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Leiden
The Netherlands

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Haas, F.A.J. de; Dillon, J.; Zovko, M.-É.

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FRANS A.J. DE HAAS

Thinking about Thought

An inquiry into the life of Platonism

Léon Robin, the famous Plato scholar, once wrote: „Aristotle sent us on the way of a Neoplatonic interpretation of his master’s philosophy“.¹ This statement raises numerous questions about the relationship between Plato, Aristotle, and Neoplatonism. Was Aristotle a Platonist whose intelligent interpretation of Plato rightly became influential in later times?² Did Neoplatonists really listen to Aristotle, or did they put him into their service if they couldn’t ignore him? Alternatively, was Aristotle an anti-Platonist who shook the foundations of Platonism, and thereby provoked a series of anti-Aristotelian invectives?

These questions reach far beyond registering the doctrinal differences between Plato and Aristotle. Indeed, ‚Platonism‘ turns out to be a very slippery term.³ Despite various heroic attempts to characterize Platonism at large it has not seemed possible to come up with as much as three specific doctrines to which all people that called themselves Platonists would subscribe.⁴ The separate existence of Forms, still prominent in our handbooks as a landmark of Platonism, was soon replaced by other conceptions of their existence. The soul is such a disputed area that it is difficult to find three Platonists who had exactly the same theory of the soul. But if it is true that so many divergent opinions can be subsumed under the term ‚Platonism‘ one begins to wonder whether the term has any definite content at all. Therefore a recent volume on ‚Plato and Platonisms‘ renounces any attempt give the term any other definite meaning than as a pointer to „an inexhaustible mine of possible trajectories each of which helps us to see the richness of those great Platonic texts, of which the dialogues are undoubtedly the primary exemplars, in new ways and from unexpected angles“.⁵

- 1 „Aristote nous a mis sur la voie d’une interprétation néoplatonicienne de la philosophie de son maître.“ L. Robin, *La théorie platonicienne des Idées et des Nombres d’après Aristote*, Paris (1908), p. 600.
- 2 See e. g. Findlay (1978), esp. Ch. 7 The Influence and Worth of Platonism, pp. 205-9.
- 3 Robin *o.c.* 7-8 avoids this problem by stipulating that in his book ‚Platonisme‘ refers to Aristotle’s conception of Plato’s philosophy as preserved in Aristotle’s writings, without comparing this to the dialogues or other sources of Plato’s doctrine.
- 4 See Cherniss (1962) 72-85 for a concise argument to this effect, including characteristic criticism of Aristotle’s abuse of the freedom of interpretation that the Academy allowed.
- 5 See Korrigan and Turner (2007) 1-5, esp. p. 5.

Part of the problem is that it would be too easy to say that Platonism is the philosophy described in Plato's dialogues. Together the dialogues do not give us many clear-cut doctrines that amount to a well-defined philosophical system – which probably was Plato's point in writing dialogues to begin with. Surely one of the purposes of the dialogue form is to constitute an invitation to the readers to step *into* the discussion, not to learn any doctrine by heart.⁶ Moreover, if Platonism were restricted to the dialogues we would end up removing lots of famous Platonists from our history of 'Platonism'. Many of them adhere to doctrines Plato either never mentions or would probably have rejected out of hand.

Heinrich Dörrie, in the introduction to the monumental volumes of *Der Platonismus in der Antike*, adopted a practical solution for our problem.⁷ For him, Platonists were people who, from the first century BC onwards, started to call themselves *Platonikoi* or *Platonici*. By that time the original name of *Akadēmaikoi* had become unusable because of its associations with the skepticism which Arcesilaus introduced into the Academy about 80 years after Plato's death. This definition of Platonism allows Dörrie and Baltes to describe *Bausteine*, building blocks, of Platonism: more or less isolated sets of texts and doctrines which were held in different combinations by particular Platonists from the first century BC onwards. They also formulated 30 doctrines of Platonism.⁸ Although this looks very systematical, the description of each of these doctrines shows an astonishing amount of variation in their historical implementation. But amidst the variation Dörrie sees a single point of reference: the top of the pyramid that represents Platonism is the existence of a highest being⁹ and a highest kind of knowledge, both of which are themselves beyond description strictly speaking. The many routes that lead to the top of the pyramid represent the variety of Platonic thought.

Baltes has shown himself less convinced that Plato's philosophy is impossible to systematize, if only because Plato's pupils and successors did precisely that.¹⁰ However, Plato's successors had widely divergent views on central issues of Plato's thought, such as the existence and character of the Forms. Moreover, it has been argued that among the successors Aristotle showed himself more open to a spirit of free debate and research than Speusippus and Xenocrates did, and the latter were the official successors to Plato as head of the Athenian school.¹¹

6 See e. g. Griswold (1988); Szlezák (1993); Frede (1992); Gill and McCabe (1996); Kahn (1997).

7 Dörrie and Baltes (1987), vol. 1, 3-7.

8 Dörrie and Baltes *o.c.* 16-32.

9 Variation applies to this tenet, too, since in later Platonism the highest principle is no longer conceived as a 'being' at all.

