

PLATONISM

The task of philosophy, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze once wrote, is to ‘overturn Platonism’. This might be true, if only we could define what Platonism is. In this clear and accessible book, Mauro Bonazzi provides the first comprehensive introduction to ancient Platonism. He begins his story with Plato’s Academy before moving on to the sceptical turn which occurred during the Hellenistic centuries. He then explains the theologically oriented interpretation of Plato typical of Middle Platonists, and concludes with the metaphysical systems of the Neoplatonists. Platonism has often been regarded as no more than a trivial repetition of the same doctrines. This book, however, demonstrates how the attempts of Platonists over the centuries to engage with Plato’s thought constitute one of the most philosophically challenging moments in the history of ancient philosophy.

MAURO BONAZZI is Professor of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy at Utrecht University. His books include *The Sophists* (Cambridge, 2020) and *En quête des Idées. Platonisme et philosophie hellénistique* (2015). He is currently completing a monograph on the uses and abuses of Greek thought in Modern philosophy.

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Mauro Bonazzi , Preface by David Sedley , Translated by Sergio Knipe

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Utrecht University, the Netherlands

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FIGURE

- I.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 *page 5*

FOREWORD

David Sedley

Readers of this book know, or are about to learn under Mauro Bonazzi's expert guidance, how continuous and yet at the same time how diverse was the ancient philosophical movement known to us as Platonism. How can there have been so many Platonisms, or, if you prefer, so many competing versions of Plato's philosophy? After all, every published word of Plato, the school's iconic founder, survived and was, as indeed it remains today, open to direct scrutiny? Why wasn't that enough to make Plato's philosophical meaning transparent? In other words, why was Plato not himself the ultimate authority on his own philosophy?

The Platonic corpus is a large, diverse and brilliant collection of writings, nearly all of them purporting to be or to include reports of dialogues. But Plato himself is never named as taking part in these conversations. The figure who is virtually always present, and more often than not asks the questions, is Plato's revered master Socrates. Does this literary figure Socrates, then, tend to speak for Plato? So it has generally, and very plausibly, been thought. Yet across the corpus, Socrates himself varies widely in the opinions he seems to favour – when, at any rate, he favours any, and is not simply interrogating others, perhaps in order to expose their assumptions and test these for mutual coherence.

To pick just one example out of many, is knowledge humanly attainable? Socrates makes few substantive knowledge claims on his own behalf in any Platonic dialogue, and repeatedly refutes others' pretensions to knowledge. Indeed, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates seems at times to go so far as to treat knowledge as unattainable by the soul until it leaves bodily incarnation behind altogether. Yet this same character Socrates is also the lead speaker of the *Republic*, where he argues that human happiness depends on the remote but real prospect of living under the governance of highly trained philosophers who possess comprehensive knowledge of

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the Forms, all the way up to the ultimate explanatory principle, identified as the Form of the Good.

In the course of two-and-a-half millennia, Plato's readers have adopted a variety of strategies for dealing with this kind of problem. Perhaps Socrates does not always speak for Plato, for example. Perhaps when he disavows knowledge he is speaking 'ironically', with his own articulated philosophical knowledge lying just below the surface. Perhaps Plato used Socrates only to puncture others' epistemic vanity. Or perhaps Plato's own views changed over the years, and these developments were reflected by philosophical shifts of position in the dialogues.

We may start with this last hypothesis. Today, it is very widely assumed that Plato's writings fall into three main phases, albeit with some works classed as 'transitional' between one phase and the next. The three postulated phases are as follows:

- An 'early' period, in which he was still working out the meaning of Socrates' philosophical legacy;
- a 'middle' period, dominated by the immortality of the soul, and by a dualistic metaphysics of intelligibles and sensibles, or of Forms and their participants; and
- a 'late' period critically readdressing major political and analytic themes, but also including the *Timaeus*, Plato's one dialogue devoted to physics.

It would indeed be hard for today's readers to set aside the whole of this chronological matrix, which has the additional merit of seeming to correspond to stylistic changes in Plato's writing, with the philosophically earlier dialogues prone to mimic the natural flow of conversation, whereas the philosophically later ones seem like self-conscious literary constructs, often thereby placing much greater demands on the reader.

