CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42691-6 — The Roots of Platonism
John Dillon
Excerpt
More Information

Introduction

The present work addresses a topic which has been of interest to me for some considerable time, to wit, the process by which the intellectual speculations pursued by Plato in the (rather informal) institution that he set up in the Academy park on the outskirts of Athens in around 387 BCE, and that he presided over until his death forty years later, came to assume the nature of a philosophical *system.* This is a question that I addressed first over thirty years ago now, in a paper entitled 'Self-Definition in Later Platonism',[1] where I set out to investigate, in the case of the Platonic School in particular, what provokes a philosophic or religious movement to define itself formally, in the sense of establishing an 'orthodoxy', and discerning 'heresies'. I pursued this question further in a later essay, '"Orthodoxy" and "Eclecticism": Middle Platonists and Neo-Pythagoreans',[2] in either case drawing what I suppose is the rather obvious conclusion that a philosophical school tends to define itself initially by reason of attacks made upon it by rivals, or indeed in the process of attacking those rivals: in the case of the Old Academy, this arises initially in response to attacks from Aristotle and the Peripatos; while in the case of the New Academy, it is the accompaniment of attacks by Arcesilaus and his successors on the rival Stoic school, who had contrived to 'corner the market' in the area of epistemological certainty, following on from the dogmatic system that had progressively arisen in the Old Academy.[3]

[1] First published in Meyers & Sanders (eds.) (1982), pp. 60–75; repr. in Dillon (1990).
[2] First published in Long & Dillon (eds.) (1988), pp. 103–25; repr. in Dillon (1997b). The inverted commas in the title are intended to be significant!
[3] I should specify here what I hope will become clear from the succeeding chapters, namely that the 'orthodoxy' being discussed here should be distinguished – as a 'weak' orthodoxy, let us

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42691-6 — The Roots of Platonism
John Dillon
Excerpt
More Information

In the later 'Middle Platonic' period (viz. *c.* 100 CE), inter-school struggles seem to become somewhat less severe, but still Plutarch directs various polemics against both Stoics and Epicureans, while, later in the second century, Atticus strongly attacks the Peripatetics, apparently provoked by some rather patronizing remarks on the part of a Peripatetic rival, Aristocles of Messene, who composed a work *On Philosophy,* in ten books,[4] and who had dared, while commending Plato as quite a good philosopher for his time, to present him merely as a suitable *precursor* of the more perfect philosophy of Aristotle. Such impertinences cannot go unpunished! One can also observe, in the case of Atticus' approximate contemporary, Numenius of Apamea, both a vigorous, and entertainingly satirical, attack on the scepticism of the New Academy (with a sideswipe also at Antiochus of Ascalon), and an assertion of the essential role of Pythagoras as the true 'founding father' of Platonism – a tendency that goes back at least to Eudorus of Alexandria, in the later first century BCE, but even, to some extent at least, to Speusippus and Xenocrates in the Old Academy.

The six chapters (originally distinct papers)[5] presented here seek to contribute to this theme of developing self-definition and orthodoxy in various ways. In the first, 'The Origins of Platonist Dogmatism', I address in a general way the process by which, initially under the headship of Xenocrates, the third head of the Academy, but with modifications and amplifications on the part of his successor Polemon, a definitive set of doctrines seems to arise in the three fields of philosophy specified by him, Ethics, Physics and Logic, by contrast with the procedure of Plato himself, who, I argue, was more concerned with the free exploration of philosophical problems, such

say, as opposed to a 'strong' orthodoxy – from the kind of orthodoxy imposed by a centralized bureaucratic structure, such as arises, for example, in the various 'Abrahamic' religions. Within the Platonic tradition, there is really no centralized structure that could impose such uniformity of doctrine, even if there were a desire to do so. Instead, there is a certain spectrum of doctrinal positions which a Platonist can hold – which is not to say that he may not be challenged on these, either by colleagues or by successors. All that I see Xenocrates as doing is setting up certain parameters.

[4] Passages from whose work Eusebius quotes in the *Praeparatio Evangelica,* just prior to his quotations from Atticus.

