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# The Study of Neoplatonism Today

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The word 'Neoplatonism,' coined in the late 18th century to mark an imagined periodization of ancient philosophy, obscures more than it clarifies. It is by now widely, if not universally, recognized that the so-called 'Neoplatonists' did not regard themselves as innovators in any way. On the contrary, although they sometimes differed in their understanding of their own tradition, for the most part they took themselves to be faithful expositors and defenders of Platonism. Therein lay the problem.

Those whom today we identify as 'Neoplatonists' were not so much interested in getting Plato 'right' as they were in the philosophical position whose greatest exponent happened to be Plato. Naturally, getting Plato right constituted a not insignificant step toward understanding and defending Platonism. But the two projects were not identical. Plotinus, for example, would have said about Plato exactly what Aristotle did, namely, that he loved Plato, but that he loved the truth more.

Once we distinguish Platonism from what Plato said in the dialogues, we cannot avoid asking for at least a minimalist definition of 'Platonism'. Heinrich Dörrie, in the introduction to his monumental multi-volume *Der Platonismus in der Antike* (1987 - ), proposed 30 'Leitsätzen' for Platonism, distillable mainly from the writings of those in antiquity who *called themselves Platonists*. The core of these themes is the ontological priority of the intelligible to the sensible, including the priority of soul to body; the 'top down' approach, so to speak, as opposed to the 'bottom up' approach. Even if we took Dörrie's full list of Platonic theses, they would still amount to a description of Platonism at a level of generality sufficient to leave much room to maneuver. Ancient disciples of Plato accordingly took a fairly capacious view of the evidence for Platonism. That evidence included various, and sometimes apparently contradictory, conclusions thought to be derivable from the overall basic orientation of Platonism.

Since the Neoplatonists were focused on Platonism and not on Plato, they were eager to draw out the implications of the basic Platonic position. For example, although Plato did not write much about such topics as evil, memory, or number, one could explore what a Platonist could or must say about these. Most would agree with Plotinus who complains that Plato sometimes writes cryptically about the soul. But Plotinus and his successors are regularly excoriated for not taking this fact to be an end to the matter. Rather, they would try to piece together the or sometimes *a* Platonic position, assuming that, if this is what Platonism holds to be the truth of the matter, Plato must have agreed.

Another important and illuminating example of the Neoplatonists' approach to Platonism is in their treatment of the Idea of the Good. In interpreting Plato one can choose to ignore the implications of the single unambiguous reference to the Idea of the Good in the *Republic*. On the other hand, like the Neoplatonists, one can connect it with the *Philebus* and *Parmenides* and with Aristotle's testimony as well as with independent philosophical arguments for the necessity of positing a first principle of all things *beyondousia*. In defense of the latter approach, a Neoplatonist such as Proclus would say that ignoring the implications of the reference to the Idea of the Good constitutes a philosophical position no less than does drawing out those implications. He might also say that to ignore it would be to adopt a philosophical position that had little to recommend it.

Etienne Gilson, in his lively and idiosyncratic book *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto, 1949), argued in effect that if one were to embrace Plato's philosophy, then one would inevitably be led to Proclus' philosophy. Thomist that he was, Gilson took this putative result as synonymous with intellectual shipwreck. His argument, however, could just as well be taken as a back-handed endorsement of the Proclean interpretation of Plato. Proclus did indeed believe that anyone committed to Plato's claims would also be logically (if not, of course, necessarily psychologically) committed to the things that he, Proclus, inferred from what Plato said. It was probably for Proclus a matter of secondary importance whether or not Plato was himself aware of all the implications of his positions.

Anyone who wishes to avoid an impossibly narrow view of Platonism (according to which it is just identical with what is said in the dialogues) should consider spending some quality time with the Neoplatonists. This has become an increasingly practicable thing to do.

