

## I

## THE EARLY ACADEMY

**Plato, Platonists, and Platonism**

Writing a history of Platonism is difficult for one very simple reason: it is not clear what being a Platonist means. This might seem like nit-picking: one might object that tracing a Platonist's profile is not hard at all. A Platonist is someone who believes in the truth of Plato's philosophy and aims to defend it against opponents' criticism and against alternative philosophical theories. More specifically, as some have argued, it might be noted that Plato's philosophy, as it emerges from the dialogues and other testimonies, is a complete and perfect philosophical system: the Platonist's task is to explain this system; and, in doing so, to show its intrinsic worth and superiority.

The problem with a reconstruction of this kind is that it takes for granted some theses that are far from obvious, starting from the underlying assumption that there exists a philosophical system developed by Plato which is self-evident and indisputable – a system that can either be accepted or rejected, but whose fundamental outline cannot be doubted. This is precisely where the real difficulty lies because it is not at all evident what Plato's alleged system consists of. There are countless variations on this theme and – as we shall see in Chapter 2 – there are even thinkers who regard themselves as Platonists precisely because they believe that philosophy cannot be enclosed in any one system. We will discuss these issues in due course. What is clear for now is that tracing a profile of a true Platonist is more complex than it might seem at first sight.

In order to correctly frame the problem, then, it is necessary to acknowledge this complexity. In other words, it is best to take account of the potential difference between Plato, on the one hand, and Platonism, on the other, as well as of the intrinsic ambiguity

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of the adjective ‘Platonist’. A parallel with Karl Marx, one of the few philosophers to enjoy a reputation comparable to Plato’s, might help clarify the problem. By now it has become clear – and not just to scholars either – that Marx and Marxism do not wholly overlap. The distinction between ‘Marxian’ and ‘Marxist’ has become current: the former term applies to those seeking to reconstruct Marx’s thought, and the latter to those who draw upon his thought more freely in order to adapt it to new historical, cultural, and doctrinal contexts. The problem with Plato and Platonism is that, although the situation is much the same, a distinction of this kind is lacking, potentially giving rise to much confusion.<sup>1</sup> All in all, the problem is that there never was a single and indisputable Platonism in antiquity, to be either accepted or rejected – the very term ‘Platonism’ only entered into use in the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Rather, what we have are a series of ‘Platonisms’ competing not only, as one would expect, with the other philosophical schools, but also with one another. This variety is what makes Platonism a worthwhile subject from a historical and philosophical standpoint. The multiplicity and originality of the attempts made to reconstruct Plato’s ancient thought and his most genuine message is what makes Platonism interesting: clearly, to be a Platonist is to believe in the superiority of Plato’s philosophy; but the problem – and the interest – lies entirely in the fact that to be a Platonist means many things. This is why reconstructing the history of ancient Platonism, a history spanning almost a millennium, is so difficult yet at the same time so stimulating.

Dropping the assumption that there exists a single and indisputable Platonic philosophy, it is worth taking a more discreet route, by identifying the point of departure of the various Platonists, which is to say of those philosophers who openly drew upon Plato’s teaching. This is an easier task and the answer is twofold:

<sup>1</sup> In English – but not in many other modern languages – there exists of course a distinction between ‘Platonic’ and ‘Platonist’, but these terms are often used as synonyms, without any real awareness of the problem.

<sup>2</sup> The first attestation of the term ‘Platonism’ would appear to come from the famous *Encyclopédie raisonnée des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, and more specifically from the twenty-sixth volume, which features the entry ‘Platonisme’, written by Louis de Jaucourt: see Neschke-Hentske 1995: 2–7, offering some very interesting observations on the problematic relationship between Plato and Platonism.

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a first and obvious starting point is Plato's own texts, his dialogues. Yet there is more to this, particularly at the initial stages of the long history of Platonism: no less important is adherence to the school Plato had founded, the Academy. Starting in the first century BC, by which time the Academy had closed down, the importance reserved to Plato's texts was the criterion by which to tell a Platonist; in earlier times, affiliation to his school was just as important, if not more so. This distinction is also clearly illustrated by the use of different terms: initially, a follower of Plato was called an *akademaikos*; only in the first centuries of the imperial era did this adjective come to be replaced by *platonikos*.<sup>3</sup> It is from this institution, therefore, that we should set out in order to reconstruct the history of ancient Platonism.