10 See Baltes (1992), repr. in Hüffmeier, Lakmann and Vorwerk (1999), Ch. 11: Baltes identifies 5 dogmas that can all be derived from the immortality of the soul: 1. the freedom of the soul; 2. the 'eternity' of the world; 3. the transmigration of souls; 4. the degrees of reality; 5. the metaphysical place of the Forms (p. 234).

11 See Karamanolis (2006) Appendix I: The Platonism of Aristotle and of the Early Peripatetics, pp. 331-6: a number of early Peripatetics were regarded (and probably regarded themselves) as continuing a constant search for the truth in Plato's spirit.

According to Baltes, the variety of doctrines should not be exaggerated given the unifying power of the interpretation of the dialogues which continued in the Platonic schools – even though only a small selection of dialogues (or even only a few core passages in these dialogues) attracted the interest of later Platonists.¹² It is clear that Baltes seeks to close the gap that opened up between Plato and his pupils and successors when the latter started to systematize what the former chose to leave open for debate. Baltes is right to stress that systematization served a good purpose: to make Platonism teachable to the many, to the less gifted, or to those who simply did not have the time to spend years on reading all the dialogues.¹³

Despite its inherent difficulties, the Dörrie/Baltes approach to Platonism has turned out to be impressively successful in classifying Platonic doctrines and charting the development of Platonic debates. However, focused as it is on delineating a set of core doctrines, this approach is ill-placed to answer the question *why* Platonism became so manifold in the first place, especially on the assumption that Platonists never gave up on a set of core doctrines.

Recently, Lloyd Gerson has approached the problem from a different angle. In a book with the challenging title *Aristotle and other Platonists* he has presented the following seven points by way of a schematic compendium of the main elements of Platonism according to those who believed that Aristotle's writings were in harmony with Platonism:¹⁴

1. the universe has a systematic unity
2. the systematic unity is an explanatory hierarchy
3. the divine constitutes an irreducible explanatory category
4. the psychological constitutes an irreducible explanatory category
5. persons belong to the systematic hierarchy and personal happiness consists in achieving a lost position within the hierarchy
6. moral and aesthetic valuation follows the hierarchy
7. the epistemological order is included within the metaphysical order

Starting from this compendium of Platonism Gerson argues that in all areas of philosophy Aristotle, when interpreted with an open mind, is much closer to Plato than we usually care to think – and Platonism much closer to Aristotle than we usually care to think. By and large, Gerson's interpretation of Aristotle (which in itself should make historians of philosophy think twice about both Plato and Aristotle) tends to support and justify the late ancient project of 'harmonization' of Plato and Aristotle.¹⁵

12 Baltes *o.c.* 244.

13 *O.c.* p. 246.

14 Gerson (2005) 32-34; for a critical review of this book see D. Baltzly in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (2005), at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/2005/2005-11-17.html>. Also House (1999) has stressed the thoroughly Platonic nature of Aristotle's so-called criticisms of Plato.

15 The harmonization between Plato and Aristotle is to be evaluated against the background of a more general tendency, in the first centuries AD, to regard the project of philosophy at large as

Of course, one might object against this bold proposal that such general statements, simply in virtue of their generality, will cover even contradictory theories – and render the term ‚Platonism‘ void again. In addition, scholarly opinions differ widely on the question whether any real harmonization is at stake here. Over and against Gerson’s view we have e. g. the recent work by Riccardo Chiaradonna on Plotinus’ criticism of Aristotle’s categories and physics,¹⁶ and George Karamanolis’ book *Plato and Aristotle in Agreement?*¹⁷ They argue with various degrees of success that Platonists deeply disagreed with Aristotle on many counts, and provided devastating criticisms of all that was dear to Aristotle. Often the alleged ‚harmonization‘, they claim, is nothing but pillaging the remains to elucidate a detail in Platonism here and there, where Plato chose not to enlighten us.¹⁸ This especially applies to logic and, to a more moderate extent, to physics.