It is therefore of the utmost importance to appreciate that the task of dating Plato's individual works relative to each other, a major priority in modern scholarship, was of little concern to ancient Platonists. Of course, the dialogues must have been written in some order, and the *Laws* was explicitly recognised to have been the last. Since, however, it was inconceivable to his followers that the 'divine' Plato should ever have been forced to change

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his mind, developmental assumptions were not invoked to resolve apparent contradictions between earlier and later dialogues.

Was there not a much easier way for Platonists to establish a global interpretation? Surely they simply had to ask Plato! By ‘they’ I mean the many distinguished intellectuals (see Bonazzi’s Chapter 1) who had joined Plato’s celebrated Athenian school, the Academy, during the roughly four decades from its foundation to his death in 347 BC. These included not only Aristotle, but also Plato’s nephew and chosen successor Speusippus, and the latter’s own eventual successor as school-head, Xenocrates. Who, it might be asked, could have been better placed than Plato’s own long-time close associates to preserve for future generations his full philosophical system?

What actually happened, however, fell far short of that. True, a set of ‘unwritten doctrines’ attributed to Plato circulated after his death (Bonazzi’s Chapter 1). But consider how Plato’s most iconic doctrine, the theory of Forms, fared in the school. Aristotle, before departing to set up his own rival school in the Lyceum, wrote a refutation of the theory, entitled *On Forms*. The theory was likewise disputed by both Speusippus and the mathematician and moral philosopher Eudoxus, himself a member of the Academy. Most significant of all, one critique of the theory was written by none other than Plato himself, in the opening part of his *Parmenides*.

We should infer that the educational agenda of the school in Plato’s lifetime was one in which critical independence was strongly encouraged, orthodoxy discouraged. Even the decision to bequeath the school-headship to Speusippus, to all intents and purposes a non-Platonist, may reflect a fear on Plato’s part that in future generations reverence for his own authority might lead the Academy into a hagiographic search of the corpus for his own ultimate principles, thereby stifling open-ended philosophical inquiry in a way he had expressly warned against in the *Phaedrus* (275d–e). At all events, by 339 BC, when Speusippus was in turn succeeded as school-head by Xenocrates, the reconstruction of such a Platonist orthodoxy was already under way. And so it would remain for most of the movement’s history, with just one significant exception, recounted by Mauro Bonazzi in Chapter 2.

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The difficulty of extracting a full-blooded Platonism from the corpus can be appreciated by asking how we ourselves would fare if, without the benefits of an established reading order, we were presented with those same scrolls and invited to give a conspectus of their underlying philosophy, paying no attention to the contributions made by literary virtuosity, genre-switching, the interplay of diversely motivated speakers, or (other than in the Letters, which are of disputed authenticity) the author's apparently almost exceptionless avoidance of any personal presence in the narrative or self-reference in the interplay of arguments.

We certainly would not make much headway if we gave equal weight to all the dialogues, nor if we picked one of them at random, be it *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Philebus*, or *Protagoras*, if only because different initial choices might bring in their wake radically differing perspectives on the author's entire philosophical orientation.

This vicious circle could however be plausibly broken by concentrating initially on one specially privileged text, the *Timaeus*. Today comparatively few students of Plato ever even reach the *Timaeus*, let alone study it in depth. In antiquity, from Plato's death onwards, this dialogue was on the contrary treated by both Platonists and their opponents as if it were a semi-official manifesto for his system.

Why so? What has come down to us as the *Timaeus* is evidently the first part of an unfinished trilogy of speeches, in which Timaeus' speech on the creation of the world was evidently the only one of the dialogue's three intended speeches to have been completed by the time of Plato's death. At the end of the preserved text, the speech of Critias breaks off in mid sentence (*Critias* 121c). Although various of the *Timaeus*' innovative ideas (for instance that of the 'receptacle of becoming') are likely to have been already familiar to Plato's close associates through school discussions, the fact that he had still been at work on it when he died may have helped spotlight it for his successors as potentially the most authoritative account of his system. (No similar canonisation could credibly have been proposed regarding his late and not fully revised political-theological masterpiece the *Laws*.)

When finally published, the *Timaeus* quickly became the focus of a millennia-long debate, still unresolved today, about

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the meaning of Timaeus' very first doctrinal assertion: the world, he maintains, 'has come to be' (28b7). Could Plato really have believed that something destined to exist for infinite future time, as the world was agreed to be, might nevertheless have a merely finite past existence, starting from a dateable act of creation? Most Platonists, thinking such a temporal asymmetry incoherent, tried to show that Timaeus' grammatically past-perfect tense, 'it has come to be', had been intended by Plato not as a literal truth claim, but in the spirit of an exegetic creation myth. Most anti-Platonists, including Aristotle, for the same reason insisted on reading it literally.

