General Introduction

I. THE PLACE OF THE *REPUBLIC* IN THE NEOPLATONIC COMMENTARY TRADITION

If you asked a random philosopher of the twentieth or twenty-first century 'What is Plato's most important book?' we think he or she would reply 'The *Republic*, of course.' Thanks to the Open Syllabus Project we don't need to rely on mere speculation to intuit professional philosophy's judgement on this matter.[1] We can see what book by Plato professional philosophers put on the reading lists for their students. The Open Syllabus Project surveyed over a million syllabi for courses in English-speaking universities. Filtering the results by discipline yields the result that only two texts were assigned more frequently for subjects in Philosophy (that is, Philosophy subjects generally – not merely subjects on the history of philosophy). Plato's *Republic* comes third after Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism*. If you remove the filter for discipline, then Plato's *Republic* is the second-most assigned text in university studies in the English-speaking world, behind only Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*.[2] Thus graduates of English-language universities in our time and place are more likely to be acquainted with a work of philosophy than they are to be acquainted with any of the works of Shakespeare, and the philosophical text through which they are likely to be acquainted with the discipline is Plato's *Republic*. For us, it is Plato's greatest work and certainly among the greatest works of philosophy ever.

Philosophers and other university academics might be surprised to learn that their judgement was not the judgement of antiquity. In the first thousand years after Plato's death, the award for 'most influential book by this author' would undoubtedly go to the *Timaeus*. Nothing he wrote attracted more philosophical discussion. After a slow start, the *Parmenides* caught up to finish equal first. The reading order of Platonic

[1] http://explorer.opensyllabusproject.org/

[2] This result is principally due to the conservatism of the American (and to a large extent Canadian) university curriculum. *They* read 'the greats' – the British no longer do. The UK results, unfiltered by discipline, have books on research methods at the top. The first work in the top ten not dedicated to methodology or organisational behaviour is Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which sneaks in at number nine.

dialogues established by Iamblichus (born *c.* 245 CE) and followed by Neoplatonic philosophers in both Athens and Alexandria is simultaneously evidence of that assessment of importance and also partly its cause. Let us turn to the nature of the Iamblichean canon of Platonic dialogues and the *Republic*'s place outside of it.

The transition from Hellenistic to post-Hellenistic philosophy is, in large part, a revitalization of older Aristotelian and Platonic philosophies. As a result, the transition to post-Hellenistic philosophy was also marked by an increasing involvement of books in the activities characteristic of philosophers.[3] In fact, this coincided with an increasing pursuit of bookish activities among the cultural elites of the Roman Empire.[4] Given the size of the Platonic corpus, as well as the absence of a Platonic voice in the dialogue form telling one how to read the books of Plato, practical questions about the arrangements of the Platonic dialogues and their purposes in education were particularly pressing. The account of various early attempts to order and classify Plato's dialogues has been related by Tarrant.[5] When we turn to the Neoplatonists in particular, we find that Plotinus' free-ranging engagement with the Platonic dialogues does not recommend any particular reading order, though one can see that he frequently finds important insights contained in isolated passages from *Timaeus*, *Sophist*, *Philebus* and *Parmenides*. The famous analogy between the Sun and the Good in *Republic* VII is of course prominent among the allusions to or citations of Plato's works in Plotinus' *Enneads*.

Porphyry, unlike Plotinus, approached the exegesis of Plato's works much more systematically and wrote commentaries. In addition to the fragments of his *Timaeus Commentary*, we have small bits of evidence pointing to the existence of commentaries on *Parmenides*, *Cratylus*, *Philebus*, *Sophist*, and *Phaedo*, as well as the *Republic*. Significantly, given the extent to which Socrates' criticisms of Homer dominate Proclus' *Commentary*, Porphyry too shows an interest in finding Platonic teachings in the works of Homer by means of allegorical readings. When we add to this the slender but nonetheless persuasive evidence of two other early Neoplatonists – Amelius and Theodore of Asine[6] – we can see evidence of relatively thorough engagement with *Republic* among the first generation of Neoplatonic philosophers after Plotinus.

