himself made clear at the very beginning of his book, in the preface: “The jolt of the war has amplified my strength: with this book I wanted to do my duty, in the same way of the soldiers who are fighting outside the borders of our homeland” (1920, xv). The second edition of the book came out quickly, in 1920. It contained a short, but extremely eloquent, *postilla*, written on December 22, 1918, one month after the German defeat.

I was obliged to see the self-destruction, the self-castration of my people. In the ochlocracy, among the cowardly and venal adulators, spread in all the classes, there is no place anymore for an old man, who will never betray his honor of a Prussian—no God, no man will ever obtain that from me. I just have to die. But the kingdom of the eternal Forms (*das Reich der ewigen Formen*), which has been disclosed by Plato, is indestructible. We, with our science, are at its service. The miasma of putrefaction does not penetrate into the pure ether. ... I will fight under the sign of Plato, until my last breath (*Unter dem Zeichen Platons werde ich fechten, solange ich atme*). (1920, *Postilla*)

Wilamowitz was the greatest Hellenist of his time, and one of the best philologists to have ever lived. This book is a good example of the outstanding quality of his scholarship. However, as so often happens with Plato, there is much more at stake than merely an

¹Isnardi Parente (1970) is still an excellent introduction to this book.

historical reconstruction. Written according to the most elevated standard of scientific (*wissenschaftlich*) research, this is also an engaged, militant book, or a *Kriegsbuch*, as Luciano Canfora (1989, 87) has suggested. This book is addressed to a wider audience, which also explains why he did not use Greek. For Wilamowitz, Plato is not only an important writer from the past. He is at the same time a guide for the present and a philosopher who can help Wilamowitz's contemporaries understand the crisis of their times and find a solution to their problems.

Wilamowitz was not alone in defending the contemporary relevance of the Greek world. This belief was widely shared and endorsed by many of the most important Hellenists at the beginning of the twentieth century, who were all convinced that a privileged relation existed between Greek antiquity and the German tradition. Within this context, what is distinctive in the thought of Wilamowitz is precisely his emphasis on Plato – or, better, the real Plato. Wilamowitz tends to identify with Plato. As several scholars have remarked, the book is meant as an autobiography of sorts.² Wilamowitz's interpretation does not come out of the blue, but rather constitutes a fairly successful attempt to reverse the most popular interpretation of his time – that is, the Neo-Kantian interpretation. According to Wilamowitz, Plato's philosophy had been reduced to an abstract and arid system by professional philosophers. This reduction, he believes, is an intolerable misunderstanding. A purely theoretical approach might be interesting for the colleagues of philosophy departments, for whom philosophy had become pure theory (“... *die jetzt ganz Theorie geworden ist*,” writes Wilamowitz [1920, x]). However, as Wilamowitz sees it, Plato “was not merely a professor of philosophy, whom only colleagues could understand” (*Plato was nicht bloß ein Professor der Philosophie, den nur Kollegen verstehen können*). For Wilamowitz's Plato, philosophy's main goal (*Hauptziel*) was rather to “lead the soul of human beings to their salvation” (*die Seele des Menschen zu ihrem Heile zu führen*) (1920, x).³ Wilamowitz's task, therefore, was to bring philosophy back to its original importance and function and, at the same time, to show the importance of Plato's thought for the present crisis. In Wilamowitz's estimation, therein lay the potential political relevance of Plato's philosophy.

We should take note of two intimately connected assumptions which lie at the foundation of Wilamowitz's book. The first, and most important, is the above-mentioned claim that Plato's philosophy is an eminently political philosophy. Wilamowitz stresses that “Plato was not merely a professor of philosophy, whom only colleagues could understand. He wanted to be something more ... to have an effect on the world, to work for the world, to be politically effective ... , to lead the human soul to its salvation” (1920, x). In this view, philosophical investigation must bring about political consequences; *theoria* and *praxis* cannot be separated. Remarkably, and this is the second methodological assumption, this claim is not grounded by Wilamowitz in references to the dialogues. However, Wilamowitz insists that it must be taken as the key for a correct interpretation

²In general, on the role played by fascination with the Greek world in modern Germany, see Andurand (2013, 299–321) with further bibliography. As for Wilamowitz's identification with Plato, see Calder III and William (1985, 101–107). On Wilamowitz's political activity, see Canfora (1977, 1989).

³On Wilamowitz's ambiguous relation with philosophy (and *Wissenschaft*), see Mansfeld (1985). It is worth noticing that Neo-Kantian philosopher Paul Natorp was well aware of Plato's political interests, underlining the importance of themes such as education or the opposition between community and individuals, which were also going to play an important role for the other authors discussed in this paper. Natorp's socialist Plato, however, did not exert great influence in the post WW1 debates, (see Vegetti 2009, 64–66).

of Plato's thought. Not particularly interested in philosophy, and therefore recalcitrant in conducting an in-depth conceptual analysis of the dialogues, Wilamowitz had a different goal – the reconstruction of Plato's internal life, which cannot simply be reduced to Plato's biography (1920, 7). Such an imaginative reconstruction, in its turn, was to be the condition for a correct understanding of Plato's philosophy as well. Wilamowitz's conclusion that Plato is a *politikos aner*, and that his philosophy pursues a political goal, is the result of a psychological analysis, based on the *Seventh Letter*.

