

THE ROOTS OF PLATONISM

The Origins and Chief Features of a Philosophical Tradition

How does a school of thought, in the area of philosophy, or indeed of religion, from roots that may be initially open-ended and largely informal, come to take on the features that later mark it out as distinctive, and even exclusive? That is the theme which is explored in this book in respect of the philosophical movement known as Platonism, stemming as it does from the essentially open-ended and informal atmosphere of Plato's Academy. John Dillon focuses on a number of key issues, such as monism versus dualism, the metaphysical underpinnings of ethical theory, the theory of Forms, and the reaction to the sceptical 'deviation' represented by the so-called 'New Academy'. The book is written in the lively and accessible style of the lecture series in Beijing from which it originates.

JOHN DILLON is Regius Professor of Greek (Emeritus) at Trinity College Dublin. His chief publications are *The Middle Platonists* (1977; 2nd ed. 1996); *Iamblichus, De Anima* (with John Finamore; 2000); *Alcinous: The Handbook of Platonism* (1993); *The Heirs of Plato* (2003); and three volumes of collected essays. In 2004 he was awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Irish Academy for distinguished research in the Humanities.

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a Philosophical Tradition*

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*To my grandsons,
Kian and Bobby*

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
Introduction	i
1 The Origins of Platonist Dogmatism	7
2 Monist and Dualist Tendencies in Platonism before Plotinus	24
3 The Ideas as Thoughts of God	35
4 The Hierarchy of Being as a Framework for Platonist Ethical Theory	50
5 Carneades the Socratic	61
6 Plutarch’s Relation to the New-Academic Tradition	79
Conclusion	94
<i>Bibliography</i>	96
<i>Index Locorum</i>	101
<i>General Index</i>	105

Preface

The present volume takes its start from a set of six lectures delivered to the Department of Philosophy of Renmin University in Beijing during the last two weeks of October 2016, as the eighth in an ongoing series of Master Classes in Ancient Greek Philosophy. I am most grateful to Professor Wei Liu of the Department for the original invitation, and for copious hospitality during my stay. A version of the lectures is due to be published in due course in Chinese translation. The original lectures have been considerably revised for the present edition, and I am greatly indebted to Michael Sharp of Cambridge University Press for accepting my proposal to turn a set of somewhat disconnected papers into a book, and to the two anonymous readers that he selected for many useful suggestions as to achieving that goal. The remaining inadequacies are my own. Michael Sharp's original proposal to me was actually for a more comprehensive volume, surveying developments in the field of later Platonism in the forty years or so since the publication of my initial foray into the field, *The Middle Platonists*, in 1977, but I found that that was rather more than I could face, especially as there is now a plethora of younger scholars in the field who could do a better job on that than I. Instead, I thought that I would focus on certain salient aspects of the growth of the Platonist philosophical tradition, which is what chiefly interests me at the moment, and offer these essays as a contribution to that, as well as to further scholarly discussion on the subject.

A number of these essays had seen the light of day before being taken to China, and I am grateful to the editors of *Etudes platoniciennes* VIII, Alexandra Michalewski and Pieter d'Hoine, for permission to reproduce 'The Ideas as Thoughts of God', first delivered at

a pleasant conference in Paris in 2009; to the publishers Steiner Verlag of Stuttgart, in respect of the essay on ‘The Hierarchy of Being as a Framework for Platonist Ethical Theory’, which originally formed part of a volume of essays on Platonist ethical theory, *Ethik des antiken Platonismus*, edited by Christian Pietsch, of the University of Münster, as a subsidiary to the completion of Volume VIII of the great enterprise *Der Platonismus in der Antike*, bequeathed to him by his predecessor in the chair, my old friend Matthias Baltes; and lastly to Wayne Hankey, editor of that excellent journal *Dionysius*, for permission to republish my paper ‘Carneades the Socratic’, which had originally seen the light of day as a Memorial Lecture in honour of Gregory Vlastos, at Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, in September 2014 – another very pleasant occasion. I trust that the resulting volume achieves at least the modicum of coherence that I have tried to bestow upon it. *Habent sua fata libelli*.

A word about the cover image. I realise full well that the face peering out from amongst the roots is not that of Plato, but of the Buddha. Nonetheless, the picture seemed otherwise so apt that the Editor and I decided to adopt it, *faute de mieux*, since we could not alter it! There is an analogy, after all, with the development of the various Buddhist systems that is not irrelevant.

Acknowledgements

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