
From the Old Academy to Later Neo-Platonism: Studies in the History of Platonic Thought by Harold Tarrant

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Reviewed by
Andrew Smith
Platonic Centre, Trinity College Dublin
andrew.smith@ucd.ie

This volume, which is in the Variorum Collected Studies Series, contains 23 essays published by Harold Tarrant in various journals and books between 1979 and 1999. Tarrant is a distinguished contributor to the history of the Platonic tradition as it developed from the time of Plato through the various phases of the Platonic Academy until the last flowering of Greek philosophy and the closure of the Academy in the sixth century AD. He is a consummate interpreter of the intricate ways in which the work of Plato was read and understood over a period of 1000 years. It is an intriguing story, often documented by the most tenuous evidence, of a philosophical movement which may be traced through many changes of emphasis from metaphysical speculation to varying degrees of sceptical enquiry in the Hellenistic period and back again in the period of the early Roman Empire to renewed metaphysical and theological interests, becoming once again the dominant philosophical tradition that culminated in the Neoplatonism of Plotinus and Proclus. These essays neatly cover that ground and are divided into three sections:

- (1) Socrates, Plato and the Old Academy,
- (2) The Platonic Revival and the Second Century AD, and
- (3) Later Neoplatonism.

The first section contributes to our understanding of some basic and stimulating problems about Socrates and Plato himself. Is the portrait of Socrates as a midwife bringing to birth ideas in others but having no positive ideas of his own a genuine trait of the 'historic' Socrates or an interpretation by Plato? How is it feasible that proponents of pleasure as the goal of life (the Cyrenaics) and their

opponents at the other end of the scale (the Cynics) could both claim Socrates as their inspiration? Here Tarrant skillfully demonstrates that Plato himself may be seen in his written works to uphold both pro-hedonistic and anti-hedonistic viewpoints, whilst in reality falling between the two, just as Cyrenaics and Cynics also were not quite as black and white in their attitude to pleasure as their more extreme statements might suggest. In his essay on the composition of Plato's *Gorgias*, Tarrant argues that there was a first and then a revised edition of the work which represents a turning point in Plato's own attitude to pleasure as he became more interested in the thought of Pythagoras after his first visit to Sicily.

Tarrant is a keen observer of the ways in which Plato sought to communicate through different styles of dialogue and a changing mode of representing Socrates. The harsher, more abrasive Socrates of the early dialogues is gradually replaced by a more amenable figure, an indication that Plato wanted to make more apparent the difference between Socrates' style of philosophical enquiry and the point-scoring of the sophists.

Two studies [V, VI] examine the structure of the dialogues and attempt to analyze the method and effect of the purely dramatic dialogues (set out like a play with the names of each speaker in turn) compared with the narrative dialogues which allow for the complexity of an accompanying narrative which sets the scene and permits the author to 'comment' on the attitude of the speakers. Particularly intriguing here is the suggestion that the dramatic dialogues were originally intended for internal 'performance' in the school of Plato, where Plato would read them aloud himself and add narrative comments. The narrative dialogues, on the other hand, are intended for an external audience whose interpretation the author can to some extent control by his narrative framework.

Other themes which come up in this section include that of mature students. Plato, of course, in the *Republic*, deliberately reserved metaphysical instruction for students in their late years as he did not trust young students to act responsibly with such knowledge. But he could be equally dismissive of older students who could misbehave in the same way. Lastly, there is a balanced essay on the role of myth in the dialogues as an important form of discourse and communication.

In the second section, we have a number of closely argued articles on some key issues concerning the turning in Platonism of the first century BC away from the sceptical Academy to a more dogmatic Platonism and the gradual development of what we know as Middle Platonism. Tarrant makes a distinction in the latter between the early Middle Platonism of the first century AD with transitional figures like Plutarch and the Platonism of the second century with its greater interest in metaphysical principles, theology, and the life of the disembodied soul. Apart from Plutarch, the information we have about Platonists covered in this whole section is very fragmentary and their philosophical positions are highly nuanced but difficult to recover. I will pick out just a few of Tarrant's contributions.

The section begins with a careful and detailed examination of the epistemology of Philo of Larisa (early first century BC), a Platonist who, though adhering to a form of Academic scepticism, represents just the beginnings of a return to something more positive. A similar tendency to the more positive may be observed too in the Anonymous commentary on Plato's *Theaetetus*, which Tarrant persuasively places in the context of the renewed Platonism of the late first century BC and before Philo of Alexandria in the first century AD.

Another important text which, according to Tarrant, may be traced back to about the same period or slightly earlier is the so-called philosophical digression at 340a–345c in Plato's *Seventh Letter*. This digression, which is regarded as a later addition to the text—whether or not Plato is the author of the original letter—began, Tarrant argues, to be included widely in the Platonic text only later, since it seems to have been unknown to Philo of Alexandria and Plutarch.

Another indication of the movement from early Middle Platonism after Philo of Alexandria and Plutarch (in *De Iside*) is the disappearance of *λόγος* as a metaphysical principle. Tarrant neatly connects their use of *λόγος* as a structural principle, both transcendent and immanent, with what he calls the basic theory of 'transcended dualism' as seen in Eudorus of Alexandria (late first century BC), a theory which posits an ultimate principle, the One, above a dyad as constituent principles of the universe.

Yet another feature of this period is, according to Tarrant, a gradual return to the close reading of Platonic texts. He places the composition of the anonymous commentary on the *Theaetetus* (a

large fragment preserved in a papyrus of the second century AD) in the period of Augustus/Tiberius. And he can demonstrate how Taurus, a Platonist of the second century AD, was a very clear and sophisticated reader of Plato's text. The evidence comes largely from Aulus Gellius' reminiscences in his *Attic Nights* of his student days in Athens when he studied under Taurus. Tarrant shows that even where Gellius does not mention Taurus by name it is easy to identify his work from the more stumbling efforts of Gellius himself.

Section 3 contains an essay on 40 λόγοι by Zeno that Proclus mentions in his commentary on Plato's *Parmenides* as well as four articles on Olympiodorus, a Platonist active in Alexandria in the sixth century AD. Long after the closure of the Platonic Academy in Athens, the pagan philosophical schools continued to operate in Alexandria, perhaps because it was a more liberal setting or perhaps because they avoided the public utterance of ideas that might be construed as subversive of Christianity. Tarrant points out that Plato's *Gorgias* was deemed by Olympiodorus to be about the demiurge. This, to us, rather odd characterization of the dialogue is based on the concluding myth. But Olympiodorus' point is that the demiurge is seen as a structuring principle for virtue as lived out in the world. In a similar vein, Tarrant restores (from remarks in his *Gorgias* commentary) Olympiodorus' interpretation of Plato's *Republic* as primarily concerned with ethics, i.e., with 'political virtue'—'political' in the sense of constitutive of harmony between the three parts of the soul. And he notes that Olympiodorus curiously shows no interest in the central analogies of Sun, Line, and Cave, that section of the *Republic* which interested earlier Neoplatonists. Tarrant also restores Olympiodorus' reputation as a historian and, not least, as a logician, demonstrating that some of the apparent mistakes in his interpretation of Plato's arguments (in syllogistic form) can be traced to the mistakes of the student whose notes constitute our text of his commentaries: in one case, there is clearly a mistake not of copying out from notes but of mishearing a word in the lecture hall (hearing ἀδικοῦσι instead of ἀτυχοῦσι).

It is the latter kind of really detailed scholarship and argument combined with a stimulating general grasp of the development of ideas in their intellectual context which makes this collection such a pleasure to read and a most useful work of reference.