The authenticity of the *Seventh Letter* was debated in Wilamowitz's time (and still is). Wilamowitz laid aside his initial doubts about the authenticity of the letter and used it in his search for the real Plato – an active philosopher interested more in influencing his own society than in building a philosophical system in an isolated context.⁴ In other words, Plato's philosophy is an attempt to pursue political ends with other means, as Jaap Mansfeld (1985, 220) has brilliantly argued. Disgusted by the political corruption of his time – this is the major insight that Wilamowitz gleans from the *Seventh Letter* – Plato abandoned his earlier ambitions and decided to become a philosopher, trusting that this was the only possible way to have any political impact on Athens. This is how Wilamowitz interprets the main idea of the letter: “on the proper way, namely via philosophy, he will in the end reach what his younger self dreamt about – to become a politician” (*auf dem rechten Wege über die Philosophie wird er doch zu dem gelangen, was seine Jugend träumte, wird er in Athen Politiker gewesen*) (1920, 180). The consequence of the premises Wilamowitz lays out is a political reading of the dialogues according to which all the political doctrines of the dialogues, radical or bizarre as they may appear, have to be taken seriously and can, therefore, be used as an antidote to the crisis of early twentieth-century Germany.

Concretely, and predictably, this interpretation resulted in the conservative and aristocratic rejection of all the political novelties of Wilamowitz's time. In Wilamowitz's assessment, what makes Plato so relevant is his staunch opposition to democracy, egalitarianism, cosmopolitanism, and so forth. The book abounds in anachronisms, but it is not as if this approach to Plato's texts has never been seen before, after all. What was really new was rather the view of the centrality of political commitment, not only in Plato's life but also in his philosophy.⁵ It became the key to an alternative revival of his thought, which Wilamowitz sought to present as being very much in line with pressing contemporary issues. Heretofore the object of erudite discussions among armchair philosophers, Plato was getting back on the grand stage of history. After Wilamowitz, Plato was no longer going to be the bearded old man painted by Raphael.

Jaeger and the Third (Political) Humanism

In the winter of 1921, Wilamowitz was obliged to retire due to a new law promoted by the hated Democratic Republic. His chair was taken over by his most brilliant pupil, Werner Jaeger, who was a professor in Kiel at the time (Solmsen 1979, 98–100; Calder III 1975). Until then Jaeger had been mainly known and appreciated for his research on the text of

⁴On Wilamowitz and the *Seventh Letter*, see Mansfeld (1985, 217–220); Sasaki (2012, 149).

⁵It is interesting to note that Wilamowitz's influence extended beyond the German borders. See, for instance, Dodds (1959, 31 n. 2) with the comments of Todd (2002, 54).

Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Once in Berlin, he widened the scope of his activity, following in the footsteps of his teacher, but also going well beyond him. Like Wilamowitz, Jaeger vehemently fought for a renewal of classical studies and was firm in his belief that the ancient world, or more precisely the Greek world, was the best guide for modern times. The mission of the movement he founded, *Der dritter Humanismus* (the *Third Humanism* – third after that of the Renaissance and *die Goethezeit*), and of the official journal of the movement, *Die Antike*, was precisely to promote such a renewal (Stiewe 2011).⁶

The distinctive feature of Humanism previously had been an aesthetic interpretation of the ancient world. Following Wilamowitz, Jaeger's new Humanism (a term which his master did not appreciate) was grounded in the belief that what the Greek World had to offer for modern Germany was a lesson in politics (Chapoutot 2008, 153–159). The key notion was now *paideia*, education tacitly identified with the German *Bildung*,⁷ which is also the title of Jaeger's most famous book. Jaeger's message was that philosophy must educate citizens by teaching them that what is really important is the community. In other words, citizens must be made aware that they are part of a wider whole – the *polis* or *die Staat*. The translation of *polis* as *Staat*, with all its Hegelian flavor, is eloquent, and it clearly expresses Jaeger's major claim. The claim is that it is the *Staatsethik* – the spirit or ethos of the State (see for instance the speech presented by Jaeger in 1924, “Die griechische Staatsethik im Zeitalter des Plato,”) – and not so much the Socratic care for the soul (*Gorgias* 521d), that is at stake in the new program of education. This sentiment is also present in many pages of Hegel's texts⁸ and it is politically realized by the Bismarckian *Machtstaat* (Marchand 1996, 325). According to Jaeger, the idea at the basis of the Greek world, which finds its best manifestation in Plato, is this:

The Greek mind owes its superior strength to the fact that it was deeply rooted in the life of the community. ... The man revealed in the world of the great Greeks is a political man Any future humanism must be built on the fundamental fact of all Greek education – the fact that for the Greeks humanity always implied the essential quality of a human being, his political character. (Jaeger 1933a, xxv–xvi)

Plato is the highest peak of this tradition (Jaeger 1939, ix, xxiii).⁹ For Plato, philosophy was first and foremost a reaction against social fragmentation and atomism. For Jaeger as well, culture had to regain awareness of its social function. With Jaeger, the political interpretation of Plato became dominant. The analogies with Wilamowitz are evident. Most notably, the targets of polemical criticism are the same, namely, the ancient sophists and contemporary liberal democratic individualism. But not less remarkable are the subtle differences between Wilamowitz and Jaeger. Wilamowitz insisted more on the individual mission of the elites, while Jaeger (though acknowledging the role of the elites) focuses on the political importance of the community. Wilamowitz was more interested in reconstructing Plato's personality. Jaeger is more interested in the dialogues and leaves aside any personal dimension. Finally, and this is the most relevant and

⁶Also, more concisely, see Andurand (2013, 322–340) with further bibliography.