[3] This was increasingly true of the Hellenistic schools themselves. It was not merely that reviving Aristotelianism or Platonism meant now paying close attention to books written by philosophers who had been dead for centuries. Stoicism and Epicureanism also became increasingly bookish. See Snyder (2000).

[4] Johnson (2010). [5] Tarrant (1993). [6] See Baltzly (forthcoming).

1. The *Republic* in the Neoplatonic commentary tradition

Iamblichus was the Neoplatonic philosopher who was perhaps most important for the subsequent fortunes of the *Republic* within the commentary tradition. He established a canon of twelve dialogues which he took both to sum up the entire philosophy of Plato and also to correlate with the gradations of the cardinal virtues that were developed by Plotinus and systematised by Porphyry.[7] Thus canon formation is built around an ideal of moral and cognitive development intended to assimilate the soul of the Platonist to the divine – the Neoplatonic specification of the *telos* or goal of living. The educational programme was built around ten dialogues that progress from the theme of self-knowledge to the civic virtues to purificatory virtues to contemplative virtues, with different dialogues apparently promoting contemplation of various kinds and orders of being in the Neoplatonic hierarchy.

1. *Alcibiades I* – introductory on the self
2. *Gorgias* – on civic virtue
3. *Phaedo* – on cathartic or purificatory virtue
4. *Cratylus* – logical – on names – contemplative virtues
5. *Theaetetus* – logical – *skopos* unknown
6. *Sophist* – physical – the sublunary demiurge
7. *Statesman* – physical – *skopos* unclear
8. *Phaedrus* – theological – on beauty at every level
9. *Symposium* – theological – *skopos* unknown
10. *Philebus* – theological – on the Good

These dialogues were classified as either physical or theological. The former seem to have had some connection to the being of things in the realm of visible nature (i.e. the realm of *physis*), while the latter dealt with incorporeal being (which the Neoplatonists take to be divine). Thus, according to Iamblichus, the *Sophist* had as its central unifying theme or *skopos* 'the sublunary Demiurge', probably on the grounds that the dialogue reveals the sophist to be one who traffics in *images* and the things here in the sublunary realm are images of the celestial and intelligible realms. By contrast, the Iamblichean *skopos* of the *Phaedrus* transcends the level of nature or *physis* by dealing with 'beauty at every level' – right up to Beauty Itself and the intelligible gods.

Two additional 'perfect' or 'complete' dialogues summed up the entirety of the doctrines communicated in the first decadic arrangement.

11. *Timaeus* – physical
12. *Parmenides* – theological

[7] Brisson (2006).

Of these two, the former was a *summa* of all physical teaching, while the latter presented all Plato's theology in one dialogue.

The *Republic* is conspicuously absent from this list. While we have evidence of commentaries by Iamblichus on *Alcibiades*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, and *Parmenides*, we have no evidence of any work on the *Republic* by Iamblichus. Proclus mentions Iamblichus by name 114 times in his various other works, but there is not a single mention of him in the *Commentary on the Republic*. In a sense this is surprising. Two things stand out about the dialogues on Iamblichus' list. First, many of them contain passages which relate a myth. Secondly, many of them contain passages that invite speculations of a Neopythagorean sort. Some of them, such as the *Timaeus*, contain both. Iamblichus' efforts to position Platonism as continuous with Pythagoreanism have been well documented by O'Meara.[8] Prior to Iamblichus, Porphyry had given allegorical interpretations of the prologues and mythic passages in Plato, but these interpretations discovered mostly ethical teachings or teachings related to the soul.[9] Iamblichus' interpretations of Platonic myths look beyond the realm of the human soul and interpret at least some of them as allegorically encoding important information about intelligible reality.[10] So one might reasonably expect that the *Republic* would have been a prime candidate for elevation to Iamblichus' canon of important dialogues. There are three myths – at least by Proclus' reckoning (*in Remp*. II 96.4) – and while the Myth of Er might plausibly be supposed to have the fate of the soul as its main import, the Cave clearly aims higher and so should hold out attractions for the more 'elevated' Iamblichus. Moreover, as Proclus' Essay 13 shows, the nuptial number had already attracted plenty of numerological speculation in the broadly

[8] O'Meara (1989). The idea that Plato's philosophy is ultimately Pythagorean philosophy is not, of course, a novel idea on Iamblichus' part. One could equally well cite Numenius in this regard and perhaps the Neopythagoreans who came before him. Cf. Bonazzi, Lévy and Steel (2007). But so far as the rest of the Neoplatonic commentary tradition was concerned, Iamblichus' intervention was probably the decisive one.

