

Was Plotinus a ‘Platonist’? A Few Observations About First- and Second-Order Terminology in the Study of Platonism

Earl Fontainelle

Abstract

This paper is an inquiry into the nomenclature used for discussing Plato, the various currents of ancient thought drawing on Plato, and the broad diffusion of the ideas arising from Plato and his followers into western cultures more broadly. Starting from Plotinus (and to a lesser extent Origen) as case-studies, it argues for self-reflection in the field of Platonic studies with regard to this terminology. While the traditional terms ‘Platonic’, ‘Platonist’, ‘Neoplatonist’, and so on, have done much to facilitate study of these important currents of thought, they also have their limitations – some inherent and some as used in practice – which, it is argued, often smuggle in ambiguities and even historically-false conclusions. The second part of the paper proposes a revised usage addressing the problems raised in the first part and designed chiefly to spark conversations around the terminology we, as scholars of Plato and Platonism, use, and to emphasise the need for critical reflection on first- and second-order terms for discussing the legacy of Plato in culture.

The history of philosophy tends to speak to itself in an evolving, *ad hoc* private jargon. Terms come and go, and new refinements are continually being sought; where once we spoke of ‘post-classical’ we now speak of ‘late antique’, bespeaking important reconceptualisations of our understanding of the end of antiquity, while newcomer-terms like ‘post-Hellenistic’ lend an ever-increasing fine grain to analyses of the history of ideas. In this paper,¹ however, I wish to broaden the focus to the most basic terms used in the study of Platonism, words like ‘Platonist’, ‘Neoplatonist’, and their many cousins, arguing for critical reflection of the historicity and helpfulness of such terms. In essence, the argument presented in what follows reflects a stance long-understood within the history of religions, and which can usefully be reflected on in the history of philosophy: namely, the need for strict separation between first- and second-order terminology when discussing historical phenomena. If we study philosophy, and

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also study people who called themselves (some linguistic version of the term) ‘philosophers’, it is imperative to remember that they may have – and in the case of antique thinkers, certainly – meant something very different by ‘philosophy’ than we do. Having examined some of the problems which can arise from overlapping first- and second-order terminology in scholarly practice, the paper looks for ways in which our current heuristic vocabulary might be retooled or defined to avoid ambiguities, to further a more standard approach, and to weed out the ever-present tendency to generalise unhelpfully about specific historical instances.

The importance of this exercise may not be immediately obvious; scholars of the history of philosophy are able to navigate a certain degree of terminological looseness without undue problems. If one scholar speaks in a given context of ‘the Platonic tradition’ where another says ‘the Platonist tradition’, there is little difficulty: we understand that both authors are probably discussing an ancient philosophical tradition primarily based on exegesis of the writings of Plato and of later authors in the same tradition, wherein certain doctrinal constants, such as a theory of Forms, an hierarchical ontology, and an immortal, immaterial soul, may be assumed. It may thus be useful in the first instance to point out that there is a problem and to detail precisely where the trouble lies, taking scholarly reception of Plotinus as a case-study.

It has often been remarked that, although we may habitually refer to Plotinus as ‘the founder of Neoplatonism’, he would of course have regarded himself as simply a Platonist.² This statement is fairly uncontroversial, and makes an important point – namely that we should not put modern, second-order heuristic terms like ‘Neoplatonism’ into the mouths of our historical sources. But here is the problem: this statement does precisely that, substituting for the obviously second-order term ‘Neoplatonism’ the more tricky borderline case ‘Platonist’. This paper will follow the logic of maintaining a strict separation between first- and second-order terminology, arguing that Plotinus never regarded himself as a ‘Platonist’ or that, if he did so, his definition of what it was to be a Platonist had little in common with any normally-understood modern definition of the same term; the result is that we should, at the very least, specify what we mean by ‘Platonist’ when we make such claims.

The nature of the problem may be summarised as follows: terms like ‘Platonic’, ‘Platonist’, and even ‘Neoplatonist’ are rarely explicitly defined in the study of ancient philosophy, and, as a result, are habitually used by scholars in both first- and second-order contexts. To illustrate why this is potentially problematic, a concrete illustration will be helpful. The careful and astute scholar of Plotinus, Henry Blumenthal, says

... Plotinus was a Platonist. One might add that in spite of the fact that he has always been regarded as the founder of Neoplaton-

²E.g. Merlan (1969), 14 n. 1; Charrue (1978), 18; Blumenthal (1966), 82.

ism, he himself would not have known what the Greek equivalent of that word might have meant, since all the Platonists of late antiquity regarded themselves as Platonists *tout simple* The degree of self-deception involved in this self-concept is perhaps nowhere clearer than in their discussions of soul and intellect.³

Blumenthal rightly points out that the term ‘Neoplatonist’ has no first-order value; i.e., Plotinus and his fellow late antique philosophers would not have even recognised it, much less claimed it for themselves. But the following statement, that in considering themselves ‘Platonists *tout simple*’ the late-antique Plotinists were deceiving themselves, requires unpacking. Blumenthal goes on to specify why he feels that this is a self-deception: Plotinian and later doctrines of soul and intellect in fact make use of Aristotelean materials. The point is thus that these philosophers are not ‘Platonists’ but rather ‘Aristoteleanizing Platonists’ or perhaps simply ‘eclectic philosophers’.⁴ But is Blumenthal right to state that all late-ancient Platonists defined themselves as ‘Platonists’, meaning by this what Blumenthal seems to mean, something like ‘philosophers who only use Plato’s works and ideas, excluding those of Aristotle’ (and presumably not just of Aristotle, but of Stoics, Sceptics, and any others that a modern writer might judge to fall outside of the definition of ‘Platonist’)?

The answer here is an unequivocal ‘no’. So what has gone wrong? We may be sure that Blumenthal is not trying to say that the ancient Platonists claimed never to use Aristotelean materials: as is well known, some of them published works devoted to harmonising Aristotle’s works with those of Plato,⁵ and Platonism generally exhibits an eclectic and creative use of the Hellenic philosophical traditions extending far beyond the narrowly ‘Platonic’. I take it that Blumenthal is trying to make a philosophical claim with which most specialists would agree – that Plotinus’ doctrines about the soul and *nous* cannot be understood in terms of a strict exegesis of Plato, but involve important elements drawn from Aristotle and his commentators – but he is allowing this to shift unnoticed into an historical claim – that all ancient Platonists saw themselves as confined to such a strict reading of Plato, but failed to live up to their own high standards of textual purity. The evidence from the Platonists themselves shows us that this is not the case, as will be discussed further below.