Elsewhere I have defended the view that at least in Plotinus fierce criticism of Aristotelian doctrine (which is not the same as Aristotle’s doctrine) fruitfully coexists with a strategy of developing a novel metaphysical and physical theory which assimilates more Aristotelian doctrine than meets the eye.¹⁹ Moreover, it seems likely that in *Enn.* VI.1 Plotinus argues against an interpretation of the *Categories* which (as far as our sources go) no one ever defended, though several scholars have interpreted it as a direct attack on Aristotle.²⁰ Perhaps the black-and-white of anti-aristotelianism and anti-platonism had better give way to a more colourful, dynamic view of the Platonic philosophical enterprise. Why pursue the point that a Platonist cannot accept Aristotelian doctrine – if not even a famous Aristotelian like Alexander of Aphrodisias did?²¹ More interesting, it seems to me, are the questions (1) how can we explain the elusive character of Platonism, and at the same time understand (2) why Platonism was so successful that it steadily rose to domination in Western philosophy since the beginning of the Christian era. The two questions seem to be intimately related. By keeping a (more or less) open mind, in reverence for the free and non-dogmatic spirit of the philosophical discussions that took place in the early Academy, late Platonists, too, continued to respond to philosophical challenges, old and new. Perhaps I am allowed for a moment to speculate in an evolutionary vein that this attitude gave them an

various more or less successful attempts at understanding a single truth, see De Haas (2003) 242-70, esp. 256. It seems to me that those who let ‚Platonism‘ start in the first century BC label as particularly ‚Platonic‘ a tendency that characterized all schools of thought from that period onwards.

16 See e. g. Chiaradonna (1998), Chiaradonna (2002), following Isnardi Parente (1994); cf. also the studies collected in M. Dixsaut (ed.), *Contre Platon 1: Le platonisme dévoilé*, Paris: Vrin, 1993; Natali, C., and S. Maso (eds), *Antiaristotelismo*, Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1999.

17 Karamanolis (2006).

18 The same approach is suggested by the title though not apparent from the content of Blumenthal (1972) entitled ‚Plotinus’ Psychology: Aristotle in the Service of Platonism‘; cf. Whittaker (1987), esp. 110-114.

19 De Haas (2001).

20 De Haas (2004).

21 On the same questions concerning Aristotle and Aristotelianism see e. g. Sharples (2001).

adaptive edge over their more dogmatic contemporaries, an advantage that served the Platonic species well.

It will be clear that this strength of Platonism should be added to other factors that furthered its success.²² Plato's dialogues are of startling literary quality and are a joy to read even today. They combine depth of thought with a many-layered structure that allows all readers to find something of their liking – if only by underdetermination. Nearly every aspect of human life and every philosophical problem receives thoughtful consideration somewhere, and there is a shining passage for every occasion. Surely, these qualities of the textual basis of Platonism helped attract new aspiring Platonists. Nevertheless, it seems to me, the ability of a philosophical school of thought to meet the questions and challenges of every new era, are not only a further sign of its strength but a necessary requisite for survival.

Let me outline more clearly the position I would like to defend in this paper. I hope to show that despite systematization, and despite the polemical rhetoric against other philosophical schools, many Platonists displayed a striking ability to open up to new lines of argument from whatever origin, and remained willing to revise their views when necessary. In my view, this ability explains at once the manifold character of Platonism and its success.

Within the confines of this paper I can only describe a single episode from the life of Platonism to corroborate my point: the famous confrontation between Porphyry, Plotinus and Amelius on the subject of the location of the intelligible Forms. This well-documented confrontation, which Porphyry described in his *Life of Plotinus*, reveals how Aristotelianism played a constitutive role in providing Platonists with answers to a traditional set of Platonic problems.²³ More generally, this confrontation is a paradigm of the characteristic openness of a leading Platonist (Plotinus) to new arguments and insights from a different origin (Aristotle). This openness allows him to solve a long-standing Platonic problem (where are the Forms), and to do it in such a way that he is able to persuade a Platonist from a rival school (Porphyry, pupil of Longinus) to join him. Here, I suggest, we see most clearly how the manifold character of a Platonism that welcomes different strands of thought goes hand in hand with expansion and success. This openness allowed not only Peripatetic arguments to contribute to Platonism, but also Stoic and Epicurean ones, as well as various forms of religious experience.

I should add one proviso: it may be that the hagiographic character of Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*, which exhibits genre-dependent factors such as the influence of the *apophthegmata* literature, gives our story the flavour of an anecdote which cannot carry the weight of a historical reconstruction. However, the historical facts of the matter adduced in modern scholarly literature tend to support rather than contradict Porphyry's portrayal

22 I am grateful to the participants of the Hvar conference who stressed the inherent qualities of Plato's texts as an important explanation for the continuing interest in his philosophy.

23 This debate has been studied by e. g. Armstrong (1960); Dillon (1969); Dörrie and Baltes (1993) Baustein 89.4-7 with commentary pp. 294-296; Dörrie and Baltes (1998) Baustein 128.4 with commentary pp. 273-277, and Baustein 131 with commentary pp. 312-336; Brisson e. a. (1992) 278-281, 289-291. As far as I know, nobody has used the debate to assess the character of Platonism.

of the episode in the *Life of Plotinus*. And if Porphyry's stylized story so clearly supports my general point about Platonism, one might even begin to suspect that Porphyry himself recognized and valued the virtues of Platonism which I intend to highlight here.