Beginning in 1989, under the editorship of Professor Richard Sorabji, Duckworth began publishing English translations of the works contained in the massive *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* (CAG). By 2000, 41 volumes were published. Between now and 2005, another 30 or so are scheduled to follow. In most cases, these works had never before been translated into any language. Even for those who can read with relative ease, say, a two-hundred page commentary on Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* in Greek, the large

commitment of time involved is an obvious deterrent for all but the specialist. Unquestionably, these translations will over time be responsible for introducing non-specialists to Neoplatonism. These commentators were – with the important exception of Alexander of Aphrodisias – one and all Neoplatonists.

One of the central principles of Aristotelean interpretation held by all the commentators was that Aristotle's philosophy was in harmony with the philosophy of Plato. Harmony was never, to my knowledge, mistaken for identity. According to Simplicius, the apparent differences between Plato and Aristotle were derived from their diverse perspectives: Aristotle viewed the intelligible world from the perspective of the sensible world, whereas Plato did the reverse. But, in all central respects, Aristotle's philosophy could be best understood as a harmonious sub-division of Platonism. One may perhaps compare in this regard the way in which Newtonian mechanics is viewed in relation to quantum mechanics. Sorabji himself views the claim about the harmony of Aristotle and Plato as a 'perfectly crazy proposition' although he allows that it 'proved philosophically fruitful' (Wildberg, p.7). Since harmonization was a principle underlying virtually all of the Aristotelian commentaries, it is perhaps worthwhile saying a bit more about it.

Harmonization (*sumphônia*) was understood by the Neoplatonic Aristotelian commentators in several ways, not all of them controversial. In one sense, Aristotle's philosophy was thought to be in harmony with the philosophy of Plato because Aristotle dealt with some topics that Plato mostly ignored. For example, what Aristotle has to say about the void, the motion of animals, imagination, and the syllogism is in harmony with Plato because Plato says nothing or almost nothing that would contradict any claims that Aristotle makes about these.

Another, only slightly more, controversial sense of 'harmonization' is that according to which the most general principles of Aristotle's philosophy were thought to be basically the same as those of Plato. For example, Aristotle, like Plato, was considered an anti-nominalist. In addition, he believed in the irreducibility of form to matter generally and the ontological priority of the intelligible to the sensible. He was also an anti-relativist and identified the real with the knowable. He believed that the virtuous life and the happy life were basically the same. Certainly, one might argue over some of these points. Some, for example, argue that Aristotle held a reductivist view of the soul. But the central point is surely sound, namely, that at a very general level there are deep affinities between Aristotle and his teacher. These affinities are sometimes forgotten when working in the 'Aristotle *versus* Plato' mode.

What scholars, such as Sorabji, generally mean by 'harmonization' (when they heap scorn on the Neoplatonists) is, however, the idea that Aristotle's fundamental philosophical positions are, at least, not in contradiction with those of Plato. With respect to the 'twin pillars' of Platonism, as Francis Cornford called them, namely, the theory of Forms and the immortality of the soul, surely, common wisdom has it, Aristotle is anti-Platonist, and anyone who says otherwise relegates himself to the darkness.

First, we must recognize that, among the commentators, there was serious disagreement about Aristotle's position in relation to Forms. Syrianus, for example, wondered whether book A of *Metaphysics* was spurious because Aristotle seems to ally himself there with the Academy and the Academy believed in Forms, though elsewhere Aristotle seems to reject Forms. Proclus, apparently, wrote an early work arguing that Aristotle rejected Forms and then later changed his mind, claiming that Aristotle's opposition was not so clear cut.

Second, ever since Jaeger's seminal work, *Aristoteles. Grundlegung einer Geschichte seiner Entwicklung* (Berlin, 1923), a developmentalist hypothesis about Aristotle's writings has been the norm among scholars, who simply assume that the 'Platonic' parts of his writings must belong to an early phase. Take away the developmentalism, and it is a much trickier business to separate off the 'Platonic' Aristotle from the 'anti-Platonic' Aristotle. The Neoplatonic commentators were, however, no more inclined to developmentalism for Aristotle than they were for Plato. Indeed, they believed generally that the role of the commentator was to show the internal harmony or consistency of both Plato's and Aristotle's writings as well as their harmony with each other.