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In 387 BC Plato travelled to Sicily. The ruler of Syracuse, Dionysius the Elder, appeared to be interested in philosophical teachings. But things soon went askew. When discussing power, Plato argued that it belonged to the most just, not to the strongest; this irritated Dionysius, who retorted that these sounded like the words of a dotard. Plato's answer was brilliant, but not very judicious: the sovereign's words smacked of tyranny. And the sovereign behaved like a tyrant, handing the philosopher over to a Spartan merchant, that he might sell him off as a slave. At the market of Aegina, however, Plato was fortunately redeemed by Anniceris, who also purchased a plot of land for him inside the Academy's garden, to allow him to live and teach there.<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult to tell how much of this anecdote – or other similar ones circulating in antiquity – is true: probably, not much. But at least it gives us a date and place where to start. Plato used to frequent the Academy, a park dedicated to the local hero Academus. It was located outside the walls of Athens and also housed a gymnasium popular among sophists and orators (Socrates visits it in the *Lysis*).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Glucker 1978: 206–25; Bonazzi 2003b: 52–8.

<sup>4</sup> D.L. 3.17–20; a slightly different version is found in Philod. *Acad. ind.* III.

<sup>5</sup> Plat. *Lys.* 203a–b: along with a passage from the *Axiochus* (367a, but this text is most probably spurious), this is the only mention of the Academy in the dialogues.

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In this garden, between 390 and 380 BC, Plato acquired a small plot of land, where in all likelihood he lived and – for sure – established his school of philosophy. This much is certain, whereas the exact location of Plato’s school and house is still a matter of debate, as are numerous other details.<sup>6</sup> In particular, it would be important to know whether there was also a library in which Plato’s works were stored, and where the altar dedicated to the Muses and *exedra* were located (the latter being the teaching venue probably depicted in the famous mosaic preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Naples (Figure 1.1), the so-called philosophers’ school).<sup>7</sup> What was also located in the area is the philosopher’s tomb, a pilgrimage site where ritual celebrations (purifications, libations, and symposia) took place over the centuries (it was still visible in the fourth century AD). The presence of the inscription ἀγεωμέτρητος μηδεις εἰσιτω (‘Let no one ignorant of geometry enter’) above the door of the school is instead a late invention.<sup>8</sup>

Be that as it may, the Academy soon acquired fame and prestige, drawing people from every corner of Greece and beyond – so much so that once a Chaldaean standing by Plato’s bedside was told off for singing songs that were too barbarian for the philosopher’s liking.<sup>9</sup> It is within this school that we find the first ‘Platonists’, who soon came to be referred to as ‘Academics’, after the place in which they operated, and who were immortalised in the famous mosaic in Naples. Upon the founder’s death, in 347 BC, Plato’s nephew Speusippus (the son of his sister Potone) became scholarch. He continued to lead the school until 339 BC, when he passed away.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> An extensive overview of the various problems and hypotheses can be found in the exhaustive study by Caruso 2013 (see however Verde 2014) and in the essays collected by Kalligas et al. 2020; useful information is also provided by Billot 1989 and Baltes 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Gaiser 1980; Rashed 2012; Sedley 2021b.

<sup>8</sup> Saffrey 1968.

<sup>9</sup> Philod. *Acad. ind.* V. Diogenes Laertius (3.25) reports that a Persian by the name of Mithridates had a statue of Plato installed in the Academy, which he dedicated to the Muses. While it is difficult to tell how reliable this testimony might be, it is noteworthy that most of the Academy’s pupils came from outside Athens. It is also worth recalling that precisely in this period, and on the initiative of several Academics (especially Hermodorus and Philip of Opus), the idea started circulating of an affinity between Zoroaster and Plato: see Horky 2009.

<sup>10</sup> For editions and collections of the testimonies and fragments, see Isnardi Parente 1980 (all fragments are cited following this edition) and Tarán 1981. Cherniss 1974, Isnardi

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Figure 1.1 *The Mosaic of the Philosophers*. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli 124545. Photo by Giorgio Albana. Reproduced by permission of Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali – Museo Archeologico di Napoli

A solution of this kind was probably due to the desire to keep the property within the family, but it also depended on the age of Speusippus, who at the time was one of the most senior and authoritative members (significantly, the mosaic shows him sitting next to Plato, second and third from the left). Besides, we should not underestimate the importance of his contributions to

Parente 1979, and Krämer 1983 remain fundamental studies on the early Academy in general. More recently, see Lévy 2000; Dillon 2003; Berti 2010; Dancy 2011 and 2012; Trabattoni 2016; El Murr 2018.