Stage 1: Longinus and Porphyry

Our story starts with Longinus (ca. 212-272 AD), a well-known scholar and philosopher in the third century BC.²⁴ According to Plotinus' famous statement Longinus was a respectable philologist, but not an original philosopher like himself.²⁵ What we know of his scholarly writings on e. g. Homer, rhetoric, lexicography, etymology and other subjects seems to corroborate this impression. In a letter partially quoted in *Vita Plotini* 20, Porphyry pictures Longinus as having an interest in procuring reliable copies of Plotinus' writings – out of interest for Plotinus's style rather than his philosophical convictions.²⁶ Longinus shows himself sadly aware that Porphyry is no longer interested in his own views after spending time with Plotinus.

Concerning Longinus' philosophical views we are best informed about the theory of Forms: Longinus defended a view akin to that of the 'Middle-Platonist' philosopher Atticus (2nd half 2nd century AD),²⁷ to the effect that the Forms existed outside the divine mind on a lower level. This view was one of the solutions that arose from a debate concerning a number of passages in Plato's *Timaeus* on which Platonists exercised a considerable amount of scholarly acumen. In that dialogue Timaeus discusses the generation of the universe by a Demiurge or craftsman who used a model, in the following words:

So whenever the craftsman *looks at what is always changeless* and, using a thing of that kind as his model, reproduces its form and character, then, of necessity, all that he so completes is beautiful. (*Tim.* 28a6-b1, tr. Zeyl)

Which of the two models did the maker use when he fashioned it? Was it the one that does not change and stays the same, or the one that has come to be? Well, if this world of ours is beautiful and its craftsman good, then clearly *he looked at the eternal model*. (*Tim.* 28c6-29a2, tr. Zeyl)

24 For an excellent study of Longinus see Männlein-Robert (2001), esp. 139-250 (Longin, Porphyrios und der Plotinkreis) from which I have drawn for this paragraph. See also Brisson and Patillon (1994), Brisson and Patillon (1998).

25 Cf. *Vita Plotini* 14, 18-20. For the various meanings of the opposition *philologus /philosophos* in this context see Pépin (1992).

26 Männlein-Robert (2001) 152-3 dates the letter in 270-272 AD, after Plotinus' death, when Porphyry lived in Lilybaeum on Sicily.

27 Cf. Dillon (1977) 247-258. See further Procl. in *Tim.* I 431,14-31 (= Dörrie/Baltes Band 5, Bausteine 131.6, comments 323-329).

Now why did he who framed this whole universe of becoming frame it? Let us state the reason why: he was good, and one who is good can never become jealous of anything. And so, being free of jealousy, *he wanted everything to become as much like himself as was possible.* (*Tim.* 29d6-e3, tr. Zeyl)

Rather, let us lay it down that the universe resembles more closely than anything that Living Thing of which all other living things are parts, both individually and by kinds. For *that Living Thing comprehends within itself all intelligible living things*, just as our world is made up of us and all the other visible creatures. Since the god wanted nothing more than to make the world like the best of the intelligible things, complete in every way, he made it a single visible living thing, which contains within itself all the living things whose nature it is to share its kind. (*Tim.* 30c2-31a1, tr. Zeyl)

And so he *determined (dienoêthê)* that the living thing he was making [*i. e.* the universe] should possess the kinds (*ideas*) of living things of the same character and numbers as *those which intellect perceived* existing within the real Living Thing. Now, there are four of these kinds: first, the heavenly race of the gods; next, the kind that has wings and travels through the air; third, the kind that lives in water; and fourth, the kind that has feet and lives on land. (*Tim.* 39e7-40a2, tr. Zeyl modified)

The model is constituted by the ‚Living Being‘ (*zôion*), which is how Timaeus describes the realm of Forms as an organic unity. Now if the craftsman ‚looks‘ at this model, it appears to be outside of him, be it prior or posterior to him. Or one might explain this looking as an inward glance into his own mind, esp. if it is his own intellect which perceives the kinds and numbers of living things in the model. This interpretation might gain support from the third passage which seems to identify the model with the craftsman, and this passage may even be used to blur the distinction between model and craftsman altogether so as to leave only a distinction between a formal and a creative aspect of the same principle. Interestingly, the word *ideas* in the last text is immediately cashed out in terms of four general kinds of living being, not in terms of Forms as the tradition would do. Finally, the considerations of the craftsman suggest that his intellectual activities are not limited to perceiving the model, but also comprise deliberation about how to achieve the best possible result. If so, this deliberating mind can decide to focus on an intelligible model – outside of itself, or within itself? Or do the craftsman’s thoughts about the model constitute a representation of it which is within himself, whereas the model as such remains outside, as the cause of that representation? The tradition was to pursue all of these possibilities and more. In this context we need only a few of the options.