⁷See Marchand (1996, 327).

⁸See Vegetti (2009, 44–51) for a list of Hegelian references on this problem.

⁹On the growing importance of the role played by Plato in Jaeger's reconstruction of the Greek world in the 1920s, see White (1992, 275–283); Vegetti (2009, 71–76); Andurand (2013, 331–335). A more general account of Jaeger and Plato can be found in Frede (2017).

interesting divergence, Jaeger tends to sideline the opposition between Plato and his world. Wilamowitz's Plato was an "impeded political man." Since political circumstances prevented him from open engagement in politics, Plato was forced to live as a philosopher. Wilamowitz sees this fact as "the tragedy of his [Plato's] life" (1920, 393, 653, 532). For Jaeger, on the contrary, Plato is political insofar as he is an educator, disseminating what, in Jaeger's view, is the most fundamental Greek idea, namely that the individual is always part of the greater political whole. For Wilamowitz, Plato became a philosopher because he could not be a politician. For Jaeger, Plato is a politician insofar as he is a philosopher. On its surface, this is a slight difference, but the consequences are remarkable.

In Jaeger's interpretation, the most important basic assumption is that Plato is a paradigm of the Greek tradition because of the privileged role allotted in his works to political education. Jaeger would continue to defend this belief even in the later stages of his career when he had developed an alternative, theologically and metaphysically oriented, interpretation of Plato.¹⁰ It suffices to consider what Plato thought of Homer and the tragic poets, in *Republic X* and elsewhere in the dialogues, to understand the controversial nature of this apparently trivial idea. Plato developed his philosophy in opposition to the traditional Greek system of morality and values as it was represented by Homer and the other poets.¹¹ Jaeger's authoritative interpretation, repeatedly expressed in articles and conference papers,¹² further contributed to an image of Plato as an eminently political philosopher, one who emphasized the importance of the community over the individual and the crucial role of a group leader. Surely, these were ideas capable of attracting great attention. *Paideia's* first volume was published in 1933. But Jaeger's attempt to present himself as the spokesman of his discipline for the new regime failed, on the charge that he was too abstract and idealistic.¹³ Jaeger's philosophy, with its continuous emphasis on timeless ideals and values, was guilty of such a charge. However, once the view that Plato was an eminently political philosopher was widely adopted, the epoch was ready for the more radical and provocative interpretations that came out of the German world and were rooted in it. In 1936, Jaeger resigned from the most prestigious chair in Germany and became a professor at the University of Chicago, and then, beginning in 1939, at Harvard. The political interpretation of Plato, in the meantime, had found new supporters.

Reading Plato through Nietzsche: Kurt Hildebrandt in the George Kreis

Wilamowitz and Jaeger were two powerful university mandarins at the precise moment when Greek philology, and antiquity more generally, were at the top of

¹⁰See Vegetti (1972, 9–50).

¹¹Particularly eloquent is Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral* III 25; on this point I refer the reader to Bonazzi (2017, vii–ix).

¹²See Jaeger (1924) *Die griechische Staatsethik im Zeitalter des Plato*; Jaeger (1927) *Platos Stellung im Aufbau der griechischen Bildung*; Jaeger (1932) *Staat and Kultur*, all of which are collected in Jaeger (1937). See, especially, Jaeger (1933b) *Die erziehung des politischen Menschen und die Antike*, published in the Nazi journal *Volk im Werden* (1933) 1 (43): 43–49. Marchand (1996) writes about this publication that it was "a pathetic attempt to prove the relevance of the *Gymnasium* to the goals of the Third Reich" (325).

¹³Marchand (1996) tells us that "like many other conservative scholars, Werner Jaeger discovered that the Nazi regime had its own plans for 'cultural renewal,' but he ... was either precocious or fortunate enough to escape the evils and the embarrassment of the internal exile" (329). See also Calder III and William (1983, 105); Cambiano (2010), who quotes W. Aly's and H. Drexler's reviews of *Paideia* (36–37). See, further, Rösler (2017).

public esteem.¹⁴ From their highly prestigious chairs in Berlin, they were in the position to decide the future of many aspiring professors, and they were able to establish what would be recognized as serious and rigorous research expected of an academic, as opposed to the amateurish activity of the many. Among those rejected were several members of a famous intellectual circle at the time – the George Kreis. Stefan George was, together with Rainer Maria Rilke, one of the two great poets of early twentieth-century Germany. George's defense of a Secret Germany and his search for a new kind of spiritual life, which he called the Spiritual Kingdom,¹⁵ attracted many young poets, writers, scientists, and philosophers. Rejecting the idea that just actions depend on universal principles, George urged that

what nourishes human growth is ... the forceful example of a hero, the bearer of a powerful will. Only a hero could teach others to see with new eyes, could shape them into vital and healthy forms of inspiration and achievement. ... The idea which captured these minds was that of the "founder." The hero was a founder, a founder of a new way of seeing, of writing, at the highest level a new way of acting. (Lane 2001, 122)

Predictably, Plato was quickly counted as one among these founders, leaders, and rulers (*Gründer, Führer, Herrscher*). More surprising, perhaps, is that Plato became the most prominent figure in a group otherwise composed mainly of German writers such as Hölderlin, Goethe, and Nietzsche.¹⁶ Scholars count about 26 monographs on Plato written during these years by the members of this circle.¹⁷ After all, it was Plato who, better than anyone else, embodied the model of the artist and the political and philosophical founder.