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the philosophical debate and research conducted in the Academy: Diogenes Laertius reports that Speusippus was the author of numerous works on a wide variety of topics. As we shall see, Speusippus certainly comes across as a thinker with many original insights, although not all of them, perhaps, are equally convincing. His appointment, therefore, is hardly surprising. What proved more complex was the choice of his successor: voting took place and Xenocrates of Chalcedon (396–314 BC) defeated Menedemus of Pyrrha and Heraclides of Pontus by a few votes,<sup>11</sup> while another great representative of the Academy, Aristotle of Stagira, was missing. In all likelihood, Aristotle too was a potential candidate; however, it is difficult to give credit to the rumours that he definitely abandoned the Academy in protest against this election.<sup>12</sup> But the fact remains that he expressed some scornful opinions about his colleague. These contemptuous statements do not do justice to the complexity, standing, and thought of Xenocrates, who was a man much admired by his contemporaries for his moral qualities, as well as the author of numerous treatises.<sup>13</sup> Over time, as the historical, philosophical, and cultural context changed (we are now entering the so-called Hellenistic centuries), the Academy's interests also changed. The two successive scholarchs, Polemo of Athens and Crates of Athens, were in charge, respectively, from 314/313 to 270/269 BC and from 270/269 to 268–264 BC (unfortunately, the dates are uncertain) and are chiefly known for their practical-moral reflection, whereas their contribution to other fields is more questionable.<sup>14</sup>

However important they may have been, scholarchs were not the only notable figures in the first century and a half of the Academy's life: the roughly 150 people we know about include

<sup>11</sup> Philod. *Acad. ind.* VI–VII; it is noteworthy that none of the candidates was Athenian.

<sup>12</sup> In support of the historical reliability of this episode, Watts (2007: 115–16) has noted a parallel with the other two candidates, who in turn would appear to have quit the Academy (cf. Philod. *Acad. ind.* VII). One reasonable hypothesis is that Xenocrates' moral rectitude was the decisive factor behind his election.

<sup>13</sup> For an edition of the testimonies and fragments, see Heinze 1892 and Isnardi Parente 1982a (new ed. by T. Dorandi, 2012; all fragments are cited following this edition).

<sup>14</sup> For a first collection of the testimonies and fragments, see Gigante 1976 (Polemo) and Mette 1984 (Crantor); collections of testimonies and fragments by other Academics can be found in Lasserre 1987.

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some thinkers who are just as interesting. For the first phase, mention must be made of at least the names of Philip of Opus, Heraclides of Pontus, and Eudoxus of Cnidus. Philip helped Plato with the final drafting of the *Laws* and is the presumed author of the *Epinomis*, the dialogue intended to complete the *Laws* by introducing a sort of astral theology. Heraclides was a multi-faceted and often eccentric figure at the crossroads between the Academy (which he apparently directed during one of Plato's voyages to Syracuse) and the Aristotelian Peripatos (which he seems to have joined late in life). He chiefly focused on physical problems, championing some form of atomism and arguing that the soul, while immortal, is not immaterial but composed of light. Eudoxus instead is one of the most important Greek mathematicians and astronomers. Another figure who came to enjoy particular repute, at a later date, is Crantor of Soli, who is presented by some sources as the first commentator on the dialogues and who was highly regarded as the author of a treatise *On Pain*.<sup>15</sup>

There is then another 'Academic' whom we should take into account, namely Aristotle of Stagira (384–323 BC). This statement might seem surprising at first: was Aristotle not Plato's great opponent, as in Raphael's fresco *The School of Athens*? Actually, it is simply a matter of acknowledging a historical fact: for twenty years, from 367 to 347 BC (and beyond, since in 339 BC Aristotle was still a potential candidate to be head of the school), during the years of his intellectual training (between the ages of seventeen and thirty-seven), Aristotle was a full member of the Academy, taking part in the discussions and defending it against polemical attacks by its opponents.<sup>16</sup> This simple biographical information