Middle Platonists had commonly identified the Forms with the thoughts of the divine mind of the craftsman, which they considered as the highest principle.²⁸ According to

28 See the classic paper by Rich (1954), with the sobering comments in Dillon (1993) 94-5, 103, recalling the important precedent of Alcinoüs *Epit.* ch. 9-10 for this doctrine.

Proclus, however, Longinus claimed that the Forms existed outside the divine mind, and posterior to it.²⁹ It is clear that Longinus always stood by this view, which he knew to be at variance with Plotinus, both when Porphyry was studying with him, and afterwards when Porphyry had left for Plotinus.³⁰ Hence, we may safely infer that Porphyry came to Rome with (a variety of) Longinus' position in mind on this issue. Plotinus gave a new direction to this debate. He developed an argument to the effect that the Forms are the thoughts of the divine Intellect which is only the second of the three hypostases that make up his hierarchy of reality, One-Intellect-Soul. Through a number of treatises we are able to follow how he developed this position.

Stage 2: Plotinus before Porphyry's arrival

Already before Porphyry arrived in Rome, Plotinus had gradually been distancing himself from the Middle Platonist discussion. In several treatises he had already touched upon this and related problems. In V.9, the fifth treatise according to Porphyry's chronological order,³¹ we read:

We must consider the nature of this Intellect, which our reasoning tells us is the genuine reality and true substance, when we have first confirmed by following a different course that something of the sort must exist. It is perhaps ridiculous to enquire whether there is intellect in the world; though there are, it may be, people who would dispute even this. But it is more disputable if it is the sort of intellect we say it is, and if it is a *separate* one, and if it is the *real beings* and if *the nature of the Forms is there*: this is our present subject.

We certainly see that all the things that are said to exist are compounds, and not a single one of them is simple; [this applies to] each and every work of art, and all things compounded by nature. (V.9 [5] 3, 1-11, tr. Armstrong, my italics)

This passage confirms that Plotinus was well aware of the peculiar nature of his notion of the divine Intellect compared to earlier theories. His Intellect is separate, not an integral part of any Soul or compound living being. This separate intellect is where the Forms are; they do not exist outside it.³² This Intellect gives wisdom to the soul,³³ so that it relates to the soul as a craftsman. The relation between intellect and soul becomes clear from the following considerations:

29 Cf. Procl. *In Tim.* I 322, 18-26.

30 Cf. Porph. *Vita Plotini* 19, 34-42.

31 For this treatise in general see Vorwerk (2001).

32 Cf. *Enn.* V.9 [5] 5, 13-16, 24-29 „the real beings are neither before it nor after it“; 8, 1-7; 9,3-8 „this Intellect must be an intelligible universe, which Plato says exists in ,the absolute living being' (*Tim.* 39e8).

33 *Enn.* V.9 [5] 2, 20-22.

And then again you will enquire whether the soul is one of the simple entities, or whether there is something in it like matter and something like form, the intellect in it, one intellect being like the shape of the bronze, and the other like the man who makes the shape in the bronze.

And one will transfer these same observations to the whole universe, and will ascend there also to Intellect and suppose it to be the true maker and craftsman, and will say that the underlying matter receives the Forms, and part of it becomes fire, and part water, and part air and earth, but that these Forms come from another: and this other is soul; then again that soul gives to the four elements the form of the universe, but Intellect provides it with the forming principles, as in the souls of artists the forming principles for their activities come from their arts; and that one intellect is like the form of the soul, the one which pertains to its shape, but the other is the one which provides the shape, like the maker of the statue in whom everything that he gives exists. (V.9 [5] 3, 20-35, tr. Armstrong)

On closer inspection there appear to be two levels of intellect. Intellect which is the forming principle of a soul is the product of the craftsman's intellect which provides it with wisdom, in the same way as the soul of the artist receives its forming principles from the art.³⁴ This text suggests that Plotinus identified the divine craftsman of the *Timaeus* with the soul, and that he regarded the Intellect as the realm of Forms.

For our purposes it is important to draw attention to the Aristotelian terminology in these very passages which signal Plotinus's dissatisfaction with his predecessors. Both the notion that intellect operates separately from the body and the other functions of soul, and the matter/form distinction as applied to the soul are familiar from Aristotle's *De anima*, from whom Plotinus is known to have drawn extensively for his notion of Intellect.³⁵ In fact, the closest parallel to the previous text is to be found in Aristotle's tantalizing chapter 5 of *De anima* book III:

Since in all nature there is for each type *the matter* (that which is everything potentially), and another thing *the cause and maker* (*poiêtikê*), by making everything, like *craft* is related to matter, therefore it is necessary that these differences also obtain in the soul. And there is such an intellect by becoming everything, another by making everything, like a disposition, e. g. light. For in a sense light too makes colours that exist potentially into actual colours. This intellect is *separate* and impassive and unmixed, being essentially actuality. For the making part is always more honourable than the passive part and the principle more honourable than matter. (Aristotle *DA* III.5, 430a10-19, my translation)

