

Platonisms: Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern

STUDIES IN PLATONISM, NEOPLATONISM, AND THE PLATONIC TRADITION

Edited by

KEVIN CORRIGAN AND

JOHN D. TURNER

BRILL

Platonisms: Ancient,
Modern, and Postmodern

Ancient Mediterranean And Medieval Texts And Contexts

Editors

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Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism,
and the Platonic Tradition

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INTRODUCTION: PLATO AND PLATONISMS

Who was Plato and what is Platonism? The few details we know about Plato's life tell us only of a young man who spent his whole early life growing up in a city embroiled in a disastrous war, who became finally disillusioned with the "right" and "left" wing political parties of his day after the death of Socrates, whom Plato had known to that point practically all his life; they tell us of a middle aged man who had perhaps completed the majority of his dialogues by the time he was forty and who founded one of the great institutions of civilization, the Academy, apparently in order to bring a concern for mathematics, geometry, and the diverse forms of learning together with a sense of shared responsibility for the polis, all within the broader concern of human philosophical conversation in search of the truth about things; and they tell us of an elderly man who did not demonstrate much political insight in his apparent choice of Sicily for a politico-philosophical experiment and who delivered in his extreme old age one of the most abstruse lectures of all time that concluded with the view that the good is the one.

Apart from these and a few other details—among them Plato's apparent recognition that he did not have the talent to become a genuine poet, we know very little. Worse still, the dialogues themselves conceal as much as they reveal, for Plato's hand is everywhere at work, but Plato himself never appears except by oblique reference at best.

How then are we to find a Plato who never appears in his own dialogues and how are we to gauge critically the apparent "Platonism" that is so confidently extracted from history and is so well-known even to casual observers that it requires almost no comment whatsoever? Platonism is apparently "abstract idealism," dedicated to the reification of transcendent, supersensible forms, indeed, a "theory of Forms." It is dualistic, privileging soul over body, essence over existence, form over matter (for the most part, terms that Plato never uses himself); it is authoritarian and tyrannical (despite the picture of tyrannical authoritarianism that Socrates deconstructs in the *Republic*); it is universalist with no real sense of the meaning(s) of individuality (despite the many individuals we find in the dialogues generally), and so on.

Should we, then, only locate Plato's "Platonism" in some of the "more important" dialogues? Should we develop a chronology and

pin-point “developments” or “repudiations” of earlier views, a “later” repudiation of the theory of Forms, for instance, or an “earlier” anti-immortalist view of the soul? Or should we determine what Platonism is and then illustrate it from passages throughout the dialogues, privileging the clearly “more important bits”, like the body-tomb motif in the *Phaedo* or Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium* or the cave allegory in the *Republic*? Should we determine what is philosophically important and regard, with suitable disclaimers, everything else as ornamentation, myth, or setting? Or do setting and myth have their own place too? Or again, should we suppose, if not extracted doctrines, then some “unwritten doctrines” about whose representation the mature Plato was explicitly skeptical, and in light of these, then read the dialogues with fresh insight? Alternatively, should we attempt—the almost superhuman task—of reading each dialogue as a whole and then somehow also contriving to read them all inter-textually? But, in this case, what will be our criteria for deciding what is “whole” and what foundation might any inter-textual readings have in this context, especially since we can have little assurance that our chronology of the dialogues has any chance of being the “correct” one? Is the *Timaeus*, for instance, written after the *Republic* or is it much later? We simply do not know.

So, in one way or another, the skeptical student of Plato and Platonism is forced into the maelstrom of history, of which this volume is a small and necessarily selective token. In order to understand what Platonism might have been and what it can be, could our best guide perhaps be Plato’s own nephew, Speusippus, or the later Academy? But this turns out to be implausible since Speusippus and the later Academy seem so different from anything we find in the dialogues. Should Platonism then be understood in terms of later “Middle Platonism,” or of the “Neopythagoreanism” of Nicomachus of Gerasa or Moderatus of Gades? Again, this seems even less plausible since most of the testimonies we possess come by the hands of still later thinkers whose reports are necessarily colored by their own perspectives.

