

Introduction

Beyond the Calcidius Pass

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of Calcidius' work on Plato's *Timaeus*, which consists of a partial Latin translation and commentary.¹ So many links in the extensive commentary tradition of the *Timaeus* are no longer extant. We have snippets from Crantor, a mere allusion (and a highly debated one at that) to a possible commentary by Posidonius,² part of a translation by Cicero, allusions to Adrastus' commentary, a commentary by Theon of Smyrna that deals only with the mathematical issues, and a mere shadow of Porphyry's commentary, to name but some. Because of these lacunae Calcidius' work becomes all the more valuable.

Moreover, Calcidius presents one of those very rare cases of a Latin philosophical commentary. As the knowledge of Greek started to wane at the end of Antiquity, Calcidius became one of the main channels through which Plato's legacy was transmitted to the Middle Ages.³ Indeed, his work is one of the four master-texts of that era, as Édouard Jeuneau points out (1975: 30), together with Boethius' *On the Consolation of Philosophy*, Macrobius' commentary on Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*, and Martianus Capella's *On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury*. In the subsequent tradition Plato at times elided Calcidius' authorship altogether, and the work came to be seen as simply presenting Plato's views.

Given the translation and commentary's important role in the Middle Ages, Calcidius has been studied mostly by medievalists. The work, however, also presents a very distinctive and rich cultural encounter not only between the Latin and the Greek philosophical traditions, but also between so-called "paganism" and Christianity. My main purpose, therefore, is to

¹ The translation goes up to 53c and the commentary covers the section from 31c to 53c.

² Posidonius F85 Kidd. For a list of commentaries on the *Timaeus*, see Krause 1904: 46–54; Baltes and Dörrie 1993: 48–54, 162–224.

³ Dutton 2003; see also Lemoine 1997. For a succinct overview of the reception history of the work in Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and beyond, see Bakhouché 2011 I:47–67.

give Calcidius' commentary the attention it is due in its own right, and to examine the commentary's relation both to the preceding traditions and to contemporaneous currents of thought. From very early on, for instance, Plato's *Timaeus* was read alongside Genesis, as in the works of Philo of Alexandria (25 BCE–50 CE, Runia 1986), and Calcidius' commentary also draws on this tradition (chs. 276–278). Yet a close examination of the commentary forces us to reconsider the intellectual and cultural boundaries of the fourth century CE, and to rethink widely accepted categories such as Latin Christian Neoplatonism.

Despite the importance of the work, we know next to nothing about its author, Calcidius. The editor of the text, J. H. Waszink,⁴ dates Calcidius to the end of the fourth century or the beginning of the fifth century CE (as opposed to earlier conjectures that dated it to the first half of the fourth century). He locates the author in the Christian milieu of Milan and Italy,⁵ thereby insisting on Calcidius' Christian identity.⁶ These assertions have guided interpretations of the commentary, but it may make more sense to pursue the inquiry in the other direction, starting with what the work can tell us about its author and his operating assumptions, as this study sets out to do.

Our understanding of the commentary has also suffered from viewing it either as a window onto the preceding philosophical tradition (as if it were merely a sourcebook and a collection of fragments from other authors), or from the vantage point of its reception and influence on later writers. Wedged between these two concerns, the work itself has all but disappeared from view and has been treated merely as a channel for the transmission of older ideas, or what I dub the “Calcidius pass.” Since Waszink's edition, however, scholarship has provided valuable new insights into the practices of the commentary tradition that can yield a clearer understanding of the overall purpose of the work and its place in this commentary tradition.

⁴ *Timaeus a Calcidio translatus commentarioque instructus*, ed. J. H. Waszink, *Corpus Platonicum Medii Aevi, Plato Latinus 4* (Leiden and London 1962; revised version 1975). All references to Calcidius are to this edition, to the chapters, and in some cases also to the page and line numbers. Bakhouche 2011 has a slightly revised text, with translation, a long introduction, and extensive notes. Bakhouche's work is now the best instrument for an initial approach to the text. Moreschini 2003 provides a translation in Italian, and notes; Magee 2016 provides the first full translation in English. Detailed analyses of sub-treatises of the commentary have been written by van Winden (1959, on matter, reprinted in 1965, with supplementary notes), den Boeft (1970, on fate), and (1977, on demons).