Influential publications from the George Kreis, such as those by Heinrich Friedemann (once a student of Natorp), Kurt Singer, Edgar Salin, and especially Kurt Hildebrandt, among others, deserve mention.¹⁸ The aim of the circle was a renewal of culture. The members of the George Kreis opposed the arid, professionalized world of the University, of which Wilamowitz and Jaeger were two examples. Wilamowitz was also infamous for his attacks on Nietzsche, who was one of the patron saints of the circle. As it turns out, leaving aside personal and often violent dislikes or polemics, the opposition between the two groups is more professed than real, at least as far as Plato is concerned.¹⁹ Both the university mandarins and the members of the George Kreis shared the same aversion to Neo-Kantian, epistemological readings of Plato, and both endorsed a politically active interpretation of Plato. Based on this interpretation, philosophy's primary goal consists of building an ideal life in this world.

Among the members of the George Kreis, the one who did the most to promote the new Plato was the medical doctor, philosopher, and Hellenist Kurt Hildebrandt. He was the first in the group to write extensively on Plato, producing a commentary and translation of the *Symposium* in 1912. Hildebrandt's most important monograph, published in 1933, probably constitutes the climax and best example of this kind of interpretation.

¹⁴See Most (1994) on the prestige enjoyed by classical scholars, and Ringer (1969) for a reconstruction of the German Academic community in pre-Nazi Germany.

¹⁵See comments of Ockenden (2011, 97) on George.

¹⁶On Plato's reception in the George Kreis see Lane (2011) and Rebenich (2018); more in general see also Lacchin (2006).

¹⁷See Rebenich (2018, 178).

¹⁸For a quick presentation of these books, see Sasaki (2012, 150–151).

¹⁹Goldsmith (1985) and Rebenich (2018, 191–198).

In the context of the present discussion, the reference to the *Symposium*, the dialogue treated in Hildebrandt's first Platonic book, might appear eccentric. It is not so. As a matter of fact, homosexual love, which in Hildebrandt's interpretation is the central topic of the dialogue, is the first step towards the politicization of Plato. Real love is the love that encourages the formation of a community of elects who share the same spiritual values and principles. As Melissa Lane rightly remarked,

Plato both created and embodied the model of a founder-legislator-leader-master-poet-lover-educator, who reforms society by reforming its art, and simultaneously by inculcating new values through the erotic cultivation of an elite group of youth, as both preparatory to and constitutive of a broader political revolution. For no other figure adulated by George or the Circle could that complete claim be made. (Lane 2011, 134)

As Hildebrandt himself puts it later, "Friendship of the spirit, of the soul, and along it the foundation of the State" (1933, 386) is at the core of this philosophy.²⁰ Moreover, Plato's theory of *eros* as presented in this political and society-forming guise confirmed the view that he was an eminently active philosopher, the leader calling others to action (*der Führer zur Tat*).

The contemplation of eternal beauty is only the moment of the fecundation, it is the turning point. After the ecstatic conception, he returns back to generate real virtue in the world. ... Plato does not hesitate in contemplation, but immediately directs his mission in time and space: the goal is the foundation of the State. The Greek man does not bind himself personally to God and the world: he is man only insofar as he belongs to the State. (Hildebrandt 1933, 218. Translation by the author)

Besides, and no less importantly, the emphasis on *eros* reinforces the irrational side of Plato's philosophy. What is distinctive in Plato is not, as in Neo-Kantian interpretations, the analysis of concepts (a word which is omnipresent, and always used negatively, in the texts of the members of the George Kreis), but rather his enthusiasm, the capacity of an integral, total and complete vision (*Schau*) of reality, and his heroic will to create a new world of beauty here and now. All these themes will return and will be carefully developed in Hildebrandt's major book, published in 1933, *Plato. Der Kampf des Geistes um die Macht*. Here "the subject no longer concerned mastery over a band of disciples, but rather real power" (Rebenich 2018, 189).

The prologue of this voluminous book, full of exclamation points and daring claims, is a short synopsis of what we have seen so far, but there is, also, a final surprise. The major thesis is that only a few can aspire to real philosophy, which is not analysis of concepts but creation of spiritual life. This is what makes Plato so important. He is, as Hildebrandt puts it, "a personal forming force" (*eine persönliche formende Kraft*) (1933, 5). Plato is a "hero," a "creator," a "founder," whose greatness shines in the harmonic combination of theory and action. The reason this fact has been so often neglected, he believes, is the corruption of philosophy in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century academic world, where Plato, "the founder" and the "leader," has been misinterpreted as a utopian dreamer (1933, 6) whose only interest was to articulate systems and concepts (1933, 6–7).²¹ This is a polemical reference to Neo-Kantian readings. Besides, Hildebrandt

²⁰See Rebenich (2018) 189.