This is most of all the case in the best textual evidence for “Platonism” we possess in the whole of late antiquity, namely, the so-called Neoplatonic *Enneads* of Plotinus, preserved *in toto* because of the accident that the Syrian Porphyry came to Rome to be Plotinus’ student and eventually his colleague, encouraged Plotinus to write his thoughts down on papyrus, and then collected and edited the results for posterity. Surely, one of the great ironies of history is that Plato, the enigmatic, always hidden author of the dialogues—who became in Philo and for

Numenius in Middle Platonism a kind of “atticizing Moses”—should have become through Plotinus (himself a Greek-speaking Egyptian who lived in Rome in the house of a woman friend) a Neoplatonic Plato for virtually all of the subsequent history of Western thought, passing into Arabic under the name of Aristotle, and from Arabic through Hebrew into Latin at the hands of a Jewish thinker like Ibn Gabirol, and simultaneously becoming Christianized—through the many incarnations of Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus, Damascius, and others—in the thought of Marius Victorinus, Ambrose, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Eriugena etc. As many thinkers, so many Platonisms, and yet not one Plato!

However, if one traces out undeniable lines of influence, then even stranger results emerge: Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* could not have been written without the fundamental Neoplatonic structure for all reality: *monē*, *prohodos*, *epistrophē*; the Jewish and Christian Kaballahs would be unthinkable without the elaborate Neoplatonic notion of emanation. Descartes’ Augustinianism is undeniable, as is Berkeley’s Neoplatonism ironically celebrated through the virtues of tar-water in his *Siris*. And neither Leibniz nor Spinoza is independent of a Neoplatonic view of a one-many intellect in which all intellects are included, or a similarly comprehensive view of substance, in the case of Spinoza. At first glance, Kant and Hegel look irreducibly modern; surely neither could be called Neoplatonic in any meaningful sense? Yet, however much Plato and Aristotle are seamlessly interwoven, together with much more, in the unique fabrics of their many works, Kant’s very conception of the universe is not possible without Neoplatonism, for it involves throughout a profound engagement with the supersensible as much more than it became for the later Neo-Kantians, namely, a *Grenzbegriff* or limit-concept; and Hegel’s dialectic is not possible without Proclus, something hardly surprising if one considers for a moment that Hegel’s dialectic itself was already invented by Plato in *Republic* 8–9.

The history of philosophy and theology, together with much of the cultural, ascetic, spiritual, and literary heritage of the Western world, seems to manifest so many different types, strands or developments of Platonism, however much these are interwoven with the heritage of the whole of antiquity from Aristotle through the complex inter-civilizational ties of the Medieval world and on into the even more complex mixtures of Modernity. One of the signal achievements of the nineteenth century, then, was the final disentangling of the many Neoplatonic “Platos” from the “Plato” of antiquity through the establishment of a “Plato” text as distinct, for example, from a “Proclus” text

(foreshadowed already in Ficino's great editions in the fifteenth century), and through the study of a "Plato himself" on his own terms, as it were, by means of the critical standards of modern scholarship. Such disentanglement seemed, at first and indeed all through the twentieth century, to offer the promise of a pure study of original texts free from the paraphernalia of later mumbo-jumbo and half-baked mystical spirituality. But the promise, as we have suggested above, has been something of a mirage, since the chimeras of modern scholarship have themselves been shown to be just that: hybrid monsters of the modern imagination, so much so that while we have a better sense—perhaps—of the chronology of the Platonic dialogues, we certainly cannot agree on how to read them or even on what is most important in them. Instead, to use the title of a recent book by Catherine Zuchert, we seem to be left with many "Postmodern Platos" but no single authentic Platonic voice itself.