Finally, with respect to the Forms themselves and the writings of Aristotle universally held to be 'mature,' many scholars with little or no sympathy for Neoplatonism have argued that, for example, in book Lambda, chapter 7, of *Metaphysics* it is not unreasonable to interpret Aristotle as arguing that the unmoved mover is eternally cognizing all intelligibles (*noêta*). Indeed, Jacques Brunschwig in his most recent analysis of chapter 9 of Lambda, contained in the recently published volume, *Aristotle's Metaphysics Lambda* (Oxford, 2000), has argued that Lambda 9 must be an early work because it contradicts Lambda 7, which clearly maintains the view that God's knowledge is maximal.

If God eternally knows all intelligibles, one can reasonably ask how much these intelligibles differ from Platonic Forms, particularly in relation to the mind of the Demiurge. Also, in interpreting what is meant by 'Platonic Forms' we should not necessarily confine ourselves either to a snapshot taken from the presumed 'middle dialogues' or from Aristotle's testimony. The Neoplatonic commentators struggled to arrive at a nuanced and defensible position regarding the Forms, based on the evidence of all the dialogues and all of Aristotle's testimony along with Aristotle's own arguments, including those in *Metaphysics* Lambda. For them, harmonization of Aristotle and Plato with respect to Forms meant, basically, that Aristotle's understanding was limited but that it could be subsumed under Plato's. Aristotle's limitation consisted in the fact that he did not fully appreciate (though Lambda 10 shows an inkling of this) that an eternal mind thinking all that is intelligible could not be the first principle of all things.

As for the immortality of the soul, I shall only mention that Plato's commitment to personal immortality, as we tend to understand

that today, is not so clear. His view about the immortality of the highest part of the soul is not radically different from what one might reasonably infer from Aristotle's obscure remarks about the active intellect in *De Anima*. We need not, I think, exaggerate the similarity of Aristotelianism and Platonism in order to allow that the Neoplatonic commentators were engaged in a profound debate at a high level based on their enormously impressive knowledge of the texts. In this regard, I just note Simplicius' insistence that any commentator on any text of Aristotle must not begin before acquiring an intimate knowledge of *all* the *corpus* (in Greek, of course). Whether they were crazy to hold to harmonization or not, the availability of these works in English translation, many of which, such as the commentaries of Philoponus and Simplicius, are important philosophical and historically influential works in their own right, can only deepen and broaden our understanding of the central philosophical tradition of antiquity.

Another monumental work of on-going scholarship is the aforementioned *Der Platonismus in der Antike*, conceived and begun by Heinrich Dörrie, and carried forward since his death by Matthias Baltes. Begun in 1987, the work aims to provide texts, translations, and commentary for the 'Bausteine' of Platonism. If the dialogues are the foundation of the edifice, the writings of the commentators and other self-declared disciples of Plato constitute the 'building blocks' of Platonism. Dörrie rightly makes little of the designation 'Neoplatonism' or the equally unhelpful 'Middle Platonism'. As a result, he and Baltes have provided an indispensable resource for the study of Platonism in all its complexity. Five volumes have already appeared. The sixth volume, containing the texts on Platonic 'Seelenlehre' is to appear soon. Three more volumes after that are planned.

Two impressions will, I think, inevitably arise for anyone who becomes familiar with one or more of the volumes of this work. The first is that of the dominance of Platonism in the intellectual life of antiquity. Very few ancient thinkers were not in one way or another seized with Platonic ideas, either as their defenders or opponents. The second is that of the organic nature of Platonism. It is certainly not as if some people in the Platonic tradition did not strive for a dogmatic one-and-for-all expression of Platonism. Dörrie, in the introduction to the first volume, nicely elucidates this religious dimension of Platonism. In this regard it is illuminating to read the fine edition of Proclus' Hymns, newly translated into English with essays and commentaries, by R.M. Van Den Berg (Amsterdam, 2000). Proclus' renowned piety, evident in these hymns, does not inhibit his heroic – almost unbelievable – dedication to the dialectical appropriation of the entire history of Platonic exegesis.