[9] On Porphyry's place in the development of allegorical readings of the prologues and myths in Platonic dialogues, see Tarrant's discussion of the interpretation of the Atlantis myth; Tarrant (2007).

[10] A good example of this tendency on the part of Iamblichus and those associated with him, like Theodore of Asine, to read Plato's myths at a metaphysically higher level than Porphyry is provided by the *Phaedrus*. Iamblichus identified key phrases in *Phdr*. 245c as providing clues to the structure of the intelligible realm. The 'sub-celestial arch', the 'revolution of the heaven', and the 'super-celestial place' all became important symbols, laden with metaphysical significance. Proclus identifies Iamblichus and Theodore as the philosophers who rediscovered this truth in Plato; cf. *Plat. Theol*. IV.23 68.23–69.8 and Bielmeier (1930).

Pythagorean tradition. So given Iamblichus' emphasis on mythic passages in Plato and on Pythagorean number speculation, it is somewhat surprising to find the *Republic* absent from his canon of dialogues.

There is broad consensus that one reason for the exclusion of the *Republic* from the Iamblichean canon of twelve key dialogues was pure practicality: it is simply too long. It has long been recognised that our written commentaries – with the exception of those of Simplicius – were grounded in classroom teaching, either very directly, as in the case of the commentaries *apo phônês* or somewhat more indirectly, as in the case of Proclus' commentaries.[11] If applied to the *Republic*, the sort of meticulous treatment that is offered to the texts like *Parmenides* or *Timaeus* would yield a course of lectures and a written commentary that would be positively vast. In addition, there may be issues about the unity of the *Republic*. As far back as Praechter, it was recognised that one of Iamblichus' most influential contributions to the Neoplatonic reception was the elevation of the role of the central theme or *skopos* of a dialogue in the interpretation of individual passages.[12] Proclus does offer a *skopos* for the whole of the *Republic*, and in doing so reflects on previous disagreements about what its *skopos* should be. Yet while Proclus finds a single *skopos* for the dialogue – it is about both justice and the *politeia*, as these are two ways of looking at the same thing – it is not as neat and tidy as the central themes identified for other dialogues. Moreover, Proclus himself seems to treat the *Republic* as a *logos* that has other *logoi* within it, each of which can be subjected to the same questions with which one normally opens the reading of a dialogue. Thus in Essay 13 Proclus treats the so-called speech of the Muses (*Rep*. VIII 545e, ff.) as a *logos* about which it is appropriate to offer opinions regarding its style and central theme. Similarly, the commentary on the Myth of Er opens with an identification of its theme (*prothesis*). So, in spite of the unity that Proclus seeks to impose upon the *Republic* in Essay 1, there emerges from the subsequent essays a sense in which the *Republic* constitutes a *logos* within which there are other *logoi*.

This observation intersects in an interesting way with a puzzling piece of information from the *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*. The author of the latter work, in the passage immediately before elaborating the twelve canonical dialogues of Iamblichus, makes some observations on spurious dialogues. He notes that everyone accepts that *Sisyphus*, *Demodocus*, *Alcyon*, *Eryxias* and the *Definitions* don't belong in the Platonic corpus. He adds that Proclus rejected as not genuine (*notheuei*) the *Epinomis* – in part because, on the assumption that the *Laws* remained unrevised at Plato's death, he couldn't

[11] Festugière (1971), Lamberz (1987), Richard (1950). [12] Praechter (1910).