⁵ For a good overview see Bakhouche 2011 I: 7–13.

⁶ On this point, he is followed by Moreschini 2003: xxxi–xxxix.

Two examples should suffice here to demonstrate the risks inherent in overlooking the nature of the work.⁷ The first of these examples is an instance of uncritically treating Calcidius' commentary as a source book. Relatively recently a number of scholars have used Calcidius as evidence for an account of Stoic psychology that allegedly differs from the standard model described elsewhere.⁸ According to the standard account, the ruling principle (*hēgemonikon*), the five senses, speech, and reproduction are assigned to the soul, whereas other functions such as nutrition and growth are assigned to the "nature" level of a living being (LS 53). (The Stoics posit a scale of nature consisting of cohesion in inanimate things, nature in plants, soul in animals, and rational soul in humans, LS 47.) Calcidius (ch. 220), by contrast, is said by these scholars to provide testimony that Chrysippus also attributed the lower functions of growth and nutrition to the soul. In response to this assumption, one can state, first, that it is not always easy to distinguish between a literal quotation and an interpolation by the author quoting the material – a problem that is common to many sources of this type.

The second and more serious objection is that Calcidius' wording may not actually bear out this interpretation (232.19–233.6). He progresses from the (elsewhere attested) eight parts of the soul – the ruling part, the five senses, speech, and reproduction – to the claim that these parts of the soul "extend throughout the whole body and fill all its parts in every quarter with the vital breath; they regulate and control" the body "with *innumerable and diverse powers* (... *reguntque et moderantur innumerabilibus diuersisque uirtutibus* ...): *nourishment, growth, locomotion, sensory equipment, and the impulse to action* (*nutriendo, adolendo, mouendo motibus localibus, instruendo sensibus, compellendo ad operandum*; trans. Magee, emphasis added).⁹ All this claim need imply is that the soul of humans and animals can also make use of the powers belonging to the level of *nature* as instruments to guide the organism as a whole, not that these lower powers actually belong to the soul itself. All functions of an organism presumably are subsumed under the coordinating direction of the governing principle, without being controlled directly by the soul.

The third and most important objection, however, is that if one looks at the sub-treatise on the human soul as a whole (chs. 213–235),¹⁰ it becomes

⁷ As van Winden already pointed out, 1959: 9–10; see also Macías Villalobos 2015: 12–13.

⁸ Tieleman 1996: 96–101, reviewed by Reydams-Schils 2004; Powers 2012: 258–260; on this issue see also Reydams-Schils 2006 and Ju 2007.

⁹ All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from Magee 2016.

¹⁰ See also sections 6.3 and 12.2 in this study.

apparent that Calcidius works with some kind of master-list that integrates as many features of Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic psychology as possible, in order to underscore the view *he himself* endorses, which posits both a life principle and a principle of reason *within* the soul. He has harmonized his rendering of the different positions by inserting into each elements of the others. Thus, I would argue, the list of nutrition, growth, locomotion, sensation, and impulse in the testimony of Chrysippus' view of the human soul is an interpolation (by Calcidius or his source) with Peripatetic overtones, and we should handle the testimony with great caution.

