

Introduction: Studying Middle Platonism

0.1 Post-Hellenistic Philosophy

On 12 February 86 BC, Athens, which had taken the ill-fated decision to side with Mithridates VI of Pontus in the conflict with Rome known as the First Mithridatic War, fell to the Roman general Sulla. Quite apart from the political significance of the victory, the events leading up to it were to precipitate a transformation in the intellectual landscape of the ancient Mediterranean. For three hundred years, Athens had been the undisputed centre of philosophy: indeed, our evidence for philosophical activity in the Hellenistic period hews very close to reports of what was happening in the schools which had been founded there – Plato’s Academy, the Lyceum of Aristotle (whose members were known as ‘Peripatetics’), the Stoa (‘Stoics’) and the Garden of Epicurus. But the war brought an end to all that. The work of the schools was not only interrupted by a long and traumatic siege: it was abandoned. Those who could, fled (Cicero, *Brutus* 306).

This dramatic end to the work of the Athenian schools has naturally encouraged a narrative of displacement and exile to be applied to the evidence we have for philosophy in the subsequent decades and even centuries – the ‘post-Hellenistic’ age. But there is another, very different story to be told as well, one of liberation and renewal. The philosophical systems of the Athenian schools outlasted their institutional origins: Stoicism and Epicureanism especially enjoyed wide popularity through the early empire; Aristotelianism actually found a new lease of life then, producing more significant and innovative philosophical work than the Hellenistic Lyceum had ever managed. On top of this, the effective deregulation of the later period made it possible for a wider range of voices to enter into debate with them on something like equal terms: a movement like Pythagoreanism, which had been marginalised in the Hellenistic period, was now able to enter the mainstream; new philosophical positions arose and commanded attention in a way that would not have been possible before: Christianity is an obvious example, but the same point might apply to Gnosticism and Hermeticism as well.

In this volume, I take the ‘up-beat’ approach to the philosophical movements of the post-Hellenistic era, and especially to what I take to be the most important of its ‘new’ voices: Platonism. That is, I approach Platonism as a vigorous and constructive response to the opportunities of the age, and not as a ragged survivor of the shipwreck of Athens. In the first place, this is because, in general, I do not think that it is right to think of the Athenian schools, or the structures evolved with them, as necessary conditions for effective and innovative philosophical work. Our histories of ancient philosophy (including the *ancient* histories of ancient philosophy from which they often take their cue) are perhaps too enamoured of these schools. True, they provide a convenient structure for organising our narratives: lists of school-heads (‘scholarchs’) give a ready-made timeline, for example, and, since it is understood that the head for the time being represents the current ‘orthodoxy’ of the school, a convenient metonymy for its views. But it is a presumptive to infer from the success of the Athenian schools that philosophical communities *require* such formal structures to maintain a coherent sense of identity, or that they *require* formally recognised leaders to produce innovation. Like other interest groups, philosophical communities may tend towards hierarchical organisation, but they do not require it.

0.2 Middle Platonism as a New Movement

0.2.1 *Roots in the Later Academy. . .?*

It will be apparent from the foregoing that I view post-Hellenistic Platonism as one of the *new* movements of the era. This is controversial. For one thing, we find people who start to describe themselves as ‘Platonist’ (Πλατωνικός/*Platonicus*) shortly after people generally stop describing themselves as ‘Academics’ – that is as members of Plato’s Athenian school, the Academy. What is more, we know that there were radical shifts of thought in the Academy towards the end of its institutional life that brought it closer toward some of the conclusions picked up in Platonism: Philo of Larissa (who fled Athens during the siege of Sulla) and Antiochus of Ascalon (founder and head of a rival school which he called the ‘Old Academy’) both moved away from the scepticism that was adopted into the Academy at the beginning of the Hellenistic era under Arcesilaus, towards a commitment to the possibility of knowledge. Antiochus developed a philosophical system which, he argued, represented the intentions of Plato as developed through the work of his immediate

successors, and after them the Stoics. In the next generation, Eudorus of Alexandria, always called an ‘Academic’, worked with Pythagorean and Aristotelian ideas in the reading of central issues in Plato’s metaphysics which Plutarch at least, later on, saw as part of his own tradition of commentary on the *Timaeus*. Many people, then, have seen Platonism as a continuation of the Academy.