<sup>15</sup> In addition to the aforementioned studies, see also Alesse and Ferrari 2012; Aronadio 2013 provides a new edition, translation and commentary of the *Epinomis*; Gottschalk 1980 is a detailed reconstruction of Heraclides (whose fragments have been collected in Wehrli 1969 and more recently in Schütrumpf 2008; see also Fortenbaugh and Pender 2009); see Lasserre 1966 for a collection of testimonies on Eudoxus, and Puech 2000 for an introductory overview. As for Crantor, see the presentation at the end of this chapter. It seems that two women, Latheneia of Mantinea and Axiothea of Phlius, were also active in the Academy, although they used to dress up in male clothes (D.L. 4.2, with the commentary in Dorandi 1989).

<sup>16</sup> One might mention for instance the *Gryllus*, in which Aristotle polemically attacked Isocrates, or the *Protrepticus*, an exhortation to philosophy celebrating the lifestyle upheld by the Academy.

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is enough to prove that Aristotle's relationship with Plato and the Academy is a complex one, which certainly cannot be reduced to a simple opposition.<sup>17</sup> Aristotle's philosophical programme does not always necessarily coincide with that of Plato or the other Academics, yet there is no doubt that he embarked on his research within the Academy, by setting out from Plato's philosophical project: a project that Aristotle never tired of discussing and criticising, but also of taking up and developing further. With all his questions, objections and suggestions, Aristotle de facto provided an essential stimulus not just for Plato and the first Academics, with whom he constantly engaged and polemicised,<sup>18</sup> but for the whole Platonist tradition, down to late antiquity. In other words, it is not so much Raphael's fresco as, once again, the 'mosaic of the philosophers' in Naples – which features Aristotle the last on the right, in a more inconspicuous position, yet still within the group – that offers the most appropriate description of the complex relationship between Aristotle, Plato, and the Platonists: he was an awkward, at times even annoying, figure, yet one that could not be ignored.<sup>19</sup>

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As Aristotle used always to relate, such was what befell most of those who listened to Plato's lecture on the Good. For, he said, they came, each expecting to find out one of those things that people think good, such as wealth, health, or strength – in general, some kind of wonderful happiness. But when the discourse was manifestly concerned with mathematics and numbers, and geometry and

<sup>17</sup> See Gerson 2005.

<sup>18</sup> As further confirmation of Aristotle's importance, it may be recalled that he is our primary source for reconstructing the thought of the two leading Academics, Speusippus and Xenocrates: as scholars have shown, although he hardly ever mentions them by name, in several texts he discusses their doctrines in detail. Without Aristotle's crucial testimony, our knowledge of the early history of the Academy would amount to very little, since the other sources at our disposal are mainly useful from a biographical standpoint (Philodemus, Diogenes Laertius) or are likely to be distorted by interpretative prejudices even more than Aristotle (the Neoplatonists: cf. *infra*, The Doctrine of Principles and the Abandonment of the Theory of Forms, n. 45 on Speusippus; an interesting overview, with regard to Proclus, may be found in Tarán 1987).

<sup>19</sup> What need not be discussed here in detail is Aristotle's life and thought. I will be talking about Aristotle either as a source (in the present chapter) or in relation to what various Platonists have to say about him (in the following chapters).



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astronomy, and the end result was that the Good is one,<sup>20</sup> it seemed to them, I think, to be quite contrary to their expectations; some of them either derided the subject matter, while others found fault with it.<sup>21</sup>

- A: What are Plato and Speusippus and Menedemus up to? On what subjects are they discoursing (*diatribousin*) today? What weighty idea, what line of argument (*logos*) is currently being investigated by them? Tell me this accurately, in Earth's name, if you've come with any knowledge of it.
- B: Why yes, I can tell you about these fellows with certainty. For at the Panathenaea I saw a troop of lads in the exercise-grounds of the Academy, and heard utterances indescribable, astonishing! For they were propounding definitions about nature (*peri physeōs aphorizomenoi*), and separating into categories the ways of life of animals, the nature of trees, and the classes of vegetables. And in this connection they were investigating to what genus one should assign the pumpkin.
- A: And what definition (*horos*) did they arrive at, and of what genus is the plant?
- B: Well now, first of all they all took up their places, and with heads bowed they reflected a long time. Then suddenly, while they were still bent low in study, one of the lads said it was a round vegetable, another that it was a grass, another that it was a tree. When a doctor from Sicily heard this, he dismissed them contemptuously, as talking rubbish.
- B: No doubt they got very angry at that, and protested against such insults? For it is unseemly to behave thus in such public gatherings.
- A: No, in fact the lads didn't seem to mind at all. And Plato, who was present, very mildly, and without irritation, told them to try again to define the genus to which the pumpkin belongs. And they started once again to attempt a division (*diairesis*).<sup>22</sup>