Here we find the same matter/form distinction, and the same analogy between art and matter. We also find references to light, which recalls the analogies of the sun and the

34 For the arts see further V.9 [5] 11-12.

35 See e. g. Merlan (1963), Szlezák (1979). For the role of *Metaph.* Lambda, see below.

cave of Plato's *Republic*. To Alexander of Aphrodisias (ca. 200 AD), one of the sources that Plotinus used in his classes, this text meant the separation of a unique divine intellect from all human passive intellects which are somehow informed by it.³⁶ It is clear that the argument of Plotinus is close (though not identical) to Aristotle's in sense and wording. With the advantage of hindsight, it is tempting to suggest that Aristotle was wrestling, in the same terms, with the same problems that the *Timaeus* provided for Plotinus and his contemporaries.

The first chapter of *Enneads* III.9, Plotinus' 13th treatise, may serve to relate Plotinus' wider concerns with Intellect to the interpretation of *Timaeus* 39e7-9 (quoted above p. 147). Dillon has noted that this treatise shows all the signs of work-in-progress, a look into the kitchen of Platonism.³⁷ As such, it leaves considerable room for later Platonists, such as Iamblichus and Proclus, to take different positions on account of it. In Plotinus' paraphrase the *Timaeus* passage reads:

„Intellect,“ Plato says, „sees (*horai*) the Forms existing in (*enousas*) the real Living Thing“; then, he says, the Maker „planned (*dienoëthe*) that, what Intellect sees (*horai*) in the real Living Thing, this universe too should have.“ (*Enn.* III.9 [13] 1, 1-3; tr. Armstrong, modified)

The paraphrase suggests rather more clearly than Plato's text that an independent intellect sees the Forms (not just four main kinds of living beings), and that the craftsman – the word is not in Plato – plans to create what Intellect sees. In his searching comments Plotinus first explores the modalities of the distinction between thinking Intellect and its object of thought (*noëton*), the Living Thing. If the two are really separate the Intellect cannot but contemplate mere images that reside in itself. Since real separation was already ruled out in V.9 [5] 5, 9-10, it is not surprising that Plotinus conceives of the distinction as a theoretical one (*têi noësei*, III.9 [13] 1, 13), and identifies Intellect and its object. „For Plato does not say that what it sees is in something absolutely different, but in it, in that it has the intelligible object in itself“ (*ibid.* 13-14). The texts from the *Timaeus* quoted above do indeed lend themselves to this interpretation. Seeking out the verbs in Plato's text as a guide to the intelligible structure of the universe, Plotinus goes on to distinguish a unitary Intellect/object which exists (*enousas*), from the intellectual activity proceeding from it, which is the intellect that does the seeing (*horai*); this intellect in turn he distinguishes from a third intellect that resides in soul and is responsible for the deliberation (*dianoia*). It is a mere imitation of the transcendent Intellect, and concerned, among others, with the division and subsequent creation of the

36 Alex. *De anima* 88,17ff; *Mantissa* 106,19ff. The intricate fate of *DA* III.5 in late antiquity is well brought out by Gerson (2005) 152-172. For Plotinus' classes see Porph. *Vita Plotini* 14,10-14 with Goulet-Cazé (1992). For the extent of Plotinus' dependence on Alexander as opposed to Aristotle and other Peripatetics with regard to intellect theory see e. g. Armstrong (1960) and Hager (1964), with the sound criticism of Szlezák (1979) 135-143. On Alexander in general see Sharples (1987).

37 See Dillon (1969) 70. For a full survey of late ancient interpretations of Plotinus' seminal text see both Dillon (1969) and Dillon (1973).

four main kinds of living beings. Each of these intellects have the object of their activity in themselves.

Now there is nothing against [this solution]; the intelligible object is also an intellect at rest and in unity and quietness, but the nature of the intellect which sees that intellect which remains within itself is an activity proceeding from it, which sees that [static] intellect; and by seeing that intellect it is in a way the intellect of that intellect, because it thinks it; but that thinking intellect itself too is intelligent subject and intelligible object in a different way, by imitation. This, then, is that which „planned“ (*dienoêthê*) to make in this universe the four kinds of living creatures which it sees in the intelligible. Plato seems, nevertheless, to be making, obscurely, the intending principle (*to dianooumenon*) something other than those two. [...] This is the reason why [Plato] also says that the division belongs to the third and is in the third, because it „planned“, this – planning (*dianoia*) – is not the work of Intellect, but of Soul, which has a divided activity in a divided nature. (*Enn.* III.9 [13] 1, 15-24; 34-37, tr. Armstrong)