The mistake lies in attributing a modern idea of what it is to be a Platonist to the *self-definition* of ancient Platonists, who would not have recognised it any more than they would have known what to make of the modern term ‘Neoplatonist’. Slippage has occurred between first- and second-order uses of

³Blumenthal (1966), 82.

⁴*Ibid.* 82, 86-8, *et passim*.

⁵E.g. Antiochus of Ascalon (*ap. Cic. Acad. post.* 15 ff., *De fin.* 5, 7); Max. Tyr. *Orat.* I, 4; 29-33; cf. 27.5; Porphyry’s lost *On the Oneness of the Schools of Thought of Plato and Aristotle* (*ap. Suda* IV 178, 21-22); Ammonius Saccas’ reported harmonisation of the two (Hierocles *ap. Phot.* 214). On philosophic harmonisation in late antique Platonism generally, see Dillon (1982); Saffrey (1992); Hadot (2015).

‘Platonist’. Again, this may present few problems, in practice, to informed readers of Blumenthal’s (excellent) article: few if any readers will think that he means to imply that late-antique Platonists saw themselves as confined to reading Plato and Plato alone. And we understand the (clear, in my view, though not exactly provable) implication that ancient dogmatic Platonists used selective reading, ‘creative misreading’, and the ideas of other philosophers (or even the words of Homer, the Orphic poems, or the *Chaldaean Oracles*) very widely in their efforts to make Plato into a ‘Neoplatonist’ *avant la lettre*.

There may have indeed been a great degree of self-deception here, assuming that the consensual modern reading of Plato is better or more correct than ancient ones.⁶ It is perfectly legitimate to make such observations, but we must beware of falling into statements that seem to imply that the Platonists saw themselves as simply members of the school of Plato, committed solely to expounding Plato’s thought. As will appear below, they quite explicitly did not see themselves as such. ‘Platonist’ in this discussion is precisely as inappropriate as ‘Neoplatonist’, and for precisely the same reasons: it is a second-order term undreamt-of by our antique thinkers, and to hold them somehow to blame for not living up to it is just confusing.

If we consider a case like Origen’s, it may be easier to see what is at stake here. It cannot be doubted that Origen defines himself as a Christian (first-order); he is both explicit and strenuous in doing so.⁷ It is also certain that his thought is deeply structured by the Platonist philosophy of his time, and he is regularly described in scholarship with epithets like ‘Platonising Christian’ or ‘Christian Platonist’.⁸ However, it should be easy to see why a scholar who made a statement like ‘Origen claimed to be a Christian *tout simple*, but his self-deception is evident, since we know he was in fact a Platonising Christian’ would be crossing an interpretive line which should not be crossed, by mixing up first- and second-order concerns. What is this ‘pure’ Christianity to which Origen should have aspired? We must surely assume that when Origen adopts arguments and approaches from Plato and the Platonists to his Christian

⁶Again, while it is a majority view in scholarship on ancient philosophy that the philosophical projects of the thinkers known as Neoplatonists were fundamentally different from those of Plato, it is by no means either universal or provable. The so-called Tübingenschule, for instance, sees significant continuities between what they suppose to be Plato’s metaphysics and those of later thinkers like Plotinus (see Gaiser (1980) for a sympathetic summary of some of the main lines of argument), and other scholars (de Vogel (1986), for example) make similar claims, in which they are in some respects echoing ancient commentators who maintained that Plotinus was simply expounding Plato’s doctrine, e.g. Longinus (*ap. Porph. Plot.* 20.68-73: Plotinus’ exegesis of Pythagorean and Platonic principles is ‘seemingly clearer than that of the extant writers preceding him’) and Augustine (*contra ac.* 3.41 *ad fin.*: Plotinus’ philosophy is so similar to Plato’s that one might conclude that he was Plato reborn).

⁷See e.g. Origen’s apologetic epistle reported by Eusebius (*HE* 6.19.12-14), which defensively maintains that one can legitimately be a Christian philosopher, since philosophy is subordinate to religion, and furthers one’s Christian faith.

⁸The fuzziness of the second-order terminology here should however be setting off alarm bells: must there not surely be a difference between these two terms?

agenda, he sees what he is doing as a perfectly valid Christian enterprise.

When Plotinus says ‘we’, Armstrong’s translation (2003) regularly supplies variations on ‘we Platonists’.⁹ I would argue that this is equivalent to translating Origen’s ‘we’ with ‘we Platonising Christians’, which would give a very false idea of Origen’s self-definition. If we are not members of a tradition with a stake in its definitional boundaries, we should hesitate before making value-laden judgements about what does and does not count as a given tradition; it is certainly true that many contemporary and later Christians questioned Origen’s credentials as a proper Christian, but unless we are using a given definition of Christianity as a scholarly criterion – say the Nicene Creed, a particular papal bull, or something concrete along those lines – we should beware of the anachronism of obtruding our definitions of Christianity into his discourse.

The lesson has long since been learnt in the history of religions that the only ultimately-reliable index for a thinker’s membership of a given group is their claim to such membership; we may disagree with these claims for various reasons, but these reasons must stay confined to second-order discussions. But because historians of philosophy are often involved, in some way or other, with philosophy itself as a living tradition – they might feel for instance that they do have a stake in what constitutes a proper Platonist – they tend to run into this kind of trouble. Historians of Christianity might well ask how Origen’s theories fitted in with other streams of Christian discourse current in his time, or look at the reasons for his anathematization by later orthodoxies, but if a historian were to debate whether or not a Christian following the doctrines of Origen could genuinely attain to salvation, the alarm-bells of humanist academics would immediately begin to clang; this is simply a question outside our purview as historians of ideas. So, I would argue, is the question of whether or not the ancient philosophers were ‘good’ Platonists according to this or that modern understanding of the term, *if we are writing as historians of philosophy*. We may certainly wear the different hats of ‘philosopher’ and ‘historian of philosophy’ at different times, and these approaches of course can be mutually-reinforcing, but we should be careful to doff one hat before donning the other.

