

Luc Brisson, 2017.  
*Platon. L'écrivain qui inventa la philosophie.*  
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Before being a philosopher, Plato was a writer. As a writer he makes his teacher Socrates the main character of many of his dialogues, thus building his memory and at the same time creating the prototype of who is a philosopher and what is his activity, namely philosophy. In this fascinating and lucid essay, Luc Brisson, one of the most prominent Plato's scholars in the world, who has translated many of his dialogues in French for PUF and then directed the *Oeuvres Complètes* for Flammarion (Paris: 2011), offers a picture of Plato as a man of his time. Brisson frames Plato's literary activity within the events of the 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens and, specifically, within his autobiographical experience.

In the first five chapters, the reader can appreciate the relevance of Plato's life for understanding his philosophical activity. The reader discovers the youth of Plato, his relationship with Socrates and his *entourage*, the effect of Socrates' death sentence in Plato's writing, and the motivations which underlie his choice to go to Sicily. As an investigator, Brisson looks for traces of philosophy in Plato's life and argues that Plato is the inventor of philosophy and that this invention should be understood as emerging from his life. The core experience of his life was undoubtedly meeting Socrates, but the genius of Plato was the one of inventing philosophy from this encounter, also establishing philosophical dialogue as its method. The chapters about Plato's relationships with the poets and the sophists (11-12) are crystalline about it: philosophy needs to provide the knowledge required for reforming Athens from its decadence, in contrast with the false tales of the poets and the utilitarian speeches of the sophists. In this sense, inventing philosophy as the knowledge of the truth, Plato binds philosophy to ethics and politics, as the fields for proving its relevance and efficacy.

In chapters 13-16, the reader can learn about the main features of Plato's philosophy, and thus engaging with Plato's ontology, epistemology, ethics, the theory of the soul, and political philosophy. In these chapters, some of the thesis that has been argued by Brisson in more details in forty years of scholarship are introduced. For example, it is presented the thesis for which the so-called world of the Ideas is not an abstract structure beyond the sensible world but a condition of possibility for the sensible world, as the foundation for thinking and living. Then, a superb analysis of the *Timaeus* is provided, where Brisson can clarify the foundational relationship between Forms and sensible things. Finally, his account of Plato's theory of the soul puts this relationship at the heart of every human experience. The valorization of the soul for achieving the most critical epistemic objects through contemplation is not a denial of the body. Instead, the harmonic body is a sign of a beautiful soul, as the regular movements of the planets are expressions of the divine rules. Also, the sensible world is conceived as the place where to conduct the activity of self-mastering, both for personal and political life.

Focusing on real life is thus the *file-rouge* of the book. This is not only a method for discovering Plato's motivation for philosophical writing but also a clue for understanding his philosophy beyond a narrow dualism. For us, modern readers could seem weird trying to understand the philosophical thinking from the life of the thinker, but doing so Brisson is in reality following the ancient tradition, think about the *Life of Philosophers* by Diogenes Laertius. The innovation here is the one of showing that life and thinking are deeply entangled: this means that the life of the philosopher is not described just as an introduction to his philosophical positions. Instead, some of the motivations which

underline not only Plato's thought, but also his method and style, should be founded in his life. "Platon n'est pas un philosophe «professionnel» à la recherche d'une innovation conceptuelle qui le fera connaître, mais un citoyen qui se révolte contre la démocratie athénienne" (p. 134). Finally, what is relevant to highlight here is that Brisson's sensibility for the literary analysis – as his vast work on Plato's myths testimonies (see here in particular chapter 17) – is what makes also appreciate the embodied and embedded dimension of knowledge in the writing itself. Plato's dialogues are therefore the embodiment of Plato's philosophical exercise. The exercise of a man who, meeting Socrates, invented philosophy.

In conclusion, *Platon. L'écrivain qui inventa la philosophie* is not only an excellent introduction to the philosophy of Plato, but it is also a volume which explores a quite unexplored territory – Plato's life – as a method for better understanding his philosophy.