Why, it might be wondered, did the early Platonists not simply ask Plato which of the two he meant, and thereby settle the dispute? The question is readily answered, however, if we accept, as suggested above, that it was only as part of Plato's posthumous legacy that the *Timaeus* came to prominence. By the time this great interpretative schism emerged, Plato was dead.

But the value of Timaeus' speech as an entry route to Plato's philosophy could in any case not, by any stretch of the imagination, be exhausted by disambiguating this single verb. Although the speech's theme is physics, his cosmic creation narrative embodies (from a physical point of view) a whole network of metaphysical, ethical, psychological, epistemological, and even logical theses that had been individually defended in other dialogues, usually by Socrates but on occasion by another main speaker. This constitutes very strong evidence that Plato already had a structured philosophical system, into which paradigmatic Forms, the tripartite soul, the epistemological dualism of intelligibles and sensibles, the immortality of the rational soul, the explanation of false belief, and much else besides, had been integrated.

I have already mentioned Plato's restraint in absenting himself from his own dialogues. Even that remark now needs qualifying, however. The corpus contains many anonymous references which, tantalisingly, could be to Plato. Some of these are predictive, as when in the *Charmides* 168e–169a Socrates' remarks that we will have to await the arrival of a 'great man' to solve the problem whether there can be a self-moving motion; and when Parmenides (*Parmenides* 135a-b) similarly expects a 'great man' one day to

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resolve his own criticisms of the theory of Forms. Others have an implicit but clear present reference, notably *Republic* 4.427c–d and 9.580c, where the dialogue’s two major conclusions are celebrated, with each in turn attributed by Socrates to ‘the son of Ariston’. Within the economy of the dialogue these are Socrates’ two main interlocutors, respectively, Adeimantus and Glaucon. But their half-brother, Plato, was a third ‘son of Ariston’. Readers are surely being challenged to notice how, in the double deployment of Plato’s patronymic, the *Republic* conceals within itself its author’s indelible signature.

With this in mind, we may return now to the *Timaeus*, which I have characterised as conveying to its future readers the basic tenets of Plato’s proprietary philosophical system. There of all places we might expect to find his authorial fingerprint. And so we do! In the opening lines we learn that, since one of the expected speakers has failed to turn up, Timaeus will be speaking on his behalf. That is to say, the teachings imparted by Timaeus in his speech will be those of the missing person.

Who then is this anonymous absentee? It is Plato. The clue lies in Timaeus’ explanation of his absence: ‘Some kind of sickness has befallen him, Socrates. For this is a gathering that he would not have missed willingly.’ The words are calculated to remind us of the opening pages of the *Phaedo*, where we learn to our mild surprise that Plato was too ill to attend that most important of all philosophical gatherings, Socrates’ final conversation and ensuing execution. The sicknote story may not reveal Plato in a very heroic light, but its very banality allowed the all-important identity-clue to pass almost unnoticed, awaiting eventual rediscovery, much like its counterpart in the *Republic*.

Did any of Plato’s followers or readers in antiquity arrive at this same decipherment? Yes, according to Proclus (who does not himself find it credible) the covert allusion to Plato was pointed out by one Dercyllides – of uncertain date and identity, but in all probability a Middle Platonist. By the Middle Platonist era (Bonazzi chapter 3), the *Timaeus* was widely believed to be a Pythagorean work, and Timaeus, its presumed author, an authentic Pythagorean. If Dercyllides was the first reader to discover Plato’s indelible signature in the *Timaeus*, he was probably concerned

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above all to reclaim this dialogue from the Pythagoreans. But if, intentionally or not, he was also making available to future generations Plato's concealed certification of the *Timaeus* as his own philosophical testament, his is truly a name to celebrate.

It becomes ever clearer that, almost throughout the near-millennium during which ancient Platonism thrived, the *Timaeus* not only exerted a unique influence on the reception of the Platonic corpus, but in doing so may well have been fulfilling Plato's goals more faithfully than it has done in any modern reconstruction of his philosophy.

Pushing that heretical thought to one side, I shall stand no longer between the reader and Mauro Bonazzi's rich and absorbing monograph.

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of Pierluigi Donini.