Viewed as a purely historical question, the idea that it was originally Academics who took up the flag of Platonism is not in itself objectionable. But it seems to me that it fails as a way of accounting for the more radical philosophical moves around which Platonism coheres – and indeed that, as a hypothesis, it risks obscuring them altogether. Of course the Academy always maintained allegiance to Plato as its founder; but no Academic (with the likely exception of Eudorus: see further below) ever claimed that Plato must have been right in everything he thought – as all Platonists do. Antiochus for example certainly did not: Antiochus took Plato to have been the progenitor of the system he himself inherited (Cicero, *Academica* 1.17), but not the last word on it: the Stoics were still making improvements (*Academica* 1.35). Platonists on the other hand *start* from the position that Plato must have been right, so that their approach to philosophical questions is at the very same time and *in parallel* to ask: ‘What is true in this case?’ and: ‘What does Plato think in this case?’ (Platonist methodology is explored in more detail in Chapter 1.)

This alone is enough to constitute a break between self-describing Academics and self-describing Platonists; but there is a crucial matter of doctrine that separates them as well. For all their internal differences, Platonists are universally committed to one foundational thought: that the visible cosmos can only be explained by reference to eternal, incorporeal first principles which exist outside the cosmos itself. This commitment distinguishes them first of all from the Epicurean and Stoic schools, both of which thought the opposite – that ‘materialist’ explanations of the cosmos were sufficient, and that talk of incorporeal causes was simple fantasy (this debate is explored in Chapter 3). The sceptical Academy, of course, did not express a view; but both Philo’s epistemology and Antiochus’ elaborate system in its entirety (on which, thanks to Cicero, we are reasonably well informed) take the same, empiricist line. Again, Eudorus is an exception: but part of his being exceptional in this way is precisely that it is impossible to trace what he thought back through the Academy. Eudorus has much closer affinities with Hellenistic Pythagoreanism, in fact. But in that case, Eudorus’ characterisation as an ‘Academic’ does nothing to link the work of the Academy as such to Platonism: at best, it gives us a reason to think of

Eudorus as someone who, happening to have had his training in the Academy, ended up creating something new out of Pythagoreanism. The Academy died a Hellenistic school and left no heir – something noted early on by Seneca (*Natural Questions* 7.32.2); nothing in its history prepares us for the radical anti-materialism which is at the doctrinal core of the new Platonism. As we shall see in Chapter 1, then, Platonists tended to distance themselves from the Academy. Plutarch shows that it was possible for a Platonist to reread the work of the Academy in the light of a Platonist understanding of Plato; but most came to see its decline into scepticism as a telling sign of its decadence. Philo and Antiochus, when they are mentioned, are not heroes in this story, but aberrations within an aberration (IG).

0.2.2 ...or Part of a 'Perennial Tradition'?

There is another way of denying the novelty of Platonism, though. This is the view (more commonly found in European than in Anglo-American scholarship) that the post-Hellenistic movement is part of what is, in effect, a phase in a *perennial tradition*, a system of thought set out by Plato and preserved more or less intact by later Platonists. (For present purposes it does not matter whether one defines the tradition in terms of its fidelity to Plato as such, or in terms of core commitments shared with him – for example the ‘matrix’ of positions described in Gerson 2013: 9–19 as ‘Ur-Platonism’. What matters is its essential unity over time.) This is a view which has some clear virtues, especially in emphasising that the Platonists themselves did not think that they were innovating with respect to Plato. It might, depending on how one reads Plato, even be right. The problem I see with it, and the reason why I do not adopt it for this book, is that its principled interest in the internal history of the tradition leads to an unhelpfully decontextualised account of its system(s): later Platonism in particular might or might not be novel with respect to Plato, but it is certainly new with respect to the Hellenistic schools and their continuations – and it is with these that our Platonists are arguing when they set out their views. If a focus on the longer tradition means that we lose sight of the immediate dialectical context in which particular Platonists are working, that immediately means losing sight of the particularity of their arguments, and the subtleties and innovations of their various positions.