If this first example pertains to our use of Calcidius as a quarry for older views, a second example can serve as a cautionary tale against using a text's reception as a window into its interpretation. It is common knowledge that in late eleventh- and twelfth-century medieval readings of Plato's *Timaeus*, the question of how the triad God, Mind, and World Soul aligns with the Trinity comes to the fore. In particular, the claim that the World Soul is the equivalent of the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity becomes a commonplace, only to be hotly contested.¹¹ Yet there is no trace of this view to be found in Calcidius' commentary. An interpretive move, or a series of such moves, must have been made both to enhance Plato's alleged compatibility with the Christian perspective and to insert material from Calcidius into this Christian framework in such a way as to serve, or at least not contradict, this purpose.¹² Such a picture of the transmission of ideas appears less strange if we keep in mind the traditional methods of reading and commenting on texts through excerpting, summarizing, or compiling series of nested notes. The latter are the so-called glosses, which, in some cases, could constitute stand-alone commentaries in their own right (as with the famous examples of Bernard of Chartres' and William of Conches' glosses on the *Timaeus*). Inevitably, such compilations obscure the lines of continuity in the accounts from which they derive their material. In this case the chain of notes masks the fact that Calcidius himself does not establish such a connection between the World Soul and the Holy Spirit.

It is high time, then, to bring Calcidius' translation and commentary into the purview of the commentary tradition in Antiquity and to examine

¹¹ Kobusch 2005: 249–250, with bibliography; Speer 2005: 222–226; Dronke 2008: x–xi; Gersh 2010: 897.

¹² For instance, in his *Glosae super Platonem*, ch. 71, 124.13–14 Jeauneau, William of Conches states that “some” (*quidam*) equate the World Soul qua spirit with the Holy Spirit, a position which he himself, as he states here, neither rejects nor supports (*quod nec negamus modo, nec affirmamus*); see also ch. 74. For William's position on this claim in his other writings, see the notes ad loc.

Introduction

5

more closely what they can tell us in their own right. To that end, the chapters that follow have three main goals. First, they provide an overview of the key themes in the commentary and of the consistent line of interpretation of the *Timaeus* which Calcidius develops (Part Two). Under this heading fall his treatments of time, the World Soul and the human soul, the divine, Providence and Fate, the Forms, matter, and evil. The second goal is to discern Calcidius' voice as a commentator, his hermeneutical principles, and the unity of his commentary (Part One). Finally, these insights shed new light on other questions pertaining to Calcidius' work, such as his use of Aristotelian and Stoic material, his sources, and his alleged Christian identity (Part Three). We may not know much about Calcidius, but his work does reveal how he positioned himself in his cultural landscape, and what that landscape might have looked like.

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

An Authorial Voice

Calcidius is a highly self-assured author who reflects on the relation between his translation and commentary, and who clearly positions himself vis-à-vis potential rivals and the preceding tradition. These features of the work provide us with our first insights into its overall purpose. Calcidius uses the stock theme of the obscurity of philosophical texts to define his role more clearly, building on the fact that the problem of obscurity would be even worse for someone reading Plato's *Timaeus* in a Latin translation. He is also aware that by sharing this knowledge with an audience of relative beginners (though his addressee would not necessarily fall into that category), he is running counter to an established practice of the philosophical schools. Moreover, Plato, as he represents him, appears to be in need of a rescue operation, to undo damage inflicted not only by philosophers representing other currents of thought, but also by those who claim to have been his followers in the Platonist tradition.

1.1 On Obscurity

Commentators on philosophical texts in Antiquity faced a double bind. First, they had to be careful not to diminish the reputation of the thinker whose work they were elucidating – why, after all, would a text need a commentary, if it were not because of inherent deficiencies? Second, they could not afford to insult the intelligence of their addressees, and, through the addressees, that of their potential broader audience.¹ We can observe these issues being addressed throughout the commentary tradition. In his work Calcidius solves this problem by inserting a mini-treatise on the issue of “obscurity” (*obscuritas*, ch. 322) into his handling of the admittedly thorny topic of prime matter

¹ This chapter is a revised version of Reydams-Schils 2007b: sections I.i and ii (303–310).

(*silua*). Succinct as this treatment is, it ranks among the most complete overviews we have on this common theme.²

According to Calcidius, there are three causes for obscurity: the first lies with the author, the second with his audience, and the third with the subject matter of the exposition. Obscurity on the part of the author, he notes, can be intentional, as is the case with Aristotle (see also ch. 287) and Heraclitus, or it can be the result of a weakness of expression (*ex imbecillitate sermonis*). The audience can struggle either because it is not familiar with the topics being discussed, or because it is “slow” and dim-witted (*pigiore ingenio ad intelligendum*). Finally, there could be difficulties embedded in the topic itself, as with prime matter, which eludes our ordinary cognitive faculties.