Needless to say, there is more Aristotelian material to be found in these considerations, stemming both from *De anima* and *Metaphysics* XII, the other main source for ancient analysis of thought. The distinction-cum-identification of subject and object of thought – for which *Phaedrus* 247c-e may be regarded as the Platonic locus classicus – and the phrase „one and the same but different in being“ are crucial to the doctrine of thinking in *DA* III.4-7,³⁸ and to Aristotle’s exploration of divine intellect in *Metaphysics* XII.7 and 9. Two short passages from Aristotle may suffice to make the point:

Thought is itself thinkable in exactly the same way as its objects are. For in the case of objects which involve no matter, what thinks and what is thought are identical; for speculative knowledge and its object are identical. (*DA* III.4, 430a2-5, tr. Smith *RevOT*)

And thought in itself deals with that which is best in itself, and that which is thought in the fullest sense with that which is best in the fullest sense. And thought thinks itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought and object of thought are the same. (*Metaph.* XII.7, 1072 b18-21, tr. Ross *RevOT*)

From the vocabulary of Aristotle’s texts alone it seems undeniable that Plotinus is supplementing the blanks in Plato’s text with an Aristotelian concept of intellect.³⁹ Of

38 Cf. the texts quoted below, with *DA* III.7, 431a1-2; *Metaph.* XII.9 contains a similar though not identical argument against the separation of intellect and its object as we found in Plotinus.

39 Within the confines of this paper it is possible nor necessary to elaborate on the ways in which Alexander of Aphrodisias developed this vocabulary; see n. 34.

course earlier Platonists used Aristotelian vocabulary in describing Platonic psychological doctrine. To my knowledge, however, there is no other conscious attempt to elucidate a Platonic crux by importing so much Aristotelian artillery as we have in the text of III.9 [13] 1 – and there is more to come. But first we turn to Porphyry, who entered the circle of Plotinus when the texts discussed above had already been written.

Stage 3: Porphyry's confrontation with Plotinus

For the description of the sequence of events from the moment Porphyry entered the school of Plotinus I can do no better than to quote Porphyry himself:

[Plotinus'] lectures were like conversations, and he was not quick to make clear to anybody the compelling logical coherence of his discourse. I, Porphyry, experienced something of the sort when I first heard him. The result was that I wrote against him in an attempt to show that the object of thought existed outside the intellect. He made Amelius read this essay to him, and when the reading was finished smiled and said, „You shall have the task of solving these difficulties, Amelius. He has fallen into them because he does not know what we hold.“ Amelius wrote a lengthy treatise *In Answer to Porphyry's Difficulties*; I replied to what he had written; Amelius answered my reply; and the third time I with difficulty understood the doctrine, changed my mind and wrote a recantation which I read in the meeting of the school. After this I believed in Plotinus's writings, and tried to rouse in the master himself the ambition to organise his doctrine and write it down more at length; and Amelius also stimulated his desire to write books. (Porph. *Vita Plotini* 18,6-23, tr. Armstrong)

It is interesting that the story is meant to be an illustration of Plotinus' readiness to discuss his views with those who did not grasp it immediately because he usually presented them in a less than perspicuous dialogical, not logical, format. Fortunately, Plotinus is more than willing to go over matters repeatedly until he has cleared the issue for the interlocutor – or rather, in this case at least, he arranges for his ‚assistant‘ Amelius to clear the issue.⁴⁰ An exchange of writings and presentations ensues. We know that Longinus, too, seized on the occasion to write a stern reply to Porphyry's recantation.⁴¹

Unfortunately, we only possess second-hand information about the details of Porphyry's position at some stage of this process of ‚conversion‘. Proclus records that Porphyry identified the hypercosmic soul as the demiurge, and the intellect of this soul as the Living Being itself, towards which the soul of the demiurge was completely directed, so

40 For Amelius see Brisson (1987).

41 See Porph. *Vita Plotini* 20, 90-97.

that his intellect serves as the model which the demiurge contemplates.⁴² To Proclus' rhetorical question „in which texts does Plotinus make the soul a craftsman?“⁴³ we might reply that this position can very well be deduced from V.9 [5] 3, 20-35 (quoted above). On Porphyry's interpretation, or so it seems, the craftsman's intellect is the realm of Forms to which the remainder of his soul was directed. In this way, Proclus comments, Porphyry „was under the impression“ of being in agreement with Plotinus. Indeed, this position sounds as, say, the halfway stage of Porphyry's struggle with Plotinus' teaching.

It is the more remarkable that (at least in Proclus' report) Porphyry's solution is phrased almost entirely in traditional Platonic terminology directly taken from the *Timaeus*, with hardly any Aristotelian flavour. If this is not entirely due to Proclus' own vocabulary, we might take it as an indication that Porphyry was not yet ready to absorb the full impact of the application of the Aristotelian analysis of thinking to the Platonic exegetical problem.