[5] Earlier versions of three of these have appeared elsewhere: Chapter 3, in *Etudes platoniciennes* VIII (2011), pp. 31–42; Chapter 4 in *Ethik des antiken Platonismus,* hrsg. von C. Pietsch. Steiner Verlag: Stuttgart, 2013, pp. 91–8; and Chapter 5 in *Dionysius* 34 (2016), pp. 27–45.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42691-6 — The Roots of Platonism
John Dillon
Excerpt
More Information

as those of unity and plurality in the composition of the universe, the status of mathematical entities and generic and specific archetypes of physical individuals, and the nature and objective reality of ethical norms – the only restriction being the observance of a set of essentially *negative* conditions, well defined by Lloyd Gerson, in his most stimulating book, *From Plato to Platonism*[6]: that is to say, anti-materialism, anti-mechanism, anti-nominalism, anti-relativism, and anti-scepticism, which, cumulatively, can be seen to add up to a 'Platonist' stance in philosophy, termed by Gerson 'Ur-Platonism', or 'Fundamental Platonism'. What I see Xenocrates, in particular, as doing is both initiating a process of the exegesis of Plato's works, with the aim of reconciling any apparent contradictions or inconsistencies within the corpus (which he himself will have been the first to assemble), and composing a set of treatises on all or most of the main topics of philosophy, in order to provide an appropriate dogmatic underpinning to the corpus.

I turn next, with 'Monist and Dualist Tendencies in Platonism before Plotinus', to a basic question which has concerned later followers of Plato, both ancient and modern, namely whether his metaphysical system is essentially monist or dualist. Plato himself, as I note, provides plausible material in support of either alternative, and indeed his later follower Plutarch (who has something of an agenda of his own) comes out strongly in favour of Platonic dualism. Nonetheless, on balance, my conclusion is that Plato did not intend to set up a positive force of evil or disorder in opposition to his supreme unitary principle; rather, the secondary principle of multiplicity and diversity, the Indefinite Dyad, is best seen as complementary to the Monad (or One, or Good), and necessary for the generation of an ordered cosmos.

Likewise, the 'Receptacle' of the *Timaeus,* the 'ancient disharmony' of the *Statesman* myth, and the 'soul of the opposite capacity' of *Laws* X – all fastened upon as evidence by such a later dualist as Plutarch, are best seen, despite appearances, not as manifestations of a primordially existent 'disorderly World-Soul', but rather as essentially negative phenomena, inevitable concomitants of the generation

[6] Gerson (2013), esp. pp. 9–32.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42691-6 — The Roots of Platonism
John Dillon
Excerpt
More Information

of a three-dimensional, material world, lying ready to hand for the ordering power of an essentially omnipotent first principle.

A third basic topic on this theme is that of the nature and situation of the Platonic system of Forms, or Ideas, those intelligible archetypes of particular objects, qualities and concepts that Plato judged to be essential (in view of the fluid and evanescent nature of physical particulars) for the establishment of an ordered cosmos, and the attaining of secure knowledge (as opposed to opinion), allowing for the existence of rational and coherent discourse. I do not here venture to take on the vast question concerning 'of what things there are Forms', or as to what sort of *resemblance* there can be between a Form and its dependent particulars, interesting though these issues are. Instead, in 'The Ideas as Thoughts of God', I focus on an issue which has long been made something of a mystery in Platonic studies, namely where may we suppose the Forms or Ideas to reside. Plato himself makes the aged Parmenides dismiss the theory that they can be simply thoughts in the human mind (*Parmenides* 132B–C), as that would make them too subjective (they must be thoughts of *something*), but this does not preclude their being thoughts in the mind of God, as that would be the ultimate objective reality.

When we survey the revived dogmatic Platonism of the first century BCE, in the persons of Antiochus of Ascalon, Eudorus of Alexandria – and indeed the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria – we find the Ideas as thoughts of God an established doctrine (reinforced by the assimilation to it of the Stoic doctrine of divine *logoi*). I want here to suggest, however, that this is not to be seen as an innovation of that period (one gets no sense from any of the figures here mentioned that they think that they are innovating in propounding this doctrine), but rather as a doctrine descending to them from the Old Academy, and specifically from Xenocrates, for whom the supreme principle was a Monad which is also an Intellect (*nous*) – and an intellect must necessarily have thoughts! I would suggest further, indeed, that, once one had resolved on a 'demythologizing' exegesis of Plato's *Timaeus,* as do both Speusippus and Xenocrates, the 'Paradigm', or Model, in accordance with which the Demiurge fashions the physical world, can in consequence be regarded as nothing else than the contents of his intellect – he now in effect becoming a rational World-Soul.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42691-6 — The Roots of Platonism
John Dillon
Excerpt
More Information

In the later 'Middle Platonic' period, it must be said, after the time of Plutarch, it became an issue as to whether the Forms or Ideas should be regarded as being inside or outside the divine Intellect, as being internal to it must have come to seem a compromise of their objective reality, and Plotinus has to engage in a protracted argument on this subject with his pupil Porphyry, who has come to him from the Athenian school of Longinus, with Plotinus ultimately converting him to the doctrine that the Forms are *within* Intellect – but then this intellect becomes a secondary divinity, lower than the One, which transcends thought.

