

Why is Platonism still attractive today?

A conversation with John Dillon¹

1. We owe a multitude of philosophical concepts and *topoi (loci)* to Plato and the Platonic tradition. One of these terms is also “*paradeigma*” (παράδειγμα), which is found in Plato’s early dialogue, *Euthyphron*, and the late *Timaeus*. Since the central theme of this issue of *Distinctio* is the exemplarity, i.e. paradigm, could you say something about the relevance of this term for the tradition of Platonism?

Well, *paradeigma* is a term that Plato uses for the Form or Idea, as a model or exemplar, laid up in the intelligible realm, of its individual instances in the physical world, and which is the cause of their existence. At the end of Book IX of the *Republic*, however, he actually uses it, interestingly, to characterize the celestial archetype of the ideal state that he has been describing, presumably including all the components of that state; and in the *Timaeus*, of course, the Paradigm represents the archetype of the cosmos as a whole and all its contents – being contemplated, in the Myth, by the Demiurge as something external to himself, but really, in my view, as the contents of his own mind.

2. Plato is often accused of having taken “flight into ideas” (καταφυγή εἰς τοὺς λογοῦς, *Phaedo*, 99c), neglecting our life-world. Is this an attempt to explain our complex reality, fraught with corruption and evils, with the help of idealized instruments and standards doomed

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to failure from the outset? Is the tendency towards idealization also to be understood as an effort to improve our lifeworld?

In this passage, it seems to me, Socrates (and so Plato) is turning away from any attempt, following on those of previous materialist thinkers, to explain the physical world on the basis of material originative principles, and appealing to intelligible ones (the system of Forms), as providing a better explanatory basis, but I don't see that that necessarily involves a dismissal of the physical world – though Socrates does feel that we should depart from this world as soon as decently possible! It is just a matter of putting the physical world in its place, as a necessarily imperfect representation of an intelligible archetype.

3. Should the tendency towards idealization also be understood as an effort to improve our lifeworld? Plato, in contrast to Socrates, not only pleaded for the perfection of his own person but also for the institutional morality of the polis.

That is an interesting question. I don't think that Plato felt that much improvement was possible to the material world – though Socrates plainly felt that society would be much improved if his interlocutors took his advice and sought to 'know themselves'. But it is also true that Plato held that, in the highly unlikely case that a given society would submit itself to the rule of a 'philosopher-king', or group of such, that that society would be greatly improved – and in the *Laws* he presents a far more realistic version of such a society than in the *Republic*. I actually feel that much of what he proposes in the *Laws* would merit adoption in the modern world – not least the principle that no one in a given society should earn more than five times the agreed basic income – and I have ventured to develop this thought in my pamphlet *Platonism and the World Crisis* (2010).

4. The philosophy of Platonism has been shaped by the relationship between image and archetype; metaphorical speech and similes are always linked to the impossibility of articulating the highest of thoughts (the idea of the good, the *Hen*). Is the *arrheton* the quintessence of the philosophy of Platonism?

Well, that does seem to be a problem that Platonism is faced with, that human language is simply not suited to describing or discussing

the higher levels of reality, and in particular, the One; so one can only attempt to do so by employing similes and metaphors, and ultimately negations, and even mutually contradictory negations. But that doesn't inhibit Platonists too much! As I have had occasion to remark, the fact that the subject is ineffable doesn't prevent Platonists from effing about it.

5. Not only the Platonists had problems with language, Wittgenstein and Heidegger did too. Wittgenstein characterized the ineffable as the most important in philosophy, while Heidegger claimed that being should be disclosed through silence (*erschweigen*). If the boundaries of our world are shaped by language (Wittgenstein), is knocking on the walls of the inescapable a legitimate claim of philosophizing?

I think it is, simply because language can be used, by employing devices such as negation and self-contradiction, to give at least an intimation of the ineffable. At least that is what such figures as Plato and Plotinus appear to have thought, and I would agree with them. There is a fine passage on this topic at the end of one of Plotinus' main tractates, V 3: 'On the Knowing Hypostases and That Which is Beyond', which is too long to quote *in extenso*, but which ends *aphele panta*, (*Ἀφελε πάντα*). 'Take away everything!' (*Enneads* V.3 [49].17, 38).

6. You have analyzed, in detail, one of the most beautiful metaphors from the *Chaldaean Oracles*, namely to what extent the soul is the flower of the intellect (*nous*) or whether such a metaphor is sufficient to grasp the dignity of the noetic and henadic realm. Are there any beautiful metaphors from Neoplatonic philosophy that could be highlighted?