Philosophic Self-Definition in Plotinus

If it is right that there is a problem with the usual, unquestioned usages of terms like ‘Platonist’ in the history of philosophy, it would be good to offer some solutions. This task will be made easier, however, if we first address the other loose end from the foregoing discussion, namely, the statement that we have evidence for the types of self-definition which antique Platonists *did* make.

We shall again take Plotinus as a case-study, filling in gaps using evidence also from the surviving fragments of Numenius,¹⁰ Celsus, and Middle Platonism

⁹E.g. at V.8.4.55 (Vol. V p. 253) and I.4.3.18-19 (Vol. I p. 179).

¹⁰We know from Porphyry that Plotinus read Numenius very closely: Porph. *Plot.* 14; 17.

more widely. We can start by eliminating an obvious possibility: did Plotinus (or his Middle Platonist sources) use any of the Greek terms which might be obvious candidates for οἱ ἀπὸ τοῦ Πλάτωνος, ‘the Platonist school’ or ‘the school of Plato’? The answer here is negative, but this should not surprise us in the case of Plotinus, whose style is not to allude to schools of thought by name, but rather by doctrine: even Plato himself is referred to by name very few times in the *Enneads* relative to the many hundreds of quotations, paraphrases, and allusions to Plato’s works. Instead, we generally have statements like: ‘But what shall we say to those who maintain that the soul is material?’ (i.e., the Stoics),¹¹ ‘He (i.e., Plato) says that ...’,¹² or ‘One must suppose that certain of the ancient and blessed philosophers have found the truth. But which of them especially achieved this, and how we might attain to understanding concerning these matters, it is right to enquire’ (‘we’ being Plotinus’ self-referencing school of thought).¹³ So we should not expect to see ‘the Platonists’ appearing explicitly in the *Enneads*. We might still be right to supply the term in translations, however, if what Plotinus means by ‘we’ is something conveniently and accurately evoked by the term ‘Platonist’.

It is more troubling that we do not find ‘the Platonists’ in Celsus or Numenius either, since these authors are very willing to name names. The surviving fragments of Numenius’ *On the Academy’s Betrayal of Plato* give us a window on a polemical history of what we might call the Platonist and Academic traditions, with copious references to the different *haireseis* which Numenius believes to have fought for the mantle of being the true followers of Plato.¹⁴ We do in fact find a single Πλατωνικός in Numenius’ (admittedly exiguous) surviving discussion (fr. 25 ll. 12-13), but, referring as it does to Krantor, we are probably justified in taking this as meaning not what modern scholars mean by ‘Platonist’, but rather what they mean by ‘Early Academic’. Much of Numenius’ argumentation is lost to us, but one thing is clear from his work as a whole: the true tradition to which Plato belonged is not to be defined as a Platonist or a Platonic tradition at all: Plato and Socrates both learned from the same philosophic authority, namely Pythagoras.¹⁵ Thus, while we may be right to define Numenius as a Platonist (depending on what we mean thereby), we would be undeniably wrong to say that he *considered himself* a ‘Platonist *tout simple*’, since there is nothing *simplement platonicien* in the tradition outlined by Numenius.¹⁶ Turning to Celsus, in the surviving fragments of his anti-Christian polemical work the *True Account*, he too privileges Pythagoras above Plato.¹⁷ For Celsus, the ‘true account’ of his title is no straightforward philosophical

¹¹E.g. IV.7.2-8.

¹²On Plotinus’ *ipse dixit* style of referencing Plato, see Rist (1964) 57; Charrue (1978) 40.

¹³III.7.1.9-16. See further below for the precise characterisation Plotinus gives to this ‘we’.

¹⁴See fr. 23-28. All references are to the edition of Petty (2012), which follows the numbering of Des Places (1973).

¹⁵Fr. 24.55-57.

¹⁶Shaw (2012) is thus wrong to claim that Numenius ‘... identified himself as a Pythagorean Platonist’. If anything, he identifies himself as a ‘Pythagorean *tout simple*’.

¹⁷*Ap. Origen Cels.* I.16; cf. VI.42.

haireisis, but something more like a perennial tradition of wisdom, to which Plato belonged but by no means founded.¹⁸ Again, Celsus may be a Platonist, but he does not think so. Both Numenius and Celsus agree, too, that the works of the ‘wise barbarian nations’ are good sources for finding true philosophic doctrines,¹⁹ and that mystery-cults and other religious institutions are valid sources for true philosophic doctrine, to be found expressed esoterically within their customs and rites.²⁰ Both thinkers also inveigh against what they see as novelties corrupting the ancient tradition, Numenius calling for an ἀναχώρησις, a ‘return to the sources’, to correct the innovations which have crept into the pristine tradition,²¹ and Celsus attacking Christianity as a *parvenu*, false tradition to be contrasted with the true account of the ancients.²² The tradition they outline could thus be described as self-referentially ‘Platonist’ only if we defined Platonism as ‘the true philosophy – founded by Pythagoras, and extant also in the doctrines of the wise barbarians, poets, and others, and to be discovered in esoteric interpretation of the mystery-cults – of which Plato is an important expounder’.

This model of the history of truth has been described as ‘Platonist perennialism’, a purely second-order term describing a commonly-held view of philosophic history among ancient Platonists.²³ It is ‘perennialist’ in that it sees a tradition of truth (Celsus’ ἀληθῆς λόγος) which goes back not only to the beginnings of philosophy itself (normally to Pythagoras, often seen by authors of our era as the founder of ‘philosophy’ as a genre),²⁴ but further, to the beliefs of the even more ancient, though not strictly ‘philosophical’, barbarian nations (especially the Chaldæans, Brahmins, and Egyptians, the last of whose superior antiquity and wisdom was already asserted by Plato himself).²⁵ If the tradition is held to have a beginning, our authors never venture to say where it might lie. It is ‘Platonist’ in that the doctrines which the ancients profess are, to modern interpreters, recognisably Platonist doctrines, and Plato is always a privileged author in terms of actual philosophical exegesis, as opposed to the notional philosophic exegesis of more vague entities like ‘Pythagoras’ (whose ‘teachings’ will have been deduced selectively from the vast pseudepigraphic literature, it-

¹⁸Celsus’ wisdom-tradition includes ancient barbarian nations (*ibid* I.14; cf. VII.28, 58), favorite barbarian sages like Zoroaster (VIII.28), Homer and other poets (IV.36, VI.42), Pherecydes of Syros and Pythagoras (I.16, 18; II.20; VI.42, VIII.28), Heraclitus (V.24, VI.42), and Plato (e.g. VI.15, citing the παλαιός λόγος of *Laws* 715e-716a), among others. Cf. Hadot (1987) 24; Frede (1994) 5194.