Another loosely collaborative project is the series of translations and commentaries on the individual treatises of the *Enneads* of Plotinus under the editorship of Pierre Hadot. It is a bit startling to realize that it is only since 1973 that we have had available Henry and Schwyzer's critical edition of Plotinus' *Enneads*. The last of the eight volumes of A.H. Armstrong's English translation only appeared in 1988. Since the appearance of the critical edition, roughly one half of the treatises in *Enneads* have been the subject of detailed commentaries – in various languages – along with the sort of painful translations that the requirements of leaving space for commentaries allow one to make. There is even an on-going project of Paul Kalligas in Athens to translate and comment on Plotinus in modern Greek, two volumes of which have appeared. All of this essential spade-work, including the important identification of sources, is bearing considerable fruit. There are probably more doctoral dissertations being written on Plotinus and Neoplatonism generally today than at any earlier time. We are, I suppose, happily removed from the time when E.R. Dodds' interest in Neoplatonism was thought to be so eccentric that his suitability for the Regius Professorship of Greek at Oxford was questioned.

It was only in 1997 that the 6th volume of the Budé edition, translation, and commentary on Proclus' *Théologie Platonicienne* by H.D. Saffrey and L.G. Westerink appeared. The first volume, containing a lengthy and extremely valuable introduction, appeared in 1968. This work is Proclus' most important personal work. It is a monumental effort to provide a synthesis and defense of Platonism in its fullness and complexity. In 1998, a Colloquium was held at Louvain in honor of the completed publication of this work. The result of that Colloquium is a volume that appeared in 2000, *Proclus et la Théologie Platonicienne*, edited by A. Ph. Segonds and C. Steel, containing some 30 papers, many of which are fundamental studies of Proclus in the Platonic tradition.

One of the most enigmatic and little studied of the Neoplatonists is Damascius (c. 462 – c. after 538 C.E.), last head of the Academy of Athens, and teacher of Simplicius. Perhaps his most important work, *Problems and Solutions on First Principles*, is extant along with several of his commentaries on Platonic dialogues. The treatise on first principles is an extraordinarily rich and complex work, reflecting interpretations of the Platonic legacy which differ in some fundamental respects from Proclus. Very little scholarly attention has hitherto been devoted to Damascius. Happily, that will change with the publication of a recent book by Sara Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-Discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius*. Rappe begins with a fascinating question: 'why is that the Neoplatonists, who explored so intensively non-discursive or non-propositional thinking, and who subjected formal dialectic to such criticism, were exegetical beyond all other schools of ancient philosophy?' Rappe's answer, constituting what she calls 'a genealogy of Neoplatonic textuality', seeks to show the various self-conscious strategies employed by the Neoplatonists to deal with the insufficiencies of representation to express truth. This highly original work should do much to stimulate the intellectual interest of students of ancient philosophy who assume that it is pretty much downhill starting from the 3rd century B.C.E.

Another work, impressive in its scope, is *Proclus. Neo-Platonic Philosophy and Science* (Edinburgh, 1996) by Lucas Siorvanes. This is the first book in English since L.J. Rosán's *The Philosophy of Proclus* (New York, 1949) to attempt anything like a survey of Proclus' fundamental metaphysical and epistemological doctrines. This is a difficult book about a difficult philosopher. It too should help to persuade the doubters about the value of work in this field.

Finally, mention should be made of the series of essays edited mainly by R.B. Harris on various aspects of Neoplatonism and published by SUNY Press. This series is about to have five new additions, making twelve in all. By the end of this year, we should see *Neoplatonism and Nature*, *Neoplatonism and Indian Philosophy*, *Neoplatonism and Contemporary Philosophy* (two volumes) and *Neoplatonism and Western Aesthetics*. The volumes that have already appeared are, it must be granted, uneven in their contents. At the same time, however, much of this work is learned, imaginative, and stimulating. It provides various surprising entrées to the appreciation of Platonism in all its complexity.

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