PLATO'S AUTHORITY AND THE FORMATION OF TEXTUAL COMMUNITIES

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It is widely agreed that, in the re-emergence of Platonism as a dogmatic school of phil-osophy following the demise of the sceptical academy, Plato's works came to have an authoritative status. This paper argues for a particular understanding of what that author-ity consists in and how it was acquired.

Plato's dialogues became authoritative works for Platonists not in a moment in the history of philosophy but through a process. We know the product in its culmination, but because it is a multifaceted process it is harder to say when and how it started. We know that its apotheosis – or apocolocyntosis, depending on your taste for Neoplatonism – is at hand when Proclus says at the beginning of the *Platonic Theology* that Plato's philosophy was revealed by beneficent higher beings. For those few who are able to discern its meaning, Plato's philosophy reveals the Intellect con-cealed within it, as well as the Being and Truth that exist simultaneously together in it.[1] Thus in Proclus' view, when the meaning of Plato's dialogue is unwrapped, we have no mere representation. Rather, we have the substantial trifecta of Intellect, Being, and Truth. This is perhaps why Proclus tells us that Plato's philosophy contains not merely theology – that is, a true *logos* about the gods – but the highest mystagogy.[2] Rather than simply *telling* us the truth, it *initiates* such souls as are capable of being liberated into the real mysteries. Those who genuinely cling to the blessed and happy life will participate in the culminating revelation of the mystery ceremony, but in a way that is stable and perfect in every way.[3] In short, Plato's philosophy saves us and secures an immediate vision of the divine. His authority is not merely epistemic but moral. That Plato said it is not merely a surety that (when interpreted correctly) it is true. It is also the most important thing for us to grasp, for Plato's philosophy is the pathway to salvation. Or so Proclus thinks. When a Platonist handles Plato's dia-logues with this level of veneration, we rightly describe him as subscribing to the idea that Plato's text is authoritative. How did this come about?

Recent literature on Middle Platonism or post-Hellenistic philosophy has sought to explain how Platonism again became a dogmatic school of philosophy, and much of this literature has raised the question of Plato's authority. *Something* clearly changed

[1] *Theol. Plat.* 1.5.8–10: τὸν ἐν αὐτοῖς κεκρυμμένον νοῦν καὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν τὴν ὁμοῦ τοῖς οὖσι συνυφεστῶσαν ('revealing the intellect hidden in them [sc. the divine beings who imparted Plato's philosophy to him] and the truth that exists simultaneously with these beings').

[2] Ibid. 1.5.18: τὴν περὶ αὐτῶν τῶν θείων μυσταγωγίαν ('an initiation into the rites of divinity itself'). The phrase is repeated again at 6.12, 24.12, and 25.27. It is not an idle thought or a casual simile.

[3] Ibid. 1.5.16–6.7.

after 88 B.C.E. and the disruption of the philosophical schools at Athens. In fact, many things changed. The hard question is 'Which changes really matter for the subsequent history of Platonism?' The suggestion of this paper is that if we want to isolate those specific changes that were pregnant with the possibilities of Platonism's future, we should look at the culmination of Plato's authority in Neoplatonism and work back. What changes occurred that would enable Plato's dialogues to become authoritative *in the way in which the Neoplatonists understood this authority*?

The crucial change, I argue, has to do with the identification of the Platonic *telos* and its promotion to a central place in the conception of Platonism. This reorientation to the Platonic dialogues initiated a process through which the dialogues could come to function as the basis of a 'textual community', a technical notion that I will refine further in what follows. The sort of authority that Plato's dialogues enjoyed in the Neoplatonic schools is that had by the text at the centre of such communities. So if we wish to understand the changes in the post-Hellenistic philosophy that were most significant for the future of Platonism, we should look at this notion of authority.

I. PLATO'S AUTHORITY CONSISTS IN MORE THAN HIS BEING RIGHT

David Sedley applied the term *auctoritas* to the kind of authority that Platonists came to attribute to Plato's works and noted that it expresses in Latin a syndrome of notions for which Greek had no single handy word: leadership, ownership, prestige, and validation.[4] Sedley had already explored the authority of the founders of the Hellenistic schools and the idea that their authority was subtly different from the *auctoritas* that Plato held for Platonists.[5] Boys-Stones then went on to investigate this thought in more detail.[6] Members of the Stoa might argue that the views that they advocated were consistent with those of Zeno, but quoting Zeno was not an argument for the *truth* of a view – only its right to be called a *Stoic* view. By contrast, Platonists regarded the fact that some statement, S, by Plato (when properly interpreted) means P as a good ground for regarding P as *true*. The genuine philosophical work consists in the task of figuring out *what Plato really meant*. There is no conceptual space for the additional step of asking whether this is really true.[7] This is why Boys-Stones understands Platonism – a movement that he claims arose only in the later first and second centuries

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[4] D. Sedley, 'Plato's *auctoritas* and the rebirth of the commentary tradition', in J. Barnes and M.T. Griffin (edd.), *Philosophia Togata II: Plato and Aristotle at Rome*, (Oxford, 1997), 110–29.

[5] D.N. Sedley, 'Philosophical allegiance in the Greco-Roman world', in J. Barnes and M.T. Griffin (edd.), *Philosophia Togata I* (Oxford, 1989), 97–119.

[6] G.R. Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy* (Oxford, 2001), 102–4.

[7] On the whole, I think that Boys-Stones is right about this. There are a few exceptions – just enough to prove the rule. So, consider the very concrete and specific question of the order of the planets. Proclus (*In Ti*. 3.59.32–63.31) recognizes that the Chaldean order differs from the Platonic order. He also wants to adopt the Chaldean one. In order to do this, he first argues that we cannot have a demonstration for either view, in spite of Ptolemy's best efforts. He adds that there is a reading of some passages from the *Oracles* that could suggest the Platonic order. Thus the Platonic reading is not obviously wrong, nor obviously in conflict with the divine revelation of the Oracles. He finally concludes in favour of the Chaldean order on the basis of a quotation from the Theurgist – '[an assertion] it would not be licit to remain unpersuaded by'. In any case, Proclus says, Plato's attention was not so much on the *spatial* order of the physical bodies that are the planets, but on the manner in which the Sun is linked with the Moon in the *order of procession*. These twists and turns nicely illustrate Proclus' implicit belief that if Plato wrote 'S' meaning P, then this is normally sufficient evidence for the truth of P.

C.E. – as the conjunction of two theses: that Plato's philosophy was dogmatic and that it was authoritative.

I think that this debate about the peculiar