¹⁹For Celsus, see previous note. For Numenius, see fr. 1a; cf. 1b, 9, 10, 56 on the Jews.

²⁰Celsus: Origen *Cels.* VI.42 = Pherecydes B4 DK. Numenius: fr. 55. Cf. Plutarch *de Isid. passim*.

²¹Fr. 1a.

²²Origen *Cels.* Christianity’s young status: I.4, III.5. Contrasted with the antiquity of the ἀληθῆς λόγος: I.14, III.16, VI.15, VI.9 (these last two references are to Plato as an ‘ancient’) *et passim*.

²³Banner (2018) 88-124.

²⁴D.L. 1.12; cf. 8.8. Cf. Iamb. *VP* 12.58, 29, 159.

²⁵*Tim.* 22d-e; cf. *R.* 435e-436a; *Leg.* 656d-657b; *Epin.* 987d.

self largely influenced by Plato)²⁶ or ‘the barbarian sages’, whose doctrines will have been, we can assume with some confidence, largely drawn from a Greek literature subject very much to the *interpretatio græca*.²⁷ We have evidence that Platonist perennialism was not a universal stance among ancient interpreters of Plato,²⁸ but it was certainly a common one, and it is universal among the authors known as Neoplatonists.

Turning back to Plotinus, we see that he outlines a roughly similar history of truth, minus the emphasis on the barbarians, whose wisdom he seems not to have rated particularly highly.²⁹ Plotinus refers to ‘the ancients’ (οἱ παλαιοί/οἱ πάλαι) as the primary unimpeachable source of philosophic truth, along with the ‘archaic philosophers’ by which term he sometimes differentiates the thinkers we know as presocratic from the *palaioi* more generally. When he says ‘ancient’, moreover, Plotinus nearly always means ‘ancient, correct (by definition), and mutually in agreement’:³⁰ that is, the ancients constitute a school of thought, they do not disagree with each other significantly, and they are always right.³¹ We even know who founded the school of the ancients: Pherecydes of Syros and Pythagoras.³² Plato is pre-eminent among the ancients, but not because he somehow differed from their conclusions or had new ideas, but because he explained the true philosophy with the greatest *akribeia*.³³ Like Plato, Plotinus is not an original thinker, but an expounder of ancient wisdom: ‘Our doctrines are not new’.³⁴ All of this is found scattered throughout the Plotinian corpus, and has to be assembled out of context to make it into this type of bald, programmatic statement of philosophical self-definition, but the lack of contrary

²⁶See Burkert (1972).

²⁷This is overstating the case; while we have a considerable amount of evidence for the Greeks’ having viewed the beliefs of non-Greek peoples through a starkly Hellenic lens, we cannot discount the fact either of much genuine ethnographic material having made its way into the Greek discussions of the time, nor of genuine, sympathetic cross-cultural communication in the Græco-Roman *oikoumene*. The genuine Egyptian details preserved by Plutarch in his *On Isis and Osiris* are a case in point (see Richter (2001) and the essays in Erler and Stadler (2017)); on Egyptian elements in the *Hermetica*, see now Bull (2018). Johnson (2013) includes a useful discussion of the problem of sifting the non-Greek from the Greek in ancient Platonist sources.

²⁸See Proclus’ references to ‘literalist’ readers of Plato (*in Tim.* III.234.15 ff; cf. III.247.13 ff, I.284.13 ff.)

²⁹Plotinus’ sole respectful reference to ‘ancient barbarian wisdom’ is at V.8.6.1-9, where the Egyptian hieroglyphs are adduced as just symbols for non-discursive cognition. For Plotinus’ approach to ‘the ancients’, important treatments include Eon (1970); Charrue (1978); Hadot (1987).

²⁹E.g. V.1.9.28.

³⁰Cf. Charrue (1978) 19. There is one exception to this, which I take to be a slip from his normal usage, where certain atomists are called by the name οἱ πάνυ παλαιοί (VI.1.1.1 ff.); Plotinus normally reserves such terms only for members in good standing of the tradition of truth.

³¹See Banner (2018) 126-36.

³²V.1.9.27 *ad fin.*

³³IV.8.1.23–26; cf. V.1.8.24.

³⁴V.1.8.10: in this passage Plotinus has been citing not only Plato, but a myth of Kronos and Zeus, and he proceeds in the subsequent discussion to quote Parmenides, giving a snapshot of the Late Platonist exegete of the tradition at work.

evidence anywhere in the *Enneads*, and the supporting evidence for an idea of an ancient, authoritative, and fundamentally Pythagorean school of thought we have seen in Numenius and Celsus lead to the conclusion that this is the basic idea which Plotinus has of the tradition to which he belongs.

So is Plotinus a Platonist? The correct answer depends *entirely* on whether we are asking the question at a first-order or a second-order level. At the first-order level, the level of self-definition, Plotinus defines his school-of-thought as the tradition of the Ancients, founded by Pherecydes and Pythagoras, expounded with highest degree of clarity by Plato, and pursued in his day by οἱ σπουδαῖοι, which we might render as ‘the serious philosophers’, or simply by ‘us’.³⁵ ‘Platonist’ is not the best way to translate this complex self-definition if we also want to use the term in what I take to be its generally-accepted second-order sense, as meaning ‘someone who bases their philosophy primarily on exegesis of the Platonic corpus and adheres to certain basic doctrines such as a theory of Forms, an immortal, immaterial soul, etc. etc.’³⁶ We are, however, quite right to define Plotinus as a Platonist in this strictly second-order sense, because this is a good enough general description of his philosophical activity.

But what about the problem of the large amount of Aristotelean material within Platonism which, as we have seen, is to be found throughout the *Enneads*, not to mention the Stoic and other doctrines which, as Porphyry tells us, are found ‘lying unnoticed’ throughout Plotinus’ work?³⁷ This brings us to the broader problem of terminology in the study of the history of Platonism, the fact that we really do not have universally agreed-upon definitions for what our terms mean. If almost all the historical authors that we call Platonists made extensive use of ideas from other schools of thought – and this is in fact the case – then is a definition of Platonism such as that given above particularly useful? Or do we want to keep the term ‘Platonist’, but define it so as explicitly to include these other influences, and thus avoid our own ‘self-deception’ as scholars by acknowledging that ‘pure’ Platonism hardly exists in history, though it may do so in today’s university philosophy departments? Let us turn to this question.