But in the case of *Timaeus* as a speaker and his listeners – that is, *within* Plato’s account – we are safe, Calcidius claims: *Timaeus* is a reliable speaker and his audience is up to speed. Therefore, Calcidius informs his audience, it is the topic itself that poses the problem.

As readers of Calcidius, from a vantage point that is *external* to the *Timaeus*, we are also invited to adopt an attitude of confidence towards Plato as author and towards his reader, who happens to be, in this case, Calcidius’ addressee, Osius: Plato knows what he is doing³ and we are not to assume that Osius is dim-witted. As emerges from Calcidius’ dedicatory letter and from the Preface to his commentary, the challenge of the *Timaeus* as a whole does not reside in any weakness in Plato’s language (*non ex imbecillitate sermonis*, ch. 1, a claim Cicero had already made),⁴ but in the degree of specialized knowledge it presupposes. Even the ancients had considered it to be a difficult text, Calcidius reassures Osius. (And Osius was not the first to ask for help, for that matter: in the opening of his *De tranquillitate animi*, 465E, for instance, Plutarch mentions that a certain Roman, Pacius, had asked him to write an explanation of some aspects of the *Timaeus*.)⁵ The ability to follow Plato’s exposition, Calcidius

² For analyses of common practices in commentaries and their prefaces, cf. I. Hadot, Hoffmann, and P. Hadot 1990: 113–122. For an English summary, cf. I. Hadot 1991; see also Mansfeld 1994. In his treatment of obscurity, however (see especially his ch. 5), Mansfeld does not include this passage from Calcidius. See also I. Hadot 1996; Praechter 1990; Westerink 1990. For a succinct rendering of the *topos* in the tradition of commentaries on Aristotle, see Barnes 1992. See also Karamanolis 2006: 204–205.

³ See also ch. 326, in which Calcidius claims that Plato “in order to dissipate any cloudiness attaching to this point of natural obscurity, casts the light of a brilliant illustration upon” matter (*ut omne nubilum naturalis discuteret obscuritatis adhibito splendore illustris exempli*); chs. 345–346.

⁴ Cicero, *Fin.* 2.15; the best parallel for Calcidius’ treatment of obscurity is in Galen’s compendium of the *Timaeus*, 1.14–16 Kraus-Walzer; see also his *In fract. comm.* 18.2, 319.7ff. Kühn.

⁵ There also circulated *compendia* versions of the *Timaeus*, as in the text published by Stover 2016: esp. 20–22.

notes, requires a thorough preliminary training in the sciences, or in what he calls *artificiosa ratio*, that is, in arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. Thus, Calcidius invokes the less damning aspect of his second cause of obscurity, namely the audience's lack of familiarity with certain topics, and by implication the third cause, the degree of difficulty of the topic. His approach to the *Timaeus* invites comparison with the opening remarks in Theon of Smyrna's account of the mathematical knowledge one needs in order to follow Plato's arguments (*Res. math.*, second century CE). Theon states that he wrote his work on behalf of those who had not been trained since childhood in the mathematical sciences required both to understand Plato's work and to gain access to other forms of knowledge. As Ilsetraut Hadot (2005: 70) has pointed out, this recognition of the problem by Theon and Calcidius attests to the fact that, in their respective periods, an education in mathematics was not to be taken for granted.

