

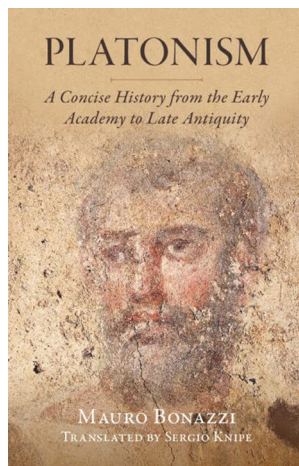
Book Review

Platonism: A Concise History from the Early Academy to Late Antiquity

Bonazzi (M.), Pp. xvi+233. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Cased, £30. ISBN: 978-1-009-25342-0.

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This short book undertakes the large task of showing how Platonism fared for the first thousand years of its existence. The book covers four main eras in four chapters: Plato's times, the Hellenistic era, the development of Platonic thought under the Roman Empire, and the Neoplatonists.

Bonazzi reminds us throughout that Plato was not the dogmatic founder of a school expecting fidelity to his teachings. It thus makes little sense to see one 'Platonism' but rather a whole bunch of Platonisms all assisting the great man's enterprise rather than

insisting on following his ideas to the letter. Running through this book is the constant tension between the dialogues as transmitted to us and the 'unwritten doctrines' (of the Monad and the Dyad, for example) which we hear of in Plato's successors but which Plato himself did not commit to writing. Can we be sure what Platonism was even before the Platonists got their philosophical hands on it?

The second chapter takes this theme further in looking at how Platonism encountered Scepticism. Plato was no stranger to sceptical thought – remember Socrates's dictum that he only knew his own ignorance and the aporetic conclusion to many of the dialogues. The imagery of the cave in the *Republic* should also alert us to the fact that (for Plato) full knowledge of the truth was not freely given without massive effort and would ultimately remain beyond our grasp. Different thinkers took the quest for truth in different directions, and Bonazzi spends a fair amount of space on Stoicism but much less on Epicureanism and Cynicism, even though Epicurean epistemology claimed to have solved the problem of knowledge which Plato had identified and the Cynic Diogenes of Sinope was clearly living what he saw as a Socratic life in accordance with nature: Juvenal later (13.122) described the Cynics as 'Stoics without tunics'. The splitting of the Platonic tradition and the tensions between the different schools of Scepticism, Platonism and Stoicism is well shown in the career and work of Antiochus of Ascalon, with whom this chapter closes.

The third chapter looks at Platonism in the Imperial Age and the competing influences of Pythagoreanism and Stoicism – as well as the influence of Aristotle in an age when philosophy became 'a commentary on authoritative texts' (p. 87), although this textual exegesis in no way inhibited the development of original thought. Platonism moved its focus towards theology and the three principles of God, the Forms and matter. 'Live according to nature' became 'assimilate oneself to God' (p. 101). There are some fascinating points here concerning the problems of Fate and determinism: some Platonists coined the idea of 'conditional fate' (rather like the Stoic Zeno who used this argument to a thieving slave who protested that he was fated to steal: 'and to get flogged' was his reply (Diogenes Laertius 7.23)). 'Pythagorizing Platonists' brought their own (mathematical) take on Platonic thought in general (and the *Timaeus* in particular) and sought to establish an 'ecumenical' theology which would create a single system out of the many paths by which men seek God.

The final chapter looks at Neoplatonism in the 3rd century AD. Plotinus seems to have united the first principle as Good and God and the One, although his concept of the One had already been contested in the 'third man argument' found in Plato's *Parmenides* which shows how a transcendent being cannot generate a multiplicity of *realia*. Bonazzi neatly summarises Plotinus' answer to this dilemma (pp. 140–142) and shows that the Forms (which were divine thoughts for the middle Platonists) were the object and the subject of divine cognition for Plotinus. The human soul remains a mystery: Iamblichus thought we are our souls and that our souls unite us with the world of Forms, but also that we are 'fallen souls' and that the aim of human life is to rediscover our true divine nature, to rid ourselves of passions and to 'be god' by the exercise of contemplative virtues.

The book ends with two appendices: one on Platonism and politics, looking at Cicero and Julian – but oddly not at the tyrannicide Brutus who was an adherent of Antiochus of Ascalon (see on this Sedley *JRS* 87 (1997)) – and one on Platonism and Christianity, showing how the tensions between these dominant world-views ended up in a philosophical rapprochement in thinkers such as Boethius. The book has a generous bibliography and a brief general index.

The book is not an easy read, and the translator clearly lacks a full idiomatic grasp of English, making what is already difficult unnecessarily so. Sentences ramble on and jargon (e.g. 'the eidetic paradigm' p. 108) is used without explanation. The book is not aimed at students unacquainted with the technical language of ancient philosophy, as is shown in a sentence such as: 'Longinus drew on the well-known Stoic theory of *lekta*, which entailed a distinction between the act of thinking and the propositional content of thought, which is self-subsistent' (p. 93). No native English speaker would have written sentences such as: 'is he (Antiochus) the last representative of the great Hellenistic season...?' (p. 66) or 'These are not trifle variations' (p. 9n.20) or the bizarre and misplaced use of 'too' in 'the very possibility of considering matter too to be a principle' (p. 94), and so on. The translator does not know that Anglophone scholars call L. Cornelius Sulla 'Sulla' while Italians call him 'Silla' – so here he is called 'Silla' three times in two pages (75–6). It is a great pity that such an important, stimulating and authoritative book has been let down by its publishers.

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