It is from this perspective that the present book might be compared to the one existing collection of evidence for post-Hellenistic Platonism, the

monumental, eight-volume work initiated by Heinrich Dörrie, *Der Platonismus in der Antike* (*PidA*). Although the formal topic of the work is post-Hellenistic (or so-called ‘Middle’) Platonism, Dörrie’s ultimate aim was to use this material to come to a better understanding of Plato himself (*PidA* i. p. xv). Already the title shows that Middle Platonism is being presented in a rather wider perspective (‘Ancient Platonism’ in general), and in fact the evidence collected within these volumes ranges throughout the chronological span of ancient Platonism, starting with Plato himself. Sometimes, to be sure, this is because our evidence for the Middle Platonists comes through texts written much later which report or quote them, and of course the same will be found true in the present collection as well. But rather often it is because the ability to draw a distinction between Platonists of different periods is obviously not the principal point. There is, for example, no systematic attempt to establish who counts as a Middle Platonist. It is true that Dörrie had recognised the desirability of doing this – and that his intentions are made good in Lakmann 2017. But the evidence presented in *PidA* iii. BSt. 75–6, ‘Elemente einer Prosopographia Platoniorum’, covers many centuries and a variety of schools. The presentation and analysis of the ancient texts is correspondingly ‘doxographical’, in the sense that testimonies are grouped together according to the similarity (or apparent similarity) of the positions they set out – resulting in descriptions of a system, one might say a quasi-religious system, which looks to its own roots in Plato for its *raison d’être* and which, even in its variations, transcends its dialectical context.

The present collection takes a complementary, but very different approach. It *starts*, in effect, with the dialectical context, and asks, without prejudice to the question of whether the views we find in our material have precedents earlier on, how Platonists in the post-Hellenistic period argued their corner. The advantages I see in this approach are three. First, it precisely does not prejudice the question of how novel our Platonists are with respect to Plato himself (that is, Plato as we should read him: to repeat, they themselves do not think they are novel in this respect at all). Secondly, it may help to understand what motivates the rise of Platonism (or, if you prefer, the renewed interest in Platonism) *at this period*. (This is too broad a question to be pursued in this volume, but one might link it, for example, to Pythagoreanism, Christian philosophy, and certain strains of Aristotelianism, and think of it in terms of a sort of ‘crisis of materialism’.) And thirdly, it helps to see what motivates individual arguments and positions – and even the disagreements that emerge *between* Platonists as they try to address problems along a common front. (They agree, just for example, in rejecting materialism, but disagree when it comes to explaining

the radical character of matter and what, exactly, it does contribute to the world.) I noted above that there is a systematic tendency to suspect that post-Hellenistic philosophical movements lacked the very constitution needed for independent and potentially innovative work, and to explain them instead as transitional repositories for Hellenistic wisdom. Advocates of the 'Perennial Tradition' are by no means committed to that view, but at the same time, they can offer little to challenge it: it may not be discernible to us whether the commitment of a second-century thinker in Platonism is a well-reasoned and independently adopted position, an ingrained assumption, or a leap of faith. In order to make the immediate case for the philosophical vitality of the Platonism of the period – and ultimately the broader case for the explosive renaissance in philosophical activity more generally – it is, I think, necessary to see it 'in action' (as Socrates says of his ideal city, *Ti.* 19b–c). The commentary that follows, then, says much less than previous works about precedents and sources, either within the Platonic tradition or within the Hellenistic schools from which our thinkers drew, and much more about what it would take to believe and defend what is attributed to post-Hellenistic Platonists.

0.3 *Dramatis Personae*

Given these ambitions, some careful thought is required about who is going to count as a candidate for inclusion in this volume. The right starting-point seems to be with self-describing Platonists of the era: but there are a number of reasons why it would be impractical and even undesirable to be very strict about applying this as a criterion.

There is, to begin with, a difficulty in establishing who is 'of the era'. Our evidence often does not tell us; and there is an obvious danger of circularity if we rely too heavily on prior judgements about what Middle Platonist thinkers 'ought' to look like. My principle has been to err on the side of inclusion (uncertainties about dating are noted in the relevant places in the Catalogue of Platonists), but we need to be aware of the problem. There is a high-profile debate over whether the anonymous commentary on the *Parmenides* (Anonymous (2) in the Catalogue) predates Plotinus or not; and a slightly less heated discussion of Aristides Quintilianus (who might with equal plausibility be ascribed to a period rather later in time). The general assumption that Alcinous is to be dated to the second century AD rests on purely impressionistic grounds: no concrete evidence rules out an earlier or a later date for him.