A Modest Proposal for a Reformed Second-Order Terminology for the Study of Ancient Platonism

A suggestion is put forward here for a set of clearly-defined terms for talking about historical Platonism. Whether or not scholars choose to adopt the proposed terminology, it is surely worthwhile to reflect on exactly what we

³⁵Οἱ σπουδαῖοι is indeed the closest Plotinus comes to giving his *hairesis* a label; other descriptors for the right kind of philosophers include the more high-flown μακαριοὶ ἄνδρες and τοὺς θείουσ ἀνδρας (II.9.6.26-27, 36) and, in the polemical context of *Ennead* II.9, ‘the *hairesis* of the Hellenes’ (II.9.6.5-10 and 15.4).

³⁶Note that this *ad hoc* definition might well seem insufficient, misguided, or just wrong to various scholars; this demonstrates the point of the present paper. We return below to what precisely we might mean by ‘Platonist’.

³⁷Porph. *Plot.* 14.

mean when we speak of ‘Platonic tradition’, ‘Neoplatonic discourse’, ‘Platonic-Pythagorean’ texts, and similar common formulations. This is perhaps especially important for young scholars setting off into the uncharted territory of the ‘Platonic tradition’, a land teeming with Pseudo-Platos, Middle Platonists, Platonising ‘Pythagoreans’, ‘Pythagoreanizing’ Platonists, Neoplatonists, Platonising Gnostics, Christian Platonists, and many others, many of which terms may from time to time expand or contract unpredictably, sometimes serving as focused, historical markers and in other cases functioning as ideal-types without any concrete historical reality.

What would be the characteristics of the best possible set of second-order terms for discussing ancient Platonism?³⁸ I suppose we would want to specify:

- The maximum possible clarity and the minimum possible ambiguity, along with
- The least possible danger of bleed between first- and second-order usage.

But these aims will have several unavoidable obstacles standing in their way, and so will have to be balanced with

- Some level of intuitive familiarity (we don’t want to invent a whole new vocabulary from scratch, like some constructed philosophic language),
- A minimum of ugliness and awkwardness (I take it that no one wants to see terms like ‘post-Plotinian Platonico-exigetical perennialist-defining philosophic movement(s)’ in general use, descriptive though they may be), and
- The problem that certain terms (like ‘Platonist/Platonicus/Πλατωνικός’) have distinct modern and ancient meanings, often with troublesome areas of partial overlap.

Some discussion of terms as they stand will be helpful here, followed by some suggestions.

First of all, let us consider the terms we find broadly in play in scholarly discussions of historical Platonist philosophy. We have general-use terms like ‘Platonic’ and ‘Platonist’, which are used interchangeably in some contexts and not in others, and are difficult to define exactly because they refer to such complex historical phenomena. We then have temporally-limited, typological terms

³⁸Note that the following discussion is aimed at historians of philosophy, and not intended to apply to philosophy as a discipline: philosophy has its own terminologies, and usually does a better job of defining them as terms of art than does the history of philosophy. Philosophers might, however, benefit from this discussion for the light it sheds on the problems of applying modern philosophical terms to historical contexts. The proposal of Gerson (2013) 9-19 for a model of an ‘Ur-Platonism’ is a valuable exercise, but, as its author recognises (*ibid.* 10), is based not historically but in a logical analysis of ideas. I prefer historical-descriptive terms, as they help us to avoid bringing value-judgements into our decision as to whether a given thinker is a Platonist or not.

like ‘Early Academic’, ‘Academic’, ‘Middle Platonist’, and ‘Neoplatonist’ along with their cognate forms and less-common relatives (‘post-Hellenistic Platonic philosophy’ and the like); these are usually easier to define, but may be problematic for other reasons. Finally, we should consider what we mean by terms used to indicate some kind of Platonic influence, often in non-philosophical or borderline contexts, such as ‘Platonising’, ‘Platonist’, or ‘Platonic’ in contexts like, ‘Platonising Gnostic texts’ or ‘the Platonic Christianity of the School of Chartres’.

What do we mean when we say ‘Platonic’ and ‘Platonist’? In fact, we may mean so many different things, depending on context, that it is impossible to give a strict definition that would cover all the usages of these terms in reputable scholarly literature. This is in and of itself not a problem; Whitehead’s *bon mot* about all western philosophy’s consisting of footnotes to Plato points to a genuine, if complex, state of affairs, and can, I would argue, even be amplified to include pretty much every department of western culture. Can we understand Christianity (or, for that matter, post-Classical Judaism or post translation-movement Islam) without considering ideas drawn ultimately from Plato? I thus propose that we need a term to do duty specifically to refer to this grand narrative of pervasive influence radiating outward from the Platonic writings and into western culture, while insisting that it must never also do service as a focused, historically-specific name for a movement or movements.

Is ‘Platonic’ the answer? The problem with this is that we need a term with which to refer to Plato’s writings, and this must surely be ‘Platonic’. I thus propose that the term ‘Platonic’ be understood as referring strictly to the Platonic textual corpus and ideas found there, inclusive of elements which may now be seen as pseudo-Platonic or otherwise problematic if a given context demands this. Thus, the dialogues are ‘Platonic’, and we may speak, in a discussion of late-antique interpretation, of the Second Epistle as ‘Platonic’, though few today would defend its authorial credentials, or of the content of the lecture ‘On the Good’, as reported in ancient sources and interpreted by later thinkers, as ‘Platonic’. We might also refer to ‘the Platonic theory of Forms’, but in doing so we will only be taking into consideration Plato’s own ideas, and may thus decide that no such theory exists, although there are certainly Platonic discussions of Forms and what they might be. We will be able to discuss later ‘Platonist uses of Platonic materials’ and, providing we have defined ‘Platonist’ with some degree of rigour, what we mean will be quite clear. We will, however, have to sacrifice ‘the Platonic tradition’; according to this narrow definition, such a tradition could only refer to manuscript-copying or similarly prosaic activities confined to Plato’s work.