Yes, Plotinus does certainly come up with some fine images, in the course of trying to characterize the nature of the intelligible world and its relation to the physical. I have actually composed a paper on this subject, 'Plotinus Orator', for a Festschrift in honor of my friend Michael Erler (*Philosophus Orator*, 2016), but in brief I may mention, from the middle chapters of *Enn.* VI 7 (12 and 15), such images as the flavor which is a blend of all flavors, and the face composed all of faces – both designed to elucidate the inter-penetrative

nature of the intelligible realm; but he also, in such a passage as VI 4. 7, draws on imagery to illustrate how the immaterial and non-extended (soul) infuses the extended (body): first think of a hand carrying a plank, its power extending throughout the whole length of the plank; then think away the hand! – this being followed in turn by the image of the luminous sphere, lit by a small light in the center: first focus on the central light; then think away the light source: the sphere remains uniformly illuminated! And I could go on, but that is perhaps sufficient to illustrate Plotinus’ use of imagery in the elucidation of difficult metaphysical issues.

7. In Plato’s *Theaetetus* 176b, we have one of the remarkable definitions of philosophy as a peculiar escape (φυγή) as homoiōsis theoi: (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν, Th. 176b–e; cf. Resp. 613a7-b1). Plato interpreted this as a demanding ethical process in which we become like God, which in turn means trying to live “justly, holily and wisely” (ὁμοίωσις δὲ δίκαιον καὶ ὅσιον μετὰ φρονήσεως γενέσθαι), which became a form of life to aspire to in the school of Platonism or the late Academy. It was an ideal of Neo-Platonism to live by the motto that God is the measure of all things, to strive for perfection, to spend one’s life in righteousness and other virtues. Is this way of life still relevant today? In any case, we miss this way of life at universities and in academic life.

Yes, I think it certainly is – if interpreted in a suitably modern sense. The ideal of ‘likeness to God’ can be seen, I think, as the striving for a state of freedom from passions and obsession with the accumulation of wealth and social status, along with a concern for developing one’s mental capacities, and a concern for the welfare of others (this latter covering the ‘holiness’ aspect of the definition). Admittedly, I don’t see that the modern university does much to further these ideals – except to the extent that it is concerned to develop our powers of critical thought! And it is devoting progressively less time to that every year, it seems to me.

8. What position do the traditional values, wisdom, justice, deliberation, and prudence have in contemporary society in the context of

the beautiful modernization of *homoiôsis* thought that you offer us?

Plotinus makes an interesting distinction (which he actually thinks was made by Plato himself, as between the *Republic* and the *Phaedo*), in his tractate I 2, between virtues at the ‘civic’ level (as in the *Republic*) and at the ‘purificatory’ level (as in the *Phaedo*), in order to postulate a ‘higher’ version of each of the traditional virtues, such as prudence or courage, which would befit a soul that is already thoroughly oriented towards the intelligible realm, and not much concerned with normal civic interactions. But this does not mean for Plotinus that the ‘normal’ virtues are disregarded, as he shows himself in his own life. And that should be equally true for a modern ‘sage’!

9. It is also a paradox of the Platonic Academy that skepticism dominated it for about 150 years, i.e., from 266 to 90. After Arcesilaus (316-241) became the head of the Academy, the Socratic principle of ignorance prevailed. The Socratic saying “I know that I know nothing” (οἶδα οὐκ εἰδώς; Ap. 21d) was taken as the basis of the argument, and Arcesilaus denied that it is possible to know this too. The impossibility of knowledge (*ἀκαταληψία*) was the proclaimed motto and the abstention from judgment (*ἐποχή*) was declared as the goal to strive for. The problem with Arcesilaus was that he wrote nothing, but unfortunately, he found no Plato among his students, so we cannot reliably pass judgment on his philosophizing. Antiochus of Ascalon turned away from skepticism, with the convincing argument that the human intellect can distinguish between the true and the false. The refutation of subjectivism in Theaetetus was again the occasion for the Academy’s distancing from skepticism. Was this turn from skepticism justified?

Yes, the turn to skepticism under Arcesilaus is a remarkable development, but explicable, I think, both as a reaction to the dogmatism of Zeno of Citium and his Stoic School – Zeno had, after all, studied with Arcesilaus’ predecessor Polemon – and a return to the Socratic roots of the Platonist School, in reaction to the dogmatism of the later Academy. It seems to me, though, that, the ideal of ‘suspension of belief’, especially under the headship of Carneades, who introduced the concept of *pithanotês*, or ‘degrees of probability’, began in

due course to lose its attraction, preparing the way for Antiochus to reintroduce dogmatic Platonism. Young Roman aristocrats, in particular, I think, whose education helped to pay the bills, wanted a set of beliefs and principles to live by!