²¹See also Chapoutot (2008) 291.

also attacks Wilamowitz, who, in the eyes of the George Kreis membership, was guilty of foregrounding Plato, the man himself, and not his doctrine. The surprise that comes at the end of Hildebrandt's book is the author's opinion according to which, in this world of progressive corruption, there is only one philosopher who understood Plato for what he was. This philosopher is Nietzsche. "It seems a paradox, but only his great adversary, Nietzsche, understood from the depths of the soul Plato's passion" (1933, 9).²²

This reference to Nietzsche is intriguing from a variety of perspectives. First, the reference qualifies Wilamowitz's critique of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Opposition to Nietzsche expressed by the young Wilamowitz was the first important step in Wilamowitz's career, and he afterwards was recognized as the champion of the *Altertumswissenschaften* (Ancient Studies). Interestingly, Hildebrandt's reference to Nietzsche revealed an unexpected link between Wilamowitz and Nietzsche. The view of Plato as a political thinker, which was the basis of Wilamowitz's interpretation, had as a matter of fact already been defended in Nietzsche's texts, especially in the early philological texts of the Basel period,²³ and elsewhere.²⁴ Nietzsche is one of the few interpreters of Plato who detects political passion as the real motive underlying Plato's philosophy.²⁵ Hildebrandt's reference, however, was not meant to support Wilamowitz's psychological and biographical interpretation. At stake was not the reconstruction of the individual Plato but a real philosophical understanding. According to Hildebrandt, "he [Nietzsche] understood Plato in his heart when the scholars merely cast lots for his raiment" (1933, 9).²⁶ This dismissive judgment alludes once again to such scholars as Wilamowitz, echoing Friedrich Gunfold's contemptuous definition of Wilamowitz's book as "Plato for serving-girls" (*Platon für Dienstmädchen!*).²⁷ Nietzsche perhaps misunderstood some of Plato's doctrines, but rightly understood him "as a vital and creative power" (1933, 8). For this reason, Nietzsche is the key to a correct interpretation of the Greek philosopher, because Nietzsche was the first one to see how important political passion was for the development of Plato's thought. It is therefore only by understanding the deep affinity with Nietzsche that one will understand the real meaning and value of Plato's philosophy.

The analysis of the *Gorgias* is a good example of Hildebrandt's Nietzschean interpretation of Plato. With its final eschatological myth, its violent polemics against politicians, its emphasis on ethical consistency as the most important principle for a good life, the

²²An interesting confirmation of the importance of the affinity between Plato and Nietzsche in the George Kreis can be found in another influential book of the time by Ernst Bertram (1920), *Nietzsche: Versuch einer Mythologie*. Nietzsche's criticisms of Plato are directed at Plato's presumed homosexuality, but they do not imply insurmountable philosophical incompatibilities. See Lane (2011, 141). Hildebrandt (1922) develops his interpretation of Plato and Nietzsche, most notably, in *Nietzsches Wettkampf mit Sokrates und Plato*.

²³These texts were known to the members of the George Kreis. See Lane (2011, 147).

²⁴See *Daybreak* 496 or *Human all too Human*, I 261. Plato was seen as the incarnation of a desire to become the supreme philosophical lawgiver and founder of states.

²⁵See Lane (2001, 118–120).

²⁶There is an implicit reference to the *Bible*, John 19:24.

²⁷Calder III (1985, 103); Rebenich (2018, 193). It is worth remembering that one of the first articles published by Hildebrandt, "Hellas und Wilamowitz (zum Ethos der Tragödie)," published in 1910, was an attack on Wilamowitz and a defense of Nietzsche. On the subject, see Goldsmith (1985, 600–610) and Lane (2011, 139–140). Wilamowitz opposed Hildebrandt's *Habilitation* in 1928. Wilamowitz died on September 25, 1931. Hildebrandt, member of the NSDP from May 1933, was appointed professor in Kiel in 1934. Until that year the two philosophy chairs at Kiel were occupied by Julius Stenzel (the most important exponent of the *Third Humanism* movement, with Jaeger), whose wife was Jewish, and by Richard Kroner, who was Jewish himself. They both were let go in the spring of 1934. One of these two chairs was taken by Hildebrandt and the other by Gadamer.

Gorgias might at first sight appear resistant to a political interpretation. Moreover, the character of Callicles, who so harshly confronts Socrates, and who plays such an influential role for Nietzsche, could be taken as further proof of the incompatibility between Plato and the German philosopher. If this is the standard view,²⁸ the opposite is rather the case for Hildebrandt, if only one understands the thought of Plato and Nietzsche. For Hildebrandt,

Callicles represents the *Herrenmoral* (Master Morality), and some are happy to argue that he shares the same thoughts as Nietzsche. After all, one finds Callicles is a “a man all along.” A bad sign of how Germans treat their great Men! ... As it turns out, the best of this *Herrenmoral* is approved by Socrates-Plato, whereas Callicles, far away from Nietzsche’s mind (*Geist*), sought Power as mere means to satisfy bestial cravings. (Hildebrandt 1933, 134)

In Hildebrandt’s interpretation of Nietzsche, and contrary to what is normally assumed, Callicles is in fact an image of an average man, interested only in his own profit (486c), and for this reason he is eventually doomed to become a slave of the mob (Hildebrandt 1933, 158). By interpreting the character in this way, Hildebrandt therefore succeeds in detaching him from Plato and Nietzsche, both of whom are ready to renounce – or so the German scholar argues – all personal interest in the battle for their ideals. In spite of all his limitations, however, Callicles also plays an important role in the development of the dialogue. For, by repeatedly emphasizing the necessity of realizing one’s own goals, he reminds the reader that a philosophical or political project which is not concretely realized risks being of no value. In other words, Callicles is an adversary (because no one could be more alien to Plato – and to Nietzsche – than this mediocre man). But he is also a tempting character, because he shows the importance of power, without which nothing can be accomplished. Therefore, Callicles explains the real goal of the dialogue, which is not a matter of morals at all. Hildebrandt’s conclusion is that the discussion in the *Gorgias* is not about “how we should live but how we should rule” (1933, 135). Plato is a fighter in a war that is fought here, in this world, not elsewhere, in the afterlife. “Plato’s Realm is of this world!” (*Platons Reich ist von Dieser Welt!*) (1933, 131). Plato’s philosophy is confined to a world without transcendence. This is not a common interpretation. To be sure, such an interpretation, immanent and all-political as it is, is too forced in some instances. Yet it cannot be denied that it conveys interesting insights that help one to better appreciate the philosophical relevance of the dialogue.