We are still lacking a general-use term for the grand narrative. Do we want to use ‘Platonist’? Again, I think that this term is spoken-for; we need a term to refer to the philosophical movements arising in antiquity which treated Plato as a dogmatic philosopher and based their thought largely on his works, and

I think only ‘Platonist’ will do in this context. But, as the discussion above has made clear, we are still in ambiguous territory here, since we cannot rely on first-order definitions of Platonism from the Platonists themselves; they favoured on the whole a completely different set of philosophic credentials which do not point toward ‘Platonist’ as an accurate first-order term, and which are moreover genuinely deceptive when viewed from a second-order perspective, relying as they do on unfalsifiable claims to perennial wisdom and pseudepigraphic textual traditions which are themselves deeply influenced by ideas stemming from the Platonic corpus. I propose that the term ‘Platonist’ be understood in the context of the history of philosophy *solely as a second-order heuristic term* referring to

- philosophic movements, thinkers, or texts which
- treat Plato as a dogmatic thinker, and
- overwhelmingly privilege Platonic materials in their thought (regardless of their stated allegiances).

If we agree to define ‘Platonist’ in this way, we will also be able to add with some confidence certain doctrinal positions shared by Platonists of all stripes:

- a realist position toward immaterial substances,
- a structured ontology privileging immaterial substances over material reality,
- a theory of immaterial Forms and a belief in a divine *nous*, with an epistemology based on these positions,
- and a belief in an immortal, immaterial, and separable soul, with an anthropology centred on that understanding.

Note that these may or may not be *Platonic* doctrines – the problem of development in Plato’s thought over the course of his career, for example, will make some of them suspect in the eyes of some scholars in the overarching Platonic context – but they are definitely common to all Platonists, according to this definition. We thus have a basic definition which, it is hoped, is neither too narrow to map well onto established scholarly usages (so that it encompasses a broad range of thinkers including e.g. Antiochus, Plotinus, and Proclus) nor too broad to be useful for talking about a specific and concrete set of historical movements.

The term ‘Platonist’ will have, according to this understanding, almost *no* first-order use whatsoever: if we are to use this term, we should be strict about this. Perhaps Cicero’s use of *Platonicus* could be translated as ‘Platonist’,³⁹ since he seems to mean something like the definition outlined above, and we might think that the approach of Alcinoüs was probably amenable to

³⁹ *De nat. de.* 1.72-3.

self-definition as ‘Platonist’; he wrote a textbook of the basics of what he saw as Plato’s philosophy, and little about his book suggests perennial wisdom, Pythagoras, or similar notions. On the other hand, Plutarch, Celsus, Numenius, Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus, and a host of other antique thinkers will in no circumstances be described as defining themselves as ‘Platonists’: these thinkers gave (differing) explicit self-definitions which do not map even roughly onto the definition given above. In other words, almost no one in antiquity defined themselves as ‘Platonists’ by the definition proposed here; this is a strength when we are seeking to avoid overlap between first- and second-order categories.

It might be objected that little confusion actually arises from the blurred semantic spheres currently in operation between the two terms, ‘Platonic’ and ‘Platonist’, but this is not always true. Discussions of several ancient phenomena have, I believe, been hampered by sloppy definitional boundaries. The history of ‘Pythagoreanism’ is a case in point. This study cannot be separated from the story of what is generally called the ‘Platonic tradition’, as Burkert has shown,⁴⁰ but in fact there are two separate questions: the detailed sifting of evidence for Plato’s ‘pythagoreanizing’ on the one hand, and the later and much different phenomenon of *Platonist* pythagoreanizing, which drew on a whole corpus of texts and traditions which were in fact a particular brand of ‘platonist’ (but not Platonic) materials, the pseudo-pythagorean writings.⁴¹

Then again, while a lively debate has been going on for centuries as to how ‘Platonic’ the ‘Platonists’ were, no one will deny a fundamental difference in method between Plato and his followers: Plato’s works do not consist primarily in exegesis of a set of texts, and he mostly wrote dialogues, rather than straightforward dogmatic works. The Platonists all expound their version of the truth via exegesis of the Platonic canon, and none of them, as far as we know, wrote aporetic dialogues.⁴² A more rigid terminology will hardly solve the problem of determining what Plato really thought, but it will perhaps help to clean up the parameters of debate. The Platonic and the Platonist are two separate phenomena, a relevant criterion of distinction being one of methods practiced; questions of the agreement or disagreement between Plato and the Platonist traditions should not be discussed under the rubric of a single ‘Platonic tradition’, as they sometimes are.

If we accept this definition, ‘Platonism’ is a philosophical movement; it will

⁴⁰Burkert (1972).

⁴¹See, for the evidence concerning the Platonic Pythagoras, Burkert’s book cited in the previous note remains the standard work; for the later, *Platonist*, Pythagoras, a good introduction is O’Meara (1989). As Burkert’s work shows, the study of the ancient phenomena grouped under the heading ‘Pythagorean’ is in even greater need of rigorously-defined terms than the study of the Platonic and Platonist texts.

⁴²Exceptions could be drawn here: some of Plutarch’s dialogues could be read as at least playfully open-ended, if not aporetic. And, of course, Aristotle’s lost dialogues may well have been aporetic in the extreme, as a counterbalance to his ploddingly doctrinal exoteric works.

differ in tone and methods from texts like the *Chaldæan Oracles*, the *Hermetica*, the Sethian Gnostic texts, or similar religio-philosophic works, which undoubtedly draw on the Platonic legacy, nor will it include authors like Origen or Eriugena, who similarly show an unmistakable stamp of Plato's thought, who are 'philosophical' by most understandings of the term, and who meet the doctrinal criteria, but whose privileging of Christian scripture over Plato's works removes them from the semantic sphere of the proposed definition. Given the deep influence of aspects of Plato's thought on Hellenistic and later religious currents, however, it will be essential to develop a further working terminology to address thinkers across a range of religious activity. How shall we discuss the works of Philo, Clement, and Origen of Alexandria, for example, of the Pseudo-Dionysius, or of Gregory of Nyssa or Eriugena?