There is an odd corollary to this point. Some texts which we *know* to be later are often treated in the literature as ‘throw-backs’, and first-order testimony to Middle Platonism, because they are thought to have the character of the period – which, more specifically, means that they do not seem to fall in behind the innovations of Plotinus. Calcidius, the fourth-century Christian commentator on the *Timaeus*, is a good example. My inclination here is far less permissive. It seems to me that, before we can proceed with such texts, we ought to understand them as testimony to the philosophical diversity of their *own* age: it is a dangerous and presumptuous business to fracture the time-line in order to collocate them with thinkers who strike us as similar. In cases where they offer us something that is really new, compared with our dateable evidence for the earlier period, there is, by and large, no check on the possibility that this is to be explained by their own originality, or their operation in a different dialectical context. And where they do not, they serve no real purpose for the study of the earlier period. In fact, there is no reason to treat, say, Calcidius very differently from Plotinus or later Platonists in his tradition, come to that: we can be certain that they too exhibit a great deal more direct reception of ideas that were live in the pre-Plotinian period than they highlight as such, and plenty of indirect evidence in their arguments too. So, on the one hand, we ought to look to *all* later writers in the tradition, when our evidence fails and they can supply a plausible supplement to the lacunose evidence for this or that argument. But on the other hand, each such appeal needs to be assessed on its own merits: it is misleading to make the aprioristic assumption that a view expressed by Calcidius is (in the absence of contradiction) one that is likely to have been live among Middle Platonists – and doubly so if that is a rule that is to apply to Calcidius but not to Plotinus.

We are not on very much firmer ground with the ‘self-describing’ clause: again, our evidence quite often does not allow a secure judgement. In practice, however, the circumstantial evidence that we do have builds up into a plausible and mutually supporting ‘family’ of ideas and practices. And this metaphor of a ‘family’ turns out to be a productive and useful one – and not just for pragmatic reasons. As we have seen above, there is some need to develop a model for talking about Platonism as a movement which does not rely on the hierarchical structures of an institution, and the notion of ‘family resemblance’ seems, with appropriate qualification, like a good first move. The appropriate qualification in this case is that there do seem to be two tenets that are non-negotiable for membership of the family – both of which I shall explore further in Chapter 1. One is that *the ultimate explanatory causes*

which philosophy hopes to uncover are eternal and non-material: a belief in the failure of metaphysical materialism seems to be what motivates the reaction against the Hellenistic schools, and the return to Plato in the first place. The second, related to the first (although far from a corollary to it) is that *Plato is always right*. We shall see in Chapter 1 that this is not, as it might at first appear, a philosophically extrinsic article of blind faith, but the headline for a distinctive methodological principle. (Seen as such, it is easy to see why it turns out to be a condition for one person's recognising another as being engaged in a recognisably similar philosophical practice.) But within the parameters set by these exceptional tenets, the notion of 'family resemblance' allows us to talk about the identity of a community of thinkers in non-hierarchical terms – without, for example, defining them against views and practices designated as 'official' or 'orthodox' by some authority; but also without hoping that they will all be thinking the same thing. 'Platonism', one might say, is really a generalisation over a network of individual Platonisms: and it is enough that each shares its core commitments (or the majority or most important of its core commitments) with a reasonable portion of the other members of the set.

There is a danger, then, that some people will have found their way into this volume whom we would certainly not want here if we knew the full facts. But so long as the imperative is to cast light on structures of thought and argument that must have been recognisably 'Platonist', and so long as one is careful to keep the 'big picture' in dialogue with the evidence for individuals (and individual pieces of evidence), this ought not to be a problem. (Note that this volume, then, steers a course between the generalising approach of *Pida*, which explicitly eschews the individual – see *Pida* i. 46 – and the use of individuals to structure a survey such as John Dillon's influential 1977 book, *The Middle Platonists*, or more recently in the new 'Überweg' survey, Ferrari and Männlein-Robert forthcoming.) One further advantage that the idea of 'family resemblance' brings to the understanding of a non-institutional philosophical movement is precisely that the boundaries are not, in fact, cut and dried. In saying this, I absolutely do *not* offer a concession to the idea that institutional structures are a precondition for shared, adversative identity: it is only to say that there is a certain 'fuzziness' at the edges of a movement *as well*. (Or better: there is room for this fuzziness to be visible to us. There is reason to believe that there was much greater diversity and flexibility of thought among Hellenistic philosophers than we have detailed evidence for – that the school-system may merely have marginalised it and driven it from official histories.) We know nothing about the philosopher Trypho, called 'Stoic