The publication year of Hildebrandt’s book – 1933 – was even more important than the publication year of Wilamowitz’s. The cover of Hildebrandt’s book left no room for doubt regarding the political sympathies of the author: it bore a swastika.²⁹ In that very same year, Hildebrandt also published a translation of Plato’s *Republic* in which he explicitly associated Plato and Hitler, presenting the latter as the philosopher guide of the dialogue. As a matter of fact, Hildebrandt’s interpretation underlined many of the themes that were going to play a prominent role in subsequent Nazi propaganda and their appropriation of Plato, including an emphasis on *Fuhrertum*, racism, and, more specifically, eugenics. But what is important to notice, once again, is that this interpretation did not come out of nowhere. As we have seen, in spite of their differences or personal

²⁸See for instance the appendix in Dodds (1959).

²⁹The swastika, in general, identified the Circle’s publications, see Lane (2011, 1948).

dislikes, the importance of the idea of Plato's philosopher as the effective guide (*Führer*) of the people was widely shared, from Wilamowitz onwards. Indeed, it was one of the key notions of the political interpretation.

As for racism, the reference becomes less surprising when one takes into consideration that biological, Darwinian-based theory was not so much at stake as was a sort of spiritual racism or, as it has been correctly defined "morphological racism" (Forti 2003, 401). The superiority of an ethnic group (namely the Hellenic-German one)³⁰ is determined by the concrete embodiment of the ideal human type, in the harmonious combination of the soul and the body. In order to prove that Plato could be regarded as a model for this kind of spiritual racism, which was meant to show the relationship between ancient Greeks and modern Germans, one had to argue primarily against the traditional Christian and ascetic view of Plato's philosophy which sees it as opposed to body and the world of matter. Hildebrandt accomplished this in the chapter on the *Phaedo*. All human laws being corrupt, the task is to revive memory of the primordial law which will lead the philosopher in his actions. The theory of the Forms and the immortality of the soul serve to prove the existence of this force, which gives order to matter and consequently creates the universe (1933, 180, 194). The *Phaedo* is not simply an attack on mechanistic materialism or an exaltation of the soul and an exhortation to escape from this world. It is rather an affirmation of the creative power of the soul. Reality, be it human or universal, cannot be reduced to matter alone, but rather depends on the interaction with the living soul. Plato's emphasis on the soul, as Hildebrandt explains in the chapter on the *Charmides*, gives rise to the widely circulated idea that Plato was a *große Dualist* (great dualist) and that he was hostile to the senses and the body (1933, 95). However, according to Hildebrandt, it is a mistake to adopt such a view of Plato's philosophy. Plato's emphasis on the soul depends on the fact that there is no need, in ancient Athens, to remind anyone about the importance of the body. Indeed, the inseparability of the two is responsible for real beauty (*kalon*) and goodness (*agathon*), which are always realized in the perfect combination of the body and the soul. This is the perfection of the ideal type (1933, 190, 197), and suggested that "when the real *kalokagathos* would win the domain on the Earth – then the Earth would be perfect for Plato" (1933, 97).

This embodied perfection is the first stage of Hildebrandt's more complex argument, according to which the perfect realization of this ideal is not an individual, but a collective, political task. From the *Phaedo*, Hildebrandt then moves on to the *Republic* where he engages in the explicit apologetics of racism on the assumption that the preservation of the purity of the group is one of the primary duties of the philosopher kings. Again, it is worth noting that the belief in the special affinity between Greeks and Germans is definitely not a Nazi novelty. It is an idea that stretches back to the greatest men of the German world, whose work marks the end of the eighteenth century (Winckelmann, Goethe, Schiller, Humboldt, the list is long). Hildebrandt, who, not by accident, quotes Winckelmann, Goethe, and Nietzsche in the chapter on the *Phaedo* (1933, 192), is only emphasizing the political element of this affinity to an unexpected and intolerable extent.

As is easy to predict, all these developments will be exalted in the following years by Nazi authors who lack the competence and knowledge of the authors I have been discussing in this paper. As has now been notably proven in some important studies, these Nazis

³⁰According to Hildebrandt (1939) Greeks are "just as purely Aryan" as Germans (246–247).

authors, by exploiting these ideas, developed an ideological caricature of Plato as the Nordic Hero.³¹ This image of the philosopher brought about the consequent crisis of his legend in the post-war years, as has been rightly remarked.³² It is against all this that Popper vehemently reacts in his war book, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, written in exile in New Zealand (this was his “contribution to the war,” he said). Inaugurated with a *Kriegsbuch*, Wilamowitz’s *Platon*, the story of the German celebration of the political Plato was now concluded with another war book that completely changed the terms of the debate. From that point on, Plato was no longer an unquestionable philosophical model; rather, he became a problematic thinker whose political philosophy was suspect.