In the Preface to his commentary Calcidius addresses the opacity of the *Timaeus* along with other standard topics such as the purpose of the work, and its division into chapters. He alludes to Plato's staging of the exchange and gives reasons for his choice of characters, though without deploying a symbolic interpretation. These points follow the older of two versions of the introductory schema for interpreting Plato's and Aristotle's work (the so-called "prolegomena" schema, Mansfeld 1994), which is also employed in such texts as the Christian Origen's Preface to his commentary on the Song of Songs.⁶

Yet despite the real challenges presented by the *Timaeus*, Calcidius notes, Plato himself does attempt to make things easier for his readers. Like earlier interpreters, going back to Speusippus and Xenocrates,⁷ Calcidius holds that Plato uses temporal language for the process of ordering the world merely to convey the world's eternal dependence on a higher cause.⁸ Given that people have an easier time grasping a causal relation if it is cast in the language of "before" and "after," as in the relation between a father and son (ch. 26), Calcidius claims that Plato applies such language for pedagogical purposes (τρόπος or χάριν διδασκαλίας, as this is called in the Greek tradition). Similarly, Calcidius points out, Plato uses a mode of direct speech when the Demiurge addresses the younger gods (41a7–d3) to give his audience a break from abstract discourse, to allow for

⁶ Cf. also Dillon 1999; Porphyry *In Cat.* 55.3–57.15 Busse; *Anon. in Th.* 1.1–4.27 Diels and Schubart; Origen, *Cant.* 61–88 Baehrens; Macrobius, *In Somn.* 1.4.1.

⁷ Cf. Baltes 1976–1978; Speusippus F41, 61, 72 Tarán; Xenocrates F54, 68 Heinze.

⁸ See also ch. 4 in this study.

an easier assimilation of his thoughts, and to claim divine authority for his views (ch. 138).

Even with these pedagogical concessions on Plato's part, however, Calcidius acknowledges, the *Timaeus* remains a difficult text. Calcidius compares Plato's account to an intelligible form that is hidden, or obscure in the sense of not being easily accessible, and his own Latin translation to a copy of that model. Given that the original is difficult, the translation risks being even more obscure because, as a mere copy, it is necessarily weaker than its model (*exemplum-simulacrum*, Letter 6.8–10; Preface ch. 4). As we will see, however, Calcidius' translation has in effect already made the *Timaeus* more accessible by simplifying complexities in Plato's account. He makes the *Timaeus* easier to read by offering specific interpretations of Plato's intentions, which would otherwise be left to the reader to determine. Thus, in order to understand how the commentary works, one also needs to investigate the relationship between the translation and the commentary, because the process of digesting the *Timaeus* for a less-experienced audience starts with the translation.⁹

Calcidius shrewdly borrows the ontological language of the *Timaeus* in order to register a hermeneutical point.¹⁰ (The issue of the link between ontology and hermeneutics permeates the ancient commentary tradition, and is one to which we will return, ch. 2.4.) With his commentary he comes to the aid of his readers by creating the bridge between the model, the *Timaeus*, and the copy, his translation. In doing so he, not unlike Plato's character Timaeus, performs the philosopher's task of providing a bridge between the sensible and intelligible realms and redirecting the audience's gaze towards the truth.¹¹ Thus he implicitly imbues Plato's account with a highly authoritative status, making it as exemplary as the Forms and the divine. Moreover, Calcidius also implies that as a model the *Timaeus* is not to be surpassed or cast aside by a different and higher truth, such as the one claimed by Christianity.¹²

⁹ This is the main approach of Hoenig 2013, 2018a: 442–447, and 2018b: 160–214. Bakhouché 2011 I: 27–30, 105–124 provides a detailed analysis of Calcidius' method of translation (surveying also the previous secondary literature on the topic), in comparison with Cicero's. She arrives at the conclusions that Calcidius translates as an exegete, implying that his translation serves the commentary, and that there is no evidence to suggest that Calcidius relied on the previous Latin translation by Cicero. For an analysis of Calcidius' translations of Greek poetry (including philosophical texts), see Bertolini 1990: 104–109.

¹⁰ Dutton 2003: 189; Somfai 2004: 206–208; Hoenig 2018b: 168–177, who also draws on Calcidius' rendering of εἰκῶς μῦθος as *mediocris explanatio*.

¹¹ As Hoenig, forthcoming a, has pointed out, ch. 349 of the commentary echoes the image from the *Republic* of emerging from the cave, from the darkness of ignorance into the light of truth.

¹² See also chs. 15 and 16 in this study.