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and Platonist' by Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 17.3 (except that he was a contemporary of Porphyry and Amelius); but one might conjecture that he was an example of someone working in the overlapping margins of Stoicism and Platonism. There are certainly overlaps – quite considerable ones – between Platonism, Hermeticism, Gnosticism and Christianity. There is particularly significant overlap between Platonism and Pythagoreanism. In fact, Pythagoreans and Platonists rarely talk as if they see themselves at odds at all, and the decision to self-describe as a Platonist or Pythagorean does not always cut along lines of explicit philosophical disagreement. So it makes little sense to worry about what to make of someone whose formal affiliation is unclear to us, or was actually undeclared (someone who might have been equally happy to be described as a Pythagorean or a Platonist). Properly integrated into a broader network of evidence in which their presence as a matter of fact generates useful dialogue, such thinkers could usefully be evidence for *both* – both Pythagoreanism and Platonism.

In fact one might want to go further than this. There are some people whose works I use in this volume on an equal basis with those of self-describing Platonists although we can be fairly sure that they were not among them. The most obvious example is Philo of Alexandria, who expresses admiration for Plato, but certainly thought of himself and his philosophy as Jewish, and his authority as Moses. Other important examples are Eudorus, who, as I noted above, is always described as an 'Academic'; and Numenius, who is consistently referred to as a 'Pythagorean', and who is in fact clear in his own writings that Pythagoras has priority over Plato: **IF**[5.2, 7]. But there are good pragmatic reasons for including them. First of all, these thinkers all clearly use and admire Plato even if, as in the case of Philo and Numenius, their admiration is rooted in the conviction that he has derived his philosophy from earlier and superior authorities: (respectively) Moses and Pythagoras. Secondly, and even more importantly, these thinkers are recognised as fellow travellers *by* self-describing Platonists of the period (see further notes s.vv. in the Catalogue of Platonists). And just as they are accepted as friends by Platonists so, thirdly, they share their major bloc of philosophical enemies in common – especially those movements committed to materialism in metaphysics and empiricism in epistemology. At one extreme, indeed, it is possible to take the position that people like Philo and Numenius are 'Platonists' in all but name. I do not take that position, quite: but I do think that it begs more questions to exclude them from the evidence we have for Platonism than it does to include them.

There are others, like Galen (who uses and admires Plato, and for that reason is often thought of as a ‘de facto’ Platonist), who will be seen to have much weaker claim to inclusion on these grounds. It is not just that Galen does not describe himself as a Platonist (in fact he refuses to align himself with any school): more to the point, he is not considered a Platonist by self-describing Platonists, and he does not share his enemies with Platonists. But in this case too, there is no need for dogmatism at the outset: as it happens, Galen enters the volume infrequently, but it has been sensible to keep an eye on him, and the Notes and Further Reading sections explain, as we go along, what justifies his absence.

There is a simple way of putting all this: I do not assume that if Philo or Numenius or Eudorus make some claim, this is *ipso facto* evidence that the claim had its place in the family of ‘Platonism’; or that if Galen said it, it did not. But in every case it is worth considering whether it might have had – whether it enters into constructive discourse with our other evidence. If it does, it seems to me that it would be an artificial restriction to exclude it – and if it does not, then it would be equally artificial to include it.

Finally, this sourcebook is, and is meant to be, one of a series which might, ideally, grow into a sketch of the period as a whole. If they all neglect their borderlands, a lot will go unaccounted for; it is, conversely, nothing to regret if the evidence they include overlaps; and I make no apology for selecting from authors who will also – and in some cases with more right – be covered in, especially, the volume currently under commission on Pythagoreanism.

0.4 Using this Volume

0.4.1 *Commentary and Notes*

I have separated out my own commentary from the Notes and Further Reading sections so that the former might be clearer, and the latter can be fuller. In this way, I hope that my commentary can provide a handle on the subject even for readers who end up disagreeing with it; and I hope that the notes will provide a reasonably fair guide to the *status quaestionis* independently of my own views.

My commentary is strongly oriented towards understanding Platonism in terms of its philosophical beliefs and their justification rather than its exegesis of Plato as such. (For the status of this within their philosophical project as I understand it, see discussion in Chapter 1.) This is not to deny that, at any given time, a Platonist is expounding Plato *as well*: but I want