Turning now to the sphere of Ethics, the fourth issue that I propose to address, in 'The Hierarchy of Being as a Framework for Platonist Ethical Theory', is that of the way that ethical theory in the Platonic tradition is tied in with metaphysics, and in particular how the *telos,* or 'end of goods', is related to the concept of the divinity. Starting with Antiochus of Ascalon, and then passing through Eudorus and Plutarch to Alcinous, I am concerned to show how the two interconnected ideals of 'living in accordance with nature' (*homologoumenôs têi physei zên*) – originally Stoic, but appropriated by Antiochus – and 'assimilating oneself to God' (*homoiôsis theôi*) are dependent on a particular view of the nature of God and of our capacity to assimilate ourselves to him through the practice of the virtues.

Next, turning to a phase of the Platonist tradition which I have in general refrained from discussing in the past, the so-called New Academy – mainly because I tended to view it, as it is often viewed, as rather a part of the history of ancient Scepticism than of Platonism – I address, in 'Carneades the Socratic', that remarkable figure, Carneades of Cyrene, the last major figure in the 'New-Academic' school, with whom the later Platonist Plutarch, as we shall see, is prepared to claim an affinity, but who would have been rejected, along with his predecessor Arcesilaus, by the general body of later Platonists as 'heretics', to examine the respects in which he can be seen to be returning, like Arcesilaus before him, to the 'Socratic' aporetic roots of the Platonist tradition, while nevertheless postulating a certain degree of certainty, or at least 'probability' (*pithanotes*), in the cognition of the perceptible world, a degree of 'knowledge' for which, I argue, he could claim Socratic antecedents, despite Plato's

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42691-6 — The Roots of Platonism
John Dillon
Excerpt
More Information

own downplaying of the reliability of sensory impressions. Here, I make considerable use of the insights of the great Platonist scholar Gregory Vlastos (in whose honour this paper was originally produced) as to the distinctive degree of 'modified' knowledge which Socrates can be seen to claim, in various of the early dialogues, such as the *Apology* or the *Gorgias.*

Following on from this, and moving to a somewhat later stage in the development of the Platonic tradition, in the essay 'Plutarch's Relation to the New-Academic Tradition', I turn to the distinctive stance of the Middle Platonist Plutarch of Chaeroneia in relation to the 'sceptical' tradition of the New Academy of Arcesilaus and Carneades, as a segment of the Platonic tradition which was, as we have seen, generally rejected as heretical by Platonists from Antiochus on, but which Plutarch is prepared to embrace as a valid aspect of the heritage of Socrates. On the one hand, Plutarch embraces the aporetic, or 'questioning', tradition, which raises difficulties for the dogmatism of Stoic epistemology; and on the other hand, he seeks to deny that the New Academics practised a thorough-going scepticism of the Pyrrhonian variety. He sees them rather as training their pupils' minds by analysing the contradictions inherent in Stoic empiricism.

To illustrate Plutarch's approach, I examine first some sections of his polemic against the Epicurean Colotes (who himself was attacking Arcesilaus); then the first, and most programmatic, of his *Platonic Questions* in which he sets forth the position of Socrates, as he sees it; and lastly, the interesting little treatise *On the Principle of Cold,* addressed to his avowedly New-Academic follower Favorinus of Arles, showing him (somewhat ironically, I feel) how one should approach such a doubtful physical question as the nature of cold.

All in all, I hope to have presented in these six essays an overview of how doctrine within a philosophical school develops, and of the various turns that may be taken, and controversies that may arise, within the tradition. I am not aspiring, especially in view of the considerable stream of works on this general topic that have emerged in recent years, to provide here any sort of definitive study, but rather a contribution to the on-going debate as to the nature and origins of the Platonist tradition.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42691-6 — The Roots of Platonism
John Dillon
Excerpt
More Information

CHAPTER 1

The Origins of Platonist Dogmatism

We may start our investigations with something of a general survey of the topic, highlighting the chief respects in which Plato's philosophical investigations progressively become something that we can reasonably term 'Platonism'. We can then proceed to focus on a series of key issues which together serve to delineate the parameters of this great tradition.