For religious thinkers we have the term of art 'Platonising'. I would propose limiting the use of this term – understood, again, as an entirely second-order term – specifically to thinkers who seek in some way explicitly to bring Plato within their religious tradition. Philo is a 'Platonising Jew', because he explicitly cites Plato as a witness to the eternal truths revealed in more primary fashion, but more esoterically, by Moses. Clement and Origen, too, name Plato as a key authority for understanding the Christian revelation. But these thinkers are a minority in Abrahamic culture; it is much more common for us to find Christians and Jews supporting doctrines which we, as scholars, might trace to Plato through a shorter or longer intellectual filiation, but which are not recognised as such by the thinkers in question. We might also turn to texts like the *Hermetica* or the *Chaldæan Oracles*, which never cite Plato by name, but which exist in a thought-world impossible to separate from the Platonic and even Platonist legacy. For these currents of thought a different term is needed.

We still lack a term for that most difficult-to-define aspect of the history of Platonic ideas, the culturally-diffuse influence of the Platonic corpus on realms such as religion and everyday thought outside the elite spaces of philosophy. This sphere of influence is so pervasive as to be almost invisible in some cases, while it is obvious in others. But we do often refer to this diffuse Platonic influence, when we use phrases like 'Platonising religious currents' or 'Platonising Christianity'. I propose, with some stylistic reluctance, the term 'Platonistic' to refer to this realm of diffusion. The analogy with 'Hellenistic' seems useful: just as the Hellenistic period saw a very influential set of Hellenic cultural tropes (from Athenian philosophy to the gymnasium) spread far and wide, encountering other cultures and both transforming them and being transformed by them, so the Platonistic phenomenon saw a very influential set of originally-Platonic ideas spread far and wide, encountering other modes of thought than the strictly philosophical, and both transforming them and being transformed by them. We could even speak of the first centuries CE in the Græco-Roman world as the first large-scale 'Platonistic period', in that certain Platonic ideas in this period, notably the incorporeality of both soul and god, the demiurge of the *Timæus*, the divine *nous*, and the ontological hierarchy, underwent a widespread process

of demoticization, rippling out throughout aspects of popular religion as well as more rarefied esoteric movements, and, it may be, entering into other realms of Græco-Roman life which are less well documented than religion.

I thus propose a strictly second-order terminological use of the terms ‘Platonic’ and ‘Platonist’, with the neologism ‘Platonistic’ to cover the most general aspects of antique culture where Plato’s influence made itself felt, and ‘Platonising’ for thinkers whose stated allegiance is not to Plato, but who adduce Plato (or Platonist readings of Plato travelling under his name) to support their tradition’s authority. We can thus discuss the ancient philosophic Platonists and also refer, in convenient shorthand, to thinkers like Philo, Origen, and Eriugena, who are deeply Platonist in terms of their philosophy and cite Plato openly and centrally, but define themselves as Jews or Christians. Thinkers like the Hermetic authors or, say, the biblical Paul and John, can be described as Platonistic religious thinkers – their thought bears the unmistakable imprint of the Platonistic turn of the early imperial centuries, but they do not themselves mention Plato, nor need we even hypothesise a familiarity on their part with the Platonic corpus.

With this general terminology in hand, we turn to the more specific, historically-local vocabulary. We do not face the same set of problems approaching more focused terms like ‘Middle Platonist’ or ‘Neoplatonist’ as we do with these general terms, in that scholars will pretty much agree on what thinkers are meant by a given term, even if they disagree that the term is appropriate. Thus, a scholar who argues, on doctrinal grounds, that the first Neoplatonist is in fact Philo of Alexandria⁴³ will nevertheless not assume that another scholar referring to ‘the Neoplatonists’ means to include Philo. However, the terms related to the ancient conceptual locus of Plato’s Academy present serious terminological problems which must be addressed.

The membership of the Early Academy *seems* fairly straightforward, and the term is value-free, as understood in modern scholarship; however, the term has roots in a very complex, polemical ancient context.⁴⁴ Following the lead of his teacher Philo of Larissa, Antiochus of Ascalon claimed to belong to a revived ‘Old Academy’ in order to mark his move away from scepticism and toward dogmatic thinking; according to his position, the sceptical Academy are an aberration from the Old Academy founded by Plato, which Antiochus is reviving in the 70’s BCE.⁴⁵ Plutarch later takes a different line: the sceptical Academy

⁴³As argued e.g. by Lewy (1978) 315.

⁴⁴Brittain (2001) Chapter 5 is a model discussion of ancient debates within Academic and Platonist philosophy over the question of the unity or otherwise of the Academy, and its relationship with a new movement arising from the first century BCE, namely dogmatic Platonism (cf. Dillon (1982) 62). A crucial point is that, while this debate was widespread, no two ancient thinkers present precisely the same model of the interrelationships between Plato, the Academy, scepticism, and dogmatism (*ibid.* 224, with n. 9).

⁴⁵On Philo’s position with regard to the unity of the Academy see Cic. *Ac.* I.13, 2.12. On Antiochus’ ‘rebranding’ see e.g. Polito (2012). Modern discussions of the ways in which

were indeed sceptics, but nevertheless stood essentially within the tradition of Plato, and the entire history of Academic philosophy may be understood as a single tradition (with Plutarch defining himself as an ‘Academic’, never as a ‘Platonist’).⁴⁶ Other variations on the ‘unity of the Academy’ argument survive from antiquity.⁴⁷ Later still, Numenius would take an opposing line, writing an exhortation of the Academic tradition, *On the Academy’s Betrayal of Plato*,⁴⁸ and numerous other constructions of the tradition would arise in antiquity, including Augustine’s fascinating characterisation of the sceptical Academy as esoteric teachers of dogmatic Platonist metaphysics.⁴⁹ There is, in short, a convoluted first-order debate, ongoing for centuries in antiquity, with high stakes vis à vis philosophic prestige and the question of who could legitimately wield Plato’s unrivalled philosophic authority, and its key terms were ‘Old Academic’, ‘Academy’, ‘Sceptical Academy’, and the like.