The present volume tends overall to the view, not that there wasn't a Plato or that we cannot understand him and his dialogues better through close and inter-textual readings of some of the most complex and subtle pieces of writing ever imagined or, again, that we cannot get a still better understanding of what Platonism may be. Rather the present volume wants to suggest that the narrow, purist attitude of some modern scholarship that seeks to exclude the subsequent history of thought (and especially its apparent irrational excesses) from the search for an originary "Plato" is misguided, since there is so much in the later history of thought that casts useful light on what it means to read Plato and that can be genuinely helpful in correcting some of the more simplistic views or slogans of Platonism uncritically accepted in the contemporary marketplace.

When Whitehead characterizes the European philosophical tradition as a series of footnotes to Plato, this certainly seems a wild and over-simplistic generalization not worth taking seriously. But he goes on in the same paragraph (in *Process and Reality*, p. 63) to specify that he does not have in mind a grand "Plato" followed by a relatively unimportant tradition, that is, a Plato of definite "substance" and a somewhat accidental legacy, but precisely the opposite: "Plato" as a reservoir of possibilities or as a living organic idea full of the always as yet unsaid. Whitehead excludes explicitly from this notion "the systematic scheme of thought which scholars have doubtfully extracted from Plato's writings" and instead points to: "the wealth of general ideas scattered through them. 'Plato's' personal endowments, his wide oppor-

tunities for experience at a great period of civilization, his inheritance of an intellectual tradition not yet stiffened by excessive systematization, have made his writing an inexhaustible mine of suggestion” (*Process and Reality*, *ibid.*).

The present volume intends to look at Plato and Platonism in something of the above fashion, not as a series of determinate doctrines or philosophical facts to be pinned down once and for all, but rather as an inexhaustible mine of possible trajectories each of which helps us to see the richness of those great Platonic texts, of which the dialogues are undoubtedly the primary exemplars, in new ways and from unexpected angles. According to this view, one may be grateful that, for all its influence, and even for all its dominance in the early Medieval curriculum, Platonism has always been somewhat marginalized or has thrived on the margins, for a centralized monolithic Platonism would on this understanding be merely a centralized body of dogma incapable of generating any new thought. The history of Platonisms itself is perhaps the best indication that such rigor mortis does not and did not characterize any of the best “Platos” from the enigmatic, never-and-always appearing “first” manifestation in the dialogues to the apparently highly fertile Postmodern “Platos” who continue to infuse our spirit, energy and time.

THE INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE VOLUME

This volume is representative of a small conference on “Platonisms Ancient and Modern” held at Emory University on November 20–21, 2003 in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar on “Rethinking Plato’s Parmenides,” and contains essays treating the Platonic tradition from Classical Antiquity through the postmodern world.

I. *Classical Antiquity*

We start in classical antiquity with the dialogues of Plato and with two major Plato scholars to help us read parts of them intelligently: Thomas Szlezák on Platonic conversation or dialectic and Luc Brisson on Plato’s view of the gods. For Szlezák, dialectic is a complex process of philosophical conversation that cannot be written down into a series of formulae or simply found in the dialogues. Nonetheless, from hints scattered throughout the dialogues Szlezák pieces together a picture to “remind” us of the paths and goal of such conversation: dialectic is a comprehensive science leading the soul to a “seeing together” of studies in relation to themselves and to the nature of beings and, thereby, to a seeing of forms and their principles in a living and achievable process that is the ultimate goal of Platonic conversation, namely, likeness to god.

The question, therefore, emerges: what is the “god” to whom we become like? Brisson takes up precisely this question in the next essay in a rather controversial way. He argues that if a god is an immortal living being, then the forms, and even the good, cannot be considered gods; the intelligible can be “divine” but not “god,” a term that necessitates both soul and body and includes, in Brisson’s interpretation, the traditional Greek gods, the celestial bodies and the universe. If this is so, then Plato is revolutionary in having human beings liken themselves to gods who care about us but are not susceptible to any attempts to influence their judgment. It would appear then that there is a philosophical standard beyond the gods, on the one hand, while the purpose