The philosopher Plato, as all his friends would agree, was a man of strong views on most subjects, but it is a notable fact that, in his published works, he chooses to present these views in a distinctly devious way. The Platonic dialogue, after all, is a literary form designed to advance philosophical positions *aporetically* and *dialectically,* not dogmatically. If we derive doctrines from them, it is, so to speak, at our own risk.[1]

Nonetheless there is indubitably a body of doctrine associated with the Platonic School. Even within Plato's own lifetime, we have the (admittedly tendentious) testimony of Aristotle as to the existence of certain philosophical principles of Plato which he on occasion[2] terms *agrapha dogmata,* and which have come to be known as the 'unwritten doctrines'. I have taken up a certain position on these myself,[3] seeking to strike a judicious balance between what I would regard as

[1] There is indeed a large and reasonably respectable body of opinion among Plato scholars which maintains that it is impossible to recover Platonic doctrine with any certainty from the dialogues; cf. e.g. the essays collected by Gerald Press (2000) and Charles Griswold (1988).

[2] E.g. *Metaph.* A 6, 987b29ff. A useful collection both of Aristotelian passages and of Neoplatonic commentaries on them is to be found in Krämer (1964).

[3] Dillon (2003), Chapter 1: 'The Riddle of the Academy'. For an incisive critique of the whole 'Tübingen' approach to the *agrapha dogmata,* see Mann (2006). I am indebted to Professor Pavel Gregoric for reminding me of this essay.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42691-6 — The Roots of Platonism
John Dillon
Excerpt
More Information

the extreme views of Harold Cherniss and his followers, such as Leonardo Tarán, on the one hand, and the 'Tübingen School' of Konrad Gaiser, Hans-Joachim Krämer, and *their* followers (such as Giovanni Reale), on the other. To summarize my position here, I see no problem about there being a body of doctrines, or at least working hypotheses, which do not find their way into the dialogues, except in devious and allusive forms, and that these doctrines, such as that of the derivation of all things from a pair of first principles. A One and an Indefinite Dyad should be of basic importance to Plato's system; but I see no need, on the other hand, to hypothesize a full body of secret lore, present in the Academy from its inception, which is preserved as a sort of 'mystery' for the initiated.

Short of this, however, it seems to me entirely probable that a great deal of philosophical speculation went on in the Academy which does not find its way into a dialogue. After all, Plato never promises to reveal his whole mind in writing – very much the opposite, indeed, if one bears in mind such a text as *Phdr.* 275D–E, or the following notable passage of the *Seventh Letter* (341C–E):[4]

> But this much I can certainly declare concerning all these writers, or prospective writers, who claim to know the subjects which I seriously study (*peri hôn egô spoudazô*), whether as having heard them from me or from others, or as having discovered them themselves; it is impossible, in my judgement at least, that these men should understand anything about this subject. *There does not exist, nor will there ever exist, any treatise of mine dealing therewith.* For it does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies, but, as a result of continued application to the subject itself and actually living with it, it is brought to birth in the soul all of a sudden (*exaiphnês*), as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself.

Even if this is not Plato himself talking, as I say – though I believe it is – it is surely someone who was well acquainted with the situation obtaining in the school. Plato never really gave up on the Socratic idea that philosophy must always be a primarily oral activity, and also an open-ended process. So talk and argumentation prevailed in the groves of the Academy. And the members of the Academy of whom

[4] Which I would certainly regard as authoritative (that is to say, emanating from sources in the Old Academy who knew what they were talking about), even if its provenance from the hand of Plato himself is disputed. (Unless otherwise attributed, translations are my own.)

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42691-6 — The Roots of Platonism
John Dillon
Excerpt
More Information

we have any knowledge – figures such as Speusippus, Xenocrates, Aristotle, Eudoxus of Cnidus, or Heraclides of Pontus – were a pretty talkative and argumentative bunch; not the sort of people to sit around until Plato had completed another dialogue!