have written the *Epinomis*. Then, surprisingly, the author of the *Anonymous Prolegomena* tells us that *Proclus* rejected (*ekballei*) the *Republic* and the *Laws* because they consist of many *logoi* and are not written in the manner of dialogues. Now, *ekballei* here cannot mean 'rejected as not a genuine work of Plato'. After all, Proclus has gone to considerable trouble to interpret the *Republic* and his works are littered with references to the *Laws*. Nothing in Proclus' writing suggests that he supposed these books to be anything other than more of the inspired philosophy of Plato – works that the Platonic *diadochus* (successor) has a duty to harmonise with the canonical dialogues of Plato. Moreover, Anonymous does not use *ekballei* in relation to the *Epinomis*, but instead *notheuei*. So it seems more likely that Anonymous supposed that Proclus – or someone – had rejected *Republic for some purpose* – not rejected it as a genuine work of Plato. But what Platonist and what purpose?

One possible explanation is that *some* Platonist supposed that both the *Republic* and the *Laws* did not admit of a suitably tight single *skopos* in order that they should be considered among the twelve dialogues that perfectly and completely convey Plato's philosophy. If this were so, then it would not merely be the length of these works that kept them outside the Iamblichean canon, but rather principled concerns about whether these dialogues had the kind of unity that characterises a single living organism (*Phdr.* 265c). This is the standard of unity expected for a truly important Platonic dialogue, as Proclus shows in his discussion of the seventh major topic in the preliminary to the discussion of any dialogue (*in Remp.* I 6.24–5). While the preliminary discussion – or at least as much of it as we now possess – suggests that Proclus thought this question could be answered in the affirmative, his actual practice in commenting on the *Republic* reveals the grounds on which others might well have doubted this. So our conjecture is that Anonymous was confused. It was not *Proclus* who rejected the *Republic* and the *Laws* for the purpose of inclusion within the central canon of Platonic works. It was rather another Platonist. We suspect, though we cannot prove, that this other Platonist was Iamblichus. Clearly, Iamblichus did not reject either the *Republic* or the *Laws* as *inauthentic*. After all, Iamblichus' letters show ample evidence of engagement with both works.[13] Rather, we suspect that Iamblichus rejected both works as suitable for inclusion in the core curriculum that completely conveyed Plato's philosophy on the grounds that it did not satisfy the *skopos* requirement as satisfactorily as did those dialogues that were included. It seems to us not coincidental that this report on 'Proclus"

[13] Dillon and Polleichtner (2009).

rejection of the 'authenticity' of the *Republic* and the *Laws* immediately precedes Anonymous' account of the Iamblichean canon.[14]

The *Anonymous Prolegomena* goes on to report that some philosophers saw fit to include the *Laws* and the *Republic* in the curriculum. Accordingly, Anonymous feels obliged to say what the *skopos* is for each of these works. He reports a view on this matter similar to one that Proclus himself criticises in his Essay 1. Each dialogue is about a different kind of *politeia* or constitution. According to Anonymous, the *skopos* of the *Republic* is the 'unhypothetical' (i.e. ideal) *politeia*, while the *Laws* concerns the *politeia* that is 'hypothetical' in the sense that laws and customs are laid down. Anonymous also refers to a 'reformed' *politeia* where we deal with the evil disturbances in our souls. The latter he takes to be the *skopos* of the *Epistles*.

Proclus himself criticises Platonists who take the *skopos* of the *Republic* to be merely the *politeia* in the external sense of a set of political arrangements (*in Remp*. I 8.6–11.4). In fact, the *skopos* of the *Republic* concerns the relations between the classes in the city and also the relation among the parts of the soul – both an internal and external *politeia*. Now, Proclus' view is that the parts of the soul other than reason are not immortal (*in Remp*. II 94.4–19) and he thinks that Plato himself makes this clear at the end of the dialogue in *Republic* X. Nonetheless, since we live with the mortal, irrational soul as our companion, our way of life is twofold and so is our happiness (*in Parm*. 931.18–23). Political virtue – or better, 'constitutional virtue' – is the excellence that the whole soul possesses and in particular the excellence that arises for the whole as a consequence of how its *parts* are related. This political virtue and the corresponding political kind of happiness is the business of the *Republic* on Proclus' view (cf. *in Remp*. I 26. 29–27.5). Within the Iamblichean curriculum, the work that teaches political virtue and paves the way for the *Phaedo*'s treatment of cathartic or purificatory virtue is the *Gorgias*.