Stage 4: Plotinus after the confrontation with Porphyry

Apparently, the discussion with Porphyry put the problems of intellect in the focus of attention in Plotinus' circle. Among the treatises written during Porphyry's years with Plotinus we find V.6, the 24th treatise, entitled *On the fact that that which is beyond being does not think*. Plotinus employs the theoretical distinction between the thinking subject and its object again, but now in order to argue that the intellect cannot be the first principle even though it contemplates itself. For the act of thought will always allow at least the theoretical distinction between subject and object and hence be multiple instead of unitary:

There is a difference between one thing thinking another and something thinking itself; the latter goes further towards escaping being two.

The former wants to escape being two and think itself, but is less capable of it; for it has what it sees with itself, but none the less it is different from it. But the latter is not substantially distinct [from its object], but keeps company with itself and so sees itself. It becomes a pair, therefore, while remaining one. It thinks more genuinely, therefore, and thinks primarily, because the thinking principle must be one and two.

For if it is not one, that which thinks and that which is thought will be different – it would not therefore be the primary thinker, because if the thought it had was of something else it will not be the primary thinker because it does not have what it thinks as [thought] of itself, so that it does not think itself; or if it has what it thinks as itself, so that it may think authentically, the two will be one: it must therefore be one and a pair – but if it is, on the other hand, one and not

42 Porph. ap. Procl. *In Tim.* I.306,32-307,4.

43 Procl. *In Tim.* I.307,4-5.

two, it will have nothing to think: so that it will not even be a thinking principle. It must, then be simple and not simple. (V.6 [24] 1, 1-14, tr. Armstrong)⁴⁴

Finally, in V.5 [32], entitled *That the intelligibles are not outside the intellect* we find the most elaborate display of Plotinus' position. He employs all the arguments we saw earlier, and more. In exploring the structure of Intellect as a candidate for the position of first principle, and even in rejecting it as such, Plotinus employs the vocabulary and the arguments of *Metaphysics XII* throughout to reach a very Platonic result:

We have said, then, that the ascent must be made to a one, and this means truly one, but not one like all other things which are multiple and one by participation in a one – the One must be grasped that is not one by participation and is not as much many as one – and that the intelligible universe and Intellect are more one than all other things, and there is nothing nearer to the One itself, but all the same this is not the pure One. (*Enn.* V.5 [32] 4, 1-6, tr. Armstrong)

Conclusions

This reconstruction of an important episode in the life of Platonism is a clear witness to the dynamic character of Platonism, which, I submit, distinguished it from contemporary philosophical movements. Porphyry came to Plotinus with a rather literal interpretation of the *Timaeus*, phrased almost entirely in Platonic terms. He was given a rough time: Plotinus set Amelius onto him and a long exchange of arguments followed. Among the arguments that (Amelius and) Plotinus used to persuade him, as well in the treatises Plotinus had written on the subject, he found many arguments from a distinctively Aristotelian provenance. Many Aristotelian distinctions were presupposed and applied to the issue at hand: matter *vs.* form, actuality *vs.* potentiality, mind *vs.* object etc. Porphyry had to acknowledge that the new vocabulary helped solve the old Platonic problem of the location of the Forms and the interpretation of the *Timaeus*, and shed an entirely new light on thought itself. During his stay with Plotinus Porphyry witnessed how the new vocabulary was also instrumental, in Plotinus' own thought, to formulate why the Intellect should *not* be regarded as the *highest* principle, as Aristotle (and others) had claimed.

Indeed, one can imagine that from Porphyry's point of view his entrance in Plotinus' school provided him with ample reason to give the Aristotelian tradition a better look – perhaps he spent so much effort on Aristotelianism in his later career because he had been impressed by a Platonism that was more open to 'foreign' influences than he

44 Cf. Gerson *o.c.* 205-6. Cf. „If anything is the simplest of all, it will not possess thought of itself: for if it is to possess it, it will possess it by being multiple. It is not therefore thought, nor is there any thinking (*noësis*) about it.“ (V.3 [49] 13, 34-37)

might have thought at first. On the basis of this episode alone, it seems highly unlikely that Porphyry's interest in Aristotelianism was a sign of alienation from Plotinus, as some have claimed.⁴⁵

I submit that Platonism was so successful precisely for the reasons that appear from my case study of Porphyry entering the school of Plotinus. It shows how a leading Platonist performed four astonishing feats at the same time:

- [1] he addressed the standing problems of Platonism successfully;
- [2] he saw the potential of a thoroughly Aristotelian analysis of thought, despite the rivalry between Platonists and Aristotelians among his predecessors;
- [3] he incorporated this Aristotelian analysis into the fabric of his own thought, while adding some creative new insights of his own;
- [4] he thereby satisfied immediate philosophical needs, in this case Porphyry's – and his own.

If this case study is in any way representative of the life of Platonism – which I believe it is – this attitude may well explain the success of Platonism in the Western tradition, not least of its analysis of thought.

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45 E. g. Evangelidou (1988) 167, Saffrey (1992). For this issue see further De Haas (2001).

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