The events surrounding the first Academy are a real riddle for us:<sup>23</sup> the sources we have are few and rather inconsistent, so that many different hypotheses have been put forward, without scholars having reached any consensus. For a long time, the dominant thesis was the one developed by the great philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorf, according to whom the School was to be regarded as a sort of *thiasus*, a religious brotherhood devoted to the cult of

<sup>20</sup> This is the meaning of the Greek here according to Hans Joachim Krämer's translation, followed by Levin 2009: 97 (whom I am quoting here). An alternative translation, proposed by Margherita Isnardi Parente, would be 'that there is only one Good'. Clearly, these are not trifle variations, but this is not the place in which to discuss them.

<sup>21</sup> Aristox. *Elem. harm.* 2.39–40.

<sup>22</sup> Athen. *Deipn.* 2.59d–f (= Speus. fr. 33); trans. Dillon 2003: 7–8.

<sup>23</sup> As expressed by the title of Cherniss 1974.

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the Muses.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, the hallmark of the Academy was seen to be a sort of mystical cult rather than any real teaching activity, in the modern sense of the term.<sup>25</sup> Equally authoritative, however, have been those interpretations stressing the political objectives of the institution, based on those ancient sources presenting it as either a school of freedom or as a breeding ground for tyrants – depending on whether their attitude was a favourable one or not.<sup>26</sup> It is difficult to come up with a coherent reconstruction of the contrasting testimonies from antiquity; hence, it is hardly surprising that, faced with such a daunting task, many scholars have – either unconsciously or not – yielded to the temptation of back-projecting images and models typical of later ages onto the Platonic School.<sup>27</sup>

These apparently secondary historical problems pose significant obstacles to any attempt to correctly reconstruct the philosophical debates taking place within the Academy.<sup>28</sup> The identification of the Platonic School with modern institutions has often gone hand in hand with the assumption that its philosophical activity exclusively revolved around the endorsement and defence of Plato's philosophy. The first passage quoted in this chapter has often been used to support such a claim, as if to suggest that the Academy's main activity was to expound Plato's thought (the topic of the lecture), to which the other members of the Academy were expected to conform.<sup>29</sup> Recently, however, there has been

<sup>24</sup> Von Wilamowitz-Möllendorf 1881. This thesis fell into disrepute after the criticism levelled by Lynch 1972: 108–27 and Glucker 1978: 226–55. However, it has been newly defended by Caruso 2013: 38–42.

<sup>25</sup> Howald 1921.

<sup>26</sup> On the Academy in Athenian politics and society, see now Haake 2020. A collection of sources and discussion is in Isnardi Parente 1989: 63–78; more generally, on political activities within the Academy, see Appendix 1.

<sup>27</sup> See Cherniss 1974: 72–3; on the institutional and educational structure of the Early Academy, see now Horky 2018.

<sup>28</sup> As for teaching, it seems that the members of the Academy were divided into two groups: the *presbyteroi*, Plato's peers and collaborators, and the younger students, the *neaniskoi* (consider for instance Aristotle, who entered the Academy at the age of 17); see Baltes 1993: 10 and D. Frede 2018: 80–2.

<sup>29</sup> Interpretations of this kind found particularly fertile soil in the Tübingen-Milan school, which identified the conceptual heart of Plato's philosophy with a series of 'unwritten doctrines' that could be reconstructed on the basis of Aristotle's testimony (cf. *infra*, n. 33). According to these scholars, a philosopher's endorsement of these doctrines is the measure of his adherence to the Platonic School: see, among others, Krämer 1964 and, more recently, Thiel 2006.