O'Meara collects in tabular form lists of works within the Platonic corpus and outside it that could be studied under the heading of

[14] Our speculations are consistent with, but go beyond Westerink (1962), p. xxxvii). He agrees that it is absurd to suppose that Proclus rejected the authenticity of a work on which he wrote an extensive commentary. He thinks that the word *ekballei* may mean 'merely that he left them out of the list of dialogues *proper*'. We are not sure exactly what that might mean. Perhaps he means what we have recommended: that their multi-book composition was a basis for excluding them from the canon of standard works taught in the Platonic schools and correlated with the moral progress of the pupil through the gradations of virtue. We think it likely that the initiator of this exclusion was Iamblichus, not Proclus, however. In any event, we agree with Westerink's assessment that 'there may be some misunderstanding here, either on the lecturer's or on the reportator's side' (p. xxxvii).

'political virtue' (pp. 65–7). He also notes that in our single surviving commentary on the *Gorgias*, Olympiodorus refers more often to the *Laws* and the *Republic* than to any other Platonic dialogue.[15] So while the *Republic* did not make the list of Iamblichus' twelve core dialogues, it was obviously treated as an important source of illumination for political virtue and political happiness. As a text to teach in the manner in which the Neoplatonists taught Plato, its length certainly made it less practical. There may also have been objections raised to the dialogue on the grounds of its unity. It might seem to us modern readers that the *Gorgias* – with its three distinct speakers and range of topics – is no more or less unified than the *Republic*. But Olympiodorus in his commentary tells us what unifies the *Gorgias*. Its *skopos* is political or constitutional happiness. The *form* of this kind of happiness is justice and temperance. (These are, of course, the virtues from *Republic* IV that involve all three parts of the soul.) The *efficient* cause of this kind of happiness is the philosophical life, while its *paradigmatic* cause is the cosmos. On Olympiodorus' division of the parts of the dialogue, the conversations with Gorgias, Polus and Callicles elucidate the efficient, formal and final causes of political happiness respectively. So the unity of these causes yields a similar unity for the dialogue. We note that Proclus' specification of a similar *skopos* for the *Republic* does not yield a division of the text that is quite so neat and tidy. This could have given rise to the view that, among these two dialogues with similar themes, the *Gorgias* had a greater degree of unity than the *Republic*.

We believe that it would be a mistake to take a particular Platonic dialogue's place within (or outside) the Iamblichean canon too seriously. By 'too seriously' we mean that – in spite of the Neoplatonists' explicit identification of some dialogue as introductory or related to a lower kind of happiness than the contemplative *eudaimonia* and union with the divine that is the stated goal of their complete programme of study – most 'beginning' commentaries do not consistently confine themselves to simple lessons on lower levels of reality. In truth, Proclus will happily import into his exegesis of an argument that is putatively concerned only with political happiness considerations having to do with the very highest levels of being. Thus, for example, his elucidation of Socrates' function argument in *Republic* I (352e–354a) relates the distinction between things that have a function F because they *alone* can perform that function and things that have a function G because they perform G *best* to the dual nature of the highest principle as both source of unity and source of goodness. Whatever they may say, in practice the Neoplatonic commentary tradition teaches *all* the

[15] See also Tarrant (2010).

mysteries of Platonism from *all* the dialogues that they interpret for their students. This observation is salient to the next section of our introduction. One of the things that has made modern scholars suspicious of the idea that Proclus' *Commentary* was ever intended by its author to be a single work is the fact that different essays within the collection seem to be addressed to quite different audiences. In fact, this is not unique to the *Republic Commentary*. Proclus seems to move freely between relatively straightforward exegesis and remarks on the most arcane of Neoplatonic doctrines in all his works. While the *Timaeus Commentary* is more frequently addressed to those with significant background knowledge, it is not invariably so. Moreover, the *Alcibiades Commentary* frequently digresses into material that seems to be directed to those who are not mere beginners.[16]