These debates are historically-important and perhaps under-emphasised in historical scholarship; the use of terms like Old Academy and Academic (to mean ‘sceptical’) as unproblematic second-order terms silently contributes to their neglect. As a purely *ad hoc* solution, I would propose the relegation of the widely-used ‘Early Academy’ to a strictly second-order usage, with ‘Old Academy’ as a strictly first-order term to be used only when discussing these ancient debates; thus, we can say that Antiochus did not belong to the Early Academy, but did belong to the Old Academy (the Old Academy existing solely as a first-order polemical construct in the minds of Antiochus and like-minded ancient thinkers). As for the Academy and Academic philosophy, terms often used today as a shorthand for the Athenian scepticism of thinkers like Arcesilaus and Carneades, they should be made explicitly the ‘Sceptical’ (or ‘Skeptical’) Academy, with the adjective ‘Sceptical-Academic’. The unqualified term ‘Academic’ is much too polemically-charged in ancient debates to be adopted as a scholarly heuristic, and we should set it aside as a first-order term to be discussed in the context of these ancient debates. We will thus be able to discuss Plutarch’s first-order claim to be an Academic – a claim of great significance in his self-definition as a philosopher – alongside his second-order classification as a Middle Platonist, with no confusion between the two terms.

Turning to the Middle Platonists, we tend to lump together under ‘Middle Platonism’ a huge range of different approaches, from Philo of Alexandria to Alcinoüs to Numenius, and we have little evidence for anything like an institu-

‘Academic’ was used as an identity-marker in antiquity include Gucker (1978) 206-25; Boys-Stones (2001) 99; Athanassiadi (2006) 23.

⁴⁶Brittain (2001) 223; see Babut (2007). Plutarch wrote a lost *περὶ τοῦ μίαν εἶναι τὴν ἀπὸ τοῦ Πλάτωνος Ἀκαδημίαν*; see Brittain (2001) 225-36. For a recent bibliography on this text, see Bonazzi (2003) 213, n. 1.

⁴⁷See Bonazzi (2003); Brittain (2001) Chapter 5.

⁴⁸See n. 14 above.

⁴⁹*Contr. Ac.* 3.37-43. Numenius seems to have held this belief about Carneades (see fr. 27.56-9) but exactly what is meant is obscure, beyond the fact that he feels Carneades was hiding something in his teaching.

tional Middle Platonist teaching-framework of the kind which we can document for post-Hellenistic movements like Stoicism and Epicureanism in the Roman period. This is fine, as long as we are careful to define this term as referring to any Platonism taking place in the right time-period, with no additional strictures as to doctrine, and no implication that we are dealing with a coherent school-of-thought.⁵⁰ ‘Platonist philosophy from the end of the sceptical Academy until Plotinus’ seems to be what is generally meant, and this is in some ways a useful time-frame to mark off. On the other hand, there is little danger of scholars falling into the trap of thinking that the Middle Platonists defined themselves as such; as John Dillon has noted, no one defines themselves as ‘middle-’anything.⁵¹

There are, however, problems with the term ‘Neoplatonism’. The ‘neo-’ *could* of course be taken to imply ‘young’, indicating a later date than ‘middle’, but in practice, the implication seems to be something new, something radically different either from earlier Platonism, from Plato himself, or both. Indeed, the term was coined by eighteenth-century German scholars as a pejorative term for the decadent corruptors of Plato’s pristine rationalism;⁵² it thus began life as a polemical coinage, never a good start for a piece of descriptive heuristical vocabulary. This is not the place to argue how far the suggestion, widely accepted from antiquity until quite recent times, that Plotinus was in fact the most clear and accurate expounder of Plato’s doctrine can be maintained, but it is of course worthwhile to remind ourselves that serious modern scholars with a lifetime of study of Plato under their belts have come, *ceteris paribus*, to this very conclusion.⁵³ But we can at least state without too much fear of arousing controversy that the stark differences once drawn between ‘Neoplatonism’ and some Middle Platonists now seem less stark than they once did. The meaningful differences between ‘Neo-’ and ‘Middle’ Platonism will therefore be more chronological than doctrinal, and the term ‘Neo-’ seems to have baggage beyond the chronological; it implies that something new and different is going on. There are also often doctrinal assumptions made in discussions of ‘Neoplatonism’: the doctrine of a first principle which transcends *ousia* and the divine *nous*, for example, is often seen as the quintessentially Neoplatonist (or Neoplatonic) position, but we certainly find something like it in Numenius.⁵⁴ Is the answer to rename Numenius a Neoplatonist, to argue that he is ‘Neoplatonist *avant la lettre*’, or simply to acknowledge the historical reality, that many of the doctrines which are perhaps typical or, let us say, standard in Platonism after Plotinus may in fact be found in certain Middle Platonist texts?

Let us simply call Plotinus and his intellectual heirs ‘Late Platonists’.⁵⁵ The

⁵⁰Cf. Gerson (2010) 299: the term ‘Middle Platonist’ is ‘anodyne’.

⁵¹Dillon (1996) 423.

⁵²See Gerson (2010) 3, 299. Other criticisms of the term, mostly centring on the difficulty of finding stable criteria for what constitutes ‘Neoplatonism’, can be found at Wallis (1972) 1-15; Athanassiadi (2006) 22-6; Remes (2008) 1-10.

⁵³See note 6 above.

⁵⁴Fr. 2.10-16 (beyond *ousia*); fr. 17 (beyond the first *nous*).

⁵⁵Gerson (2010) takes the lead here, adopting ‘late Platonism’ as standard.

term ‘Neoplatonist’ – that is, a Platonist who is undeniably bringing a radically new and un-Platonic approach to the Platonic materials – might perhaps be applied usefully to Philoponus, Eriugena, Georgios Gemistos Plethon, or Marsilio Ficino, but vis à vis thinkers like Plotinus or Proclus it adds little to our discussions save a suggestion that we moderns know better than the ancients what ‘true’ Platonism should be.

This brings the discussion back to its beginnings. We unfairly picked on an excellent scholar of Platonism there, pointing out that he had confused issues by mixing first- and second-order terms. Although questions of self-identification and identity may lie outside the ‘strictly philosophical’ concerns of some historians of philosophy, it seems to me that they are important, or at least important enough that we should refrain from plainly misstating them. I do not expect, or even necessarily hope, that the model terminology outlined in the second part of this paper will be widely adopted; indeed, the best possible outcome would be a robust debate in which it is refined or replaced entirely with something better. But I do hope this exercise of publicly thinking through what we might mean by a widely-used set of terms is helpful. The study of Plato and of Platonism has never been the most self-reflective or self-critical discipline. We should at least aspire to that basic Socratic criterion of sound practice, the rightly-held, coherent definition.

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