10. The American Platonist Harold F. Cherniss (1904-1987) claimed in his famous essay, “The Philosophical Economy of the Theory of Ideas”, that the world of phenomena can only be “saved”, i.e. adequately explained, by unchanging ideas. The Neoplatonist Simplicius (c. 490 - c. 560) attributed the famous claim for the salvation of phenomena to Plato (sōizein ta phainomena; σώζειν τὰ φαινόμενα). In the background of the claim is the intention to establish astronomy as a scientific discipline, which will culminate in the geocentric system elaborated by the Alexandrian mathematician, astronomer, and musician Claudius Ptolemy (85-165). The physicist and philosopher of science Pierre Duhem has written extensively on the history of the reception of Plato’s alleged call to save the phenomena. Plato discovered the relevance of geometry for knowledge, “Let no one ignorant of geometry enter”, and thus became the founder of science. The history of the philosophy of science usually starts with Plato (Duhem; James Robert Brown). James Robert Brown claims that Plato’s discovery of abstract mathematical objects is the greatest discovery in the history of thought. It seems that the scientific segment of inquiry was neglected in the academy. You have edited and commented on the book of Iamblichus (245 – c. 325), *On the General Science of Mathematics*. Has this book received too little attention in the history of the philosophy of science?

That is a most interesting line of thought! It is actually Philip of Opus, Plato’s secretary, in the *Epinomis*, who first, I think, explicitly makes astronomy the highest subject of study, but he plainly feels that he is faithfully relaying his Master’s intentions. As for the *DCMS*, I do think that it deserves more attention than it has so far received, especially as it plainly contains a good deal of Aristotle’s *Protrepticus* on the same subject, and I hope that the present translation, with its excellent and copious introduction and notes (not by me!), will help towards that.

11. The history of Plato’s impact (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) includes not only all forms of Platonism and idealism, but also his critics from

Aristotle to Popper, Richard Rorty, and Feyerabend. Could we dispense with Plato's epistemic foundationalism, which is also a central feature of Platonism, by promoting pluralist-relativist views and beliefs?

Well, my view of Plato is that he himself, in the Academy, encouraged an open-ended approach to philosophical questions, though I would also accept Lloyd Gerson's formulation that the range of acceptable doctrinal positions in the original Academy was circumscribed by the five negative principles of 'anti-materialism, anti-mechanism, anti-nominalism, anti-relativism, and anti-scepticism'. This would presumably exclude 'pluralist-relativist views and beliefs', while allowing for a considerable range of views. And yet, in opposition to the generally dogmatic direction taken by later Platonists, beginning with Xenocrates, we do have the phenomenon of the sceptical New Academy, initiated by Arcesilaus, which reverts to what Arcesilaus saw as the Socratic roots of the whole movement, and which continued for some two hundred years – and is certainly accepted by such a figure as Plutarch as an integral part of the Academic tradition.

12. Plato had become acquainted with the Pythagorean concept of a community of study and life in southern Italy, was enthusiastic about it, and decided to found his own academy in 377 BC. In the course of history, the academy underwent many transformations and crises. Many prominent Platonists (Ammonius Saccas, Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus) were not members of the Academy. The Academy reached a renewed flourishing only under Plutarch of Athens and Proclus. Unfortunately, Emperor Justinian I closed the Academy in 529, which was formally its end. The history of its impact continued. Which of the Neoplatonists remains your favorite, or which reached the highest level of originality?

Well, I suppose, when all is weighed up, my favorite Platonist would have to be Plotinus, for his remarkable degree of originality and insight into basic issues, while maintaining a strict loyalty to Plato – though I did begin my exploration of the Platonic tradition with the rather exotic figure of the Syrian philosopher Iamblichus of Chalcis, on whom I did my doctoral dissertation.

As to the actual Academy, though, despite the belief of the late Platonists of the Athenian School that their institution was the continuation of the original Academy, the fact seems to be that that entity in fact ceased to exist with Philo of Larisa, the predecessor of Antiochus of Ascalon, when he had to flee from Athens in face of the onslaught of Mithridates in 88 BCE. The Academy became deserted, Antiochus later setting up his school in the center of town, and it never re-opened. Platonism, however, remained a coherent tradition, and there was always a Platonic school in Athens of some sort, until Justinian finally closed it down, as you say.