2. THE UNITY OF PROCLUS' *REPUBLIC COMMENTARY*

As long ago as 1929 Carl Gallavotti argued for the heterogeneity of the essays contained in the *Republic Commentary* as we now possess it and sought to establish a chronology for the composition of the scattered writings that have come to be included in it.[17] The *Republic Commentary* we possess, Gallavotti argued, is a descendant, not of a unified work arranged by Proclus himself, but instead traces its origins back to a collection put together at some point after Proclus' death (p. xlvi). It combines independent pieces on topics in the *Republic* with an *Introduction* or *Isagoge*. The result is a kind of portmanteau of fundamentally disparate materials. Gallavotti supposed that some essays included under the title of the *Republic Commentary* are for beginners – the vestiges of the *Introduction* – while others are learned digressions on points of detail that would have been well beyond the understanding of the audience for the *Introduction*.

This hypothesis about the heterogeneity of the work has had consequences for its modern language translations. There is only one modern language translation of the entirety of Proclus' *Republic Commentary* – the three-volume French translation of A. J. Festugière published in 1970.[18] Very substantial portions of the work were

[16] To take but one example among many, consider the digression on the 'more secret' of the doctrines on love described at *in Alc.* I 50.23 ff. Here the beginner is treated to ideas drawn from the *Chaldaean Oracles*, as well as the 'three monads' that figure so prominently in Proclus' understanding of the *Philebus*. All this even before the student has completed the dialogue that allegedly instructs him in what he truly is – a soul!

[17] Gallavotti (1929). [18] Festugière (1970).

translated into Italian by M. Abbate in 2004.[19] In 2012 Robert Lamberton published his translation of Essays 5 and 6 (with facing page Greek text) under the title *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*.[20] Abbate's choices about which parts of the *Republic Commentary* to include in his translation are conditioned not only by the limits of human endurance – the text of Kroll runs to 664 pages excluding the scholia he prints at the end – but also by his view about the nature of the work that we now possess. Abbate translates what he takes to be the original *Introduction*, omitting Essays 6, 12, 13 and 16. The last, Essay 16, is the massive line-by-line commentary on the Myth of Er. This is the only part of the *Republic Commentary* that goes through Plato's text with the same level of detail that we find in Proclus' other commentaries on the *Parmenides*, *Timaeus* and *Alcibiades I*.[21] Lamberton feels similarly justified in translating only Essays 5 and 6 since he agrees with Sheppard's somewhat more circumscribed hypothesis about the underlying disunity of the *Republic Commentary* as we now possess it.[22]

We wish to demur slightly from this scholarly consensus. In this section we argue that Proclus' *Republic Commentary* has more unity than is often supposed. In our view Sheppard shows that Gallavotti's more specific claims about the *order* of composition of the essays are not well-supported by the evidence.[23] She, Lamberton and Abbate nonetheless agree that the existing manuscript is clearly a mixture compounded from a student-oriented *Introduction* to the *Republic* (Essays 1–5, 7–8, 10–12, and 14–15) into which have been integrated other essays composed for different audiences, purposes and occasions. Thus they suppose that Proclus' *Republic Commentary* has significantly less unity than its single title would suggest. Indeed, Sheppard and Lamberton both argue that the work is not entirely consistent since Essay 5 presents a quite different taxonomy of poetry than Essay 6. Since the two essays are not consistent on this subject, we can safely infer that they belong to different layers of Proclus' intellectual development – even if we cannot identify the finer distinctions in intellectual development as Gallavotti had supposed.

We reply that even if it is granted that the essays in Proclus' *Republic Commentary* had distinct purposes related to different settings and that the collection of essays may have grown organically as Proclus added to it, it remains that Proclus' *Republic Commentary* constitutes a work that is no less unified than Plato's own dialogue. We address the alleged

[19] Abbate (2004). [20] Lamberton (2012).
[21] Unlike the case of the *Republic*, however, each of these sustained, line-by-line commentaries breaks off before the commentator reaches the end of the dialogue.
[22] Sheppard (1980). [23] Sheppard (1980), 36–9.