At any rate, whatever the status of these 'unwritten doctrines', we are, it seems to me, left with the interesting problem that, from the perspective of the later Platonist tradition, beginning with Antiochus of Ascalon in the first century BCE, a firm conviction arose that Plato and the Old Academy had put forth a consistent and comprehensive body of doctrine on all aspects of philosophy, and this belief continued throughout later antiquity. Not that Platonism was ever seen to be a monolithic structure; there was room for a fairly wide spectrum of positions on most ethical and physical questions. But there was a solid consensus that Plato *did* dogmatize, and did not, as the New Academicians, from Arcesilaus to Carneades, maintained, simply raise problems and suspend judgement.[5] What I would like to enquire into on this occasion is (a) whether there might be any justification for this belief and (b), if there is, at what stage might this dogmatism have arisen.

It seems to me best, in approaching this question, to start at the end, so to speak – that is, with the evidence of Antiochus of Ascalon – and work back. What we find with Antiochus – or rather, in a number of significant texts of Cicero, in which his spokespersons are expounding Platonic doctrine along Antiochian lines[6] – is, first of all, a clear division of the subject-matter of philosophy into the three domains of ethics, physics (including what we would consider rather 'metaphysics', or the discussion of first principles), and logic, and then a set

[5] Cf. the discussion of the question at the beginning of the *Anonymous Theaetetus Commentary*, a work emanating possibly from the late first century BCE, but more probably from the following century. As regards the New Academy, indeed, an interesting belief arose in later times (doubtless a pious fiction) that the New Academics did not believe this themselves, but only maintained this position in public to combat the Stoics, while dogmatizing in private! Cf. Sextus Empiricus *PH* 1.234 and August. *C. Acad.* 3. 20, 43 (quoting a lost section of Cicero's *Academica*).

[6] We are concerned chiefly with such works as *De Finibus* 4 and 5 (for ethics), and the *Academica Priora* and *Academica Posteriora* (for 'physics'), but there are a number of other significant passages also. For a fairly comprehensive treatment of Antiochus, see Dillon (1977), Chapter 2; but also, in a more sceptical mode, Barnes (1989); and now Sedley (ed.) (2012).

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42691-6 — The Roots of Platonism
John Dillon
Excerpt
More Information

of confidently proclaimed doctrines, under each of those heads. It has long been assumed, without much dissent, that this construction is very largely a fantasy of Antiochus, concocted by dint of extrapolating back onto his heroes in the Old Academy a body of doctrine largely gleaned from the Stoics, by whose teachings he was deeply influenced.

I entered a plea against this assumption in *The Middle Platonists,* some forty years ago now, arguing on the one hand that there was little point in Antiochus trying to put over on a fairly sceptical and well-informed public a claim for which there was no justification whatever,[7] and on the other hand recalling how little we really know of doctrinal developments within the Old Academy, especially under the leadership of Xenocrates and Polemon. I was still, however, in that work pretty wary of attributing too much in the way of doctrine to Polemon in particular, since we seemed to know so little about him, despite his near-forty-year tenure of the headship. But since then I have been much encouraged by a most perceptive article of David Sedley's, 'The Origins of Stoic God', published in 2002,[8] which, it seems to me, opens the way to recovering much of Polemon's doctrinal position, and I have rather taken this ball and run with it, I'm afraid, in Chapter 4 of *The Heirs of Plato.*

I will return to David Sedley's article presently, but for the moment I want to concentrate rather on the topic of ethics, and even before that to focus on the question of the formal division of philosophy into topics at all, which seems to me to be bound up with the establishment of a philosophical *system.* We learn from Sextus Empiricus, in fact (*Adv. Log.* 1.16), that the first philosopher formally to distinguish the three main areas or topics of philosophy, which Sextus names in the order 'Physics – Ethics – Logic' but which can

[7] He is never, as I pointed out, accused of anything like this by Cicero, who himself, despite his great personal affection and respect for Antiochus, maintains a position loyal to the New Academy. All that Cicero accuses him of is being himself too close to the Stoics (*si perpauca mutavisset, germanissimus Stoicus, Acad. Post.* 132; *a Chrysippo pedem nusquam, Acad. Post.* 143; and cf. also *Acad. Pr.* 135, where Cicero seeks to nail him on the particular point of virtue being sufficient for happiness, which he declares was *not* the view of the Old Academy). All this, I maintain, does not amount to a dismissal of Antiochus' overall project – and it is, in any case, inter-school polemic.

[8] In Frede & Laks (2002), pp. 41–83.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org