13. If we read the autobiography of John Dewey, *From Absolutism to Experimentalism*, published in 1930 when Dewey was 70 years old, we will be surprised by the fact that he proposed returning to Plato: “Nothing could be more helpful to present philosophizing than a ‘Back to Plato’ movement” (LW.5.154). Dewey claims that in Plato’s philosophy, the concept of freedom and creativity is primarily positive: Dewey defines freedom as the “power to frame purposes and to execute or carry into effect purposes so framed. Such freedom is in turn identical with self-control”. We encounter such a model of freedom in Plato’s philosophy defined *via negationis*: “Plato once defined a slave as the person who executes the purposes of another, and, as has just been said, a person is also a slave who is enslaved to his own blind desires.” This quote is in Dewey’s late work *Experience and Education*, cap. 7 (1938). Have we become slaves of hedonism and consumerism nowadays in states with highly developed democracies, which Plato criticized *expressis verbis*?

Yes, that is very much what I am maintaining in my 2007 pamphlet, ‘Platonism and the World Crisis’-- that Plato has much to teach us in the area of the structuring of the state and society as a whole – at many points in his works, but most especially in his last work, *The Laws*, where he lays it down as a guiding principle of the state that everyone should be granted a basic allotment (which in modern terms would translate into a guaranteed basic income), and no one should be permitted to earn more than five times this basic income – which would greatly distress our modern captains of industry, top medical consultants, footballers and others. Entrepreneurs

and inventors would be greatly honored – with laurel wreaths, and perhaps celebratory dinners – but they would have to forgo their untold millions! Plato also felt that education should unashamedly promote the moral values of self-control, cooperation, and the development of the mind and critical thinking, rather than simply training people to fit into society like cogs in a vast machine. None of this seems to constitute any part of mainline political thinking these days – even when we are faced with the dire consequences of uncontrolled and manic ‘growth’.

14. The American Platonist Allan Bloom wrote the book *The Closing of the American Mind* in 1987. In Bloom’s estimation, relativism is a feature of modern American liberal philosophy that has undermined Platonic-Socratic teaching. Closed societies of academics publishing journals and quoting each other are the result of the closed mind neglecting its tradition. Bloom highlights that in the 19th century, an important characteristic of European universities was the practical search for truth, which was set up as an educational ideal. After the ‘68 movement, the promotion of relativism and the denial of traditional values has become the guiding principle of our education. What is your opinion on these complex issues?

Yes, I’m afraid that would be my observation about the prevailing state of affairs in the Anglo-American and Irish university systems – with the proviso that things would not be so bad in departments of Classics, where I have spent my academic career, as in Philosophy departments, where any suggestion that one’s aim in research and teaching was a search for truth would be regarded as very quaint indeed, and not conducive to promotion. That would be a natural spin-off, I should say, of the ‘logical positivist’ or ‘linguistic-analytical’ mind-set – which indeed I was brought up on in Oxford in the late 1950s. It so happens that our Centre for the Study of the Platonic Tradition in Trinity College is formally attached to the Department of Philosophy, but it is barely tolerated. People seriously interested in the search for truth would tend to turn rather to such extra-university entities as the School of Philosophy and Economic Science, or the Prometheus Trust in England, both of which I am glad to support.

15. You recently published a beautiful book on philosophy of tourism together with Marie-Elise Zovko. In your essay, you emphasize that academic tourism is a legacy of the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition. Thanks to his travels, Plato gained many new insights and got to know different cultures. Augustine, for example, claims in *The City of God* that Plato did not consider Socratic instruction sufficient, but in order to bring philosophy to perfection, undertook the longest journeys, including to Egypt, in order to acquire knowledge of the treasures of their wisdom. In Nietzsche's judgement, this has led to the anti-Hellenic development of philosophy: Concepts (*eidē*) have become mummies („Man hat teuer dafür bezahlt, dass dieser Athener bei den Ägyptern in die Schule ging“).

I think that Nietzsche is perhaps being a little hard on Plato here. He never, I think abandoned the Socratic method of enquiry, but he was also plainly in search of 'ancient wisdom', which he believed to reside with the priests of Egypt and the Magi of Persia. Mainly, he seems to have felt that one could attain to a vision of 'the Good', or something like 'the Theory of Everything', by a protracted study of the various branches of mathematics, followed by a dialectical examination of their first principles, which would in due course lead to a sort of synoptical vision of the truth of things, and this would in turn enable one to order the material world rationally and beneficially. This may be a rather optimistic vision, but it is hardly a 'mummification' of the Socratic method.