Concluding Remarks

It is not easy to express a judgment on the value of the interpretations analyzed in this paper. Some scholars who jump immediately to the conclusion, that is, to the Nazi appropriation of Plato, have criticized the analyses of previous scholars, as if they were responsible for what would eventually come to pass. This is a problematic move. Wilamowitz died well before the advent of Nazism. Therefore, to imagine how he would have commented on the political developments of the 1930s risks being empty speculation.³³ With regard to Jaeger and other members of the “Third Humanism,” it is true that they had an ambiguous relationship with the new masters of Germany, but their interpretations overlap with those of the Nazis only in part. Finally, even within the George Kreis, not all the members were quite as committed to the Nazi purpose as is usually assumed. And George, who died on the 4th of December 1933, without taking any position in favor of or against the regime, tried to convince Hildebrandt to maintain a neutral stance (Lane 2011, 147). But this is not so relevant, after all. What really matters, for the sake of the present discussion, are not so much personal political opinions as the value of the authors’ various historical and philosophical interpretations. And this is where the problem becomes delicate.

On the one hand, one could argue that the authors we have discussed have detected and highlighted long-neglected aspects of Plato’s philosophy. Undoubtedly, a vital component in Plato’s thought has been overshadowed by overly static accounts of his metaphysics. And if the claim that Plato was an immanentist thinker (Hildebrandt) is an exaggeration, it is also true that the dualist interpretation of many ascetic readings is misleading as well. Interesting as they are, these immanentist readings must nonetheless face criticism. The growing emphasis on the importance of vision and, much more importantly, intuition has progressively given birth to a mystical Plato that hardly corresponds to what one finds in the dialogues. As a matter of fact, one common tendency among all these authors, from Wilamowitz to the members of the George Kreis, is the progressive dismissal of dialectics, as if this were not relevant for a correct understanding of Plato’s philosophy. This is surely wrong, a patent misrepresentation.³⁴ If this dismissal of

³¹See Forti (2003); Chapoutot (2008, 284–339); Kim (2018).

³²See, for instance, Vegetti (2009, 85–86).

³³See, for instance, Isnardi Parente (1970, 163–164, 166); Kim (2018, 209); from the other perspective, see Canfora (1989, 94).

³⁴See Kim (2018) on this important point (229–232).

dialectic were a necessary condition for political interpretation, the conclusion would then be that this latter reading is not correct. Dialectical and conceptual analysis play a decisive role in Plato's philosophy. And yet, the readings of these authors still have some merit. They have contributed to a better understanding of Plato by underlining a political tension which is present, but not perfectly articulated, in the dialogues. All in all, the political reading is too unilateral; but for that matter, the metaphysical reading, which has dominated over the centuries, is also too unilateral and risks being misleading. The problem that remains is to see whether these two trends, the metaphysical and the political, can be somehow reconciled.

The story of Plato's political interpretations is not only a philosophical problem. Even more interesting, perhaps, are the parallels that we can draw apropos of the relation between Nazism and our tradition. The episode of the Nazi appropriation of Plato, once put in historical context, shows that the Nazis, with all of their distortions, could also present themselves as heirs to the Western and European tradition from Plato to the great German writers and thinkers. It is useful to be aware of this instead of rejecting the Nazi experience as a moment of folly which has nothing to do with us. It was definitely a more complex phenomenon, as its relations with our tradition stand to remind us. From this perspective, the case of Plato is a symptom of a much more complicated problem that is important not to forget.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Andurand, Anthony. 2013. *Le Mythe Grec Allemand. Histoire D'une Affinité électorale*. Rennes, France: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.
- Bertram, Ernst. 1920. *Nietzsche: Versuch Einer Mythologie*. Berlin, Germany: Bondi.
- Bonazzi, Mauro. 2017. *Atene la Città Inquieta*. Milan, Italy: Einaudi.
- Calder, I. I. I., and M. William. 1983. "Werner Jaeger and Richard Harder: an Erklärung." *Quaderni di Storia* 17: 99–121.
- Calder, I. I. I., and M. William. 1985. "Ecce Homo: The Autobiographical in Wilamowitz' Scholarly Writings." In *Wilamowitz Nach 50 Jahren*, edited by William M. Calder III, Helmut Flashar, and Theodore Lindken, 80–110. Darmstadt, Germany: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Calder III, M. William. 1975. "Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff to Wolfgang Schadewaldt on the Classic." *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 16: 451–457.
- Cambiano, Giuseppe. 2010. "Il Classico in Germania Alla Vigilia del Nazismo." In *Giuseppe Cambiano, Perché Leggere i Classici*, 19–42. Bologna, Italy: Il Mulino.
- Canfora, Luciano. 1977. *Cultura Classica e Crisi Tedesca. Gli Scritti di Wilamowitz, 1914–1931*. Bari, Italy: Di Donato.
- Canfora, Luciano. 1989. "Wilamowitz tra Scienza e Politica." In *Le vie del Classicismo*, edited by L. Canfora, 80–111. Roma-Bari, Italy: Laterza.
- Chapoutot, Johann. 2008. *Le Nazisme et L'Antiquité*. Paris, France: PUF.
- Dodds, Eric R. 1959. (ed.). *Plato. Gorgias*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Forti, Simona. 2003. "Biopolitica Delle Anime." *Filosofia Politica* 17: 397–417.
- Frede, Dorothea. 2017. "Jaegers Platon." In *Werner Jaeger: Wissenschaft, Bildung, Politik*, edited by Colin G. King, and Roberto Lo Presti, 139–170. Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter.

- Goldsmith, K. Ulrich. 1985. "Wilamowitz and the 'Georgekreis': New Documents." In *Wilamowitz Nach 50 Jahren*, edited by William M. Calder III, Helmut Flashar, and Theodore Lindken, 583–612. Darmstadt, Germany: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Hildebrandt, Kurt. 1910. "Hellas und Wilamowitz (zum Ethos der Tragödie)." *Jahrbuch für die Geistige Bewegung* 1: 64–114.
- Hildebrandt, Kurt. 1912. *Platons Gastmahl*. Leipzig, Germany: Feliz Meiner.
- Hildebrandt, Kurt. 1922. *Nietzsches Wettkampf mit Sokrates und Plato*. Dresden, Germany: Im Sibyllen Verlag.
- Hildebrandt, Kurt. 1933. *Platon. Der Kampf des Geistes um die Macht*. Berlin, Germany: Bondi.
- Hildebrandt, Kurt. 1939. *Hölderlin: Philosophie und Dichtung*. Berlin, Germany: Kohlhammer.
- Jaeger, Werner. 1933a. *Paideia. Die Formung des Griechischen Menschen, vol. 1. Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter (Engl. Transl. 1939. Paideia. The Ideals of Greek Culture. Translated by Gilbert Highet. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.*
- Jaeger, Werner. 1933b. "Die Erziehung des Politischen Menschen und die Antike." *Volk im Werden* 1: 43–49.
- Jaeger, Werner. 1937. *Humanistischen Reden und Vorträge*. Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter.
- Kim, Alan. 2018. "An Antique Echo: Plato and the Nazis." In *Brill's Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, edited by Helen Roche, and Kyriakos N. Demetriou, 204–237. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.
- Lacchin, Giancarlo. 2006. *Stefan George e L'Antichità. Lineamenti di una Filosofia Dell'arte*. Como, Italy: University Worlds.
- Lane, Melissa. 2001. *Plato's Progeny. How Plato and Socrates Still Captivate the Modern Mind*. London, UK: Duckworth.
- Lane, Melissa. 2011. "The Platonic Politics of the George Circle: A Reconsideration." In *A Poet's Reich. Poetics and Politics in the George Circle*, edited by Melissa Lane, and Martin A. Ruhel, 133–163. Rochester, NY: Camden House Publishing.
- Mansfeld, Jaap. 1985. "Wilamowitz' Ciceronian Philosophy." In *Wilamowitz Nach 50 Jahren*, edited by William M. Calder III, Helmut Flashar, and Theodore Lindken, 17–221. Darmstadt, Germany: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Marchand, L. Susanne. 1996. *Down from Olympus. Archaeology and Philhellenismi in Germany, 1750-1970*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Most, Glenn. 1994. "Friederich Nietzsche Zwischen Philosophie und Philologie." *Ruperto Carola. Forschungsmagazin der Universität Heidelberg* 2: 12–17. 24.
- Ockenden, Ray. 2011. "Kingdom of the Spirit: The Secret Germany in Stefan George's Later Poems." In *A Poet's Reich. Poetics and Politics in the George Circle*, edited by Melissa Lane, and Martin A. Ruhel, 91–116. Rochester, NY: Camden House Publishing.
- Parente, Isnardi. 1970. *Filosofia e Politica Nelle Lettere di Platone Copertina Flessibile.*. Napoli, Italy: Guida.
- Popper, Karl R. 1966. *The Open Society and its Enemies*. London, UK: Routledge & Kegan.
- Rebenich, Stefan. 2018. "'May a Ray from Hellas Shine upon Us': Plato in the George-Circle." In *Brill's Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, edited by Helen Roche, and Kyriakos N. Demetriou, 178–204. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.
- Ringer, K. Fritz. 1969. *The Decline of the German Mandarins. The German Academic Community, 1890-1933*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rösler, Wolfgang. 2017. "Werner Jaeger und der Nationalsozialismus." In *Werner Jaeger: Wissenschaft, Bildung, Politik*, edited by Colin G. King, and Roberto Lo Presti, 51–82. Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter.
- Sasaki, Takeshi. 2012. "Plato and *Politeia* in Twentieth-Century Politics." *Études Platoniciennes* 9: 147–160.
- Solmsen, Friedrich. 1979. "Wilamowitz in His Last Ten Years." *Greek Roman and Byzantine Studies* 20: 89–122.
- Stiewe, Barbara. 2011. *Der «Dritter Humanismus» – Aspekte Deutscher Griechenrezeption vom George-Kreis bis zum Nazionalsozialismus*. Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter.

- Todd, B. Robert. 2002. "Plato as a Public Intellectual: E.R. Dodds' Edition of the *Gorgias* and its 'Primary Purpose.'" *Polis (Bologna, Italy)* 19: 45–60.
- Vegetti, Mario. 1972. "L'Aristotele Redento di Werner Jaeger." *Il Pensiero* 17: 7–50.
- Vegetti, Mario. 2009. "Un Paradigma in Cielo." *Platone Politico da Aristotele al Novecento*. Roma, Italy: Carocci.
- White, H. Donald. 1992. "Werner Jaeger's 'Third Humanism' and the Crisis of Conservative Cultural Politics in Weimar Germany." In *Werner Jaeger Reconsidered*, edited by William M. Calder III, 267–288. Atlanta, GA: The American Scholars Press.
- Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Ulrich. 1920. *Platon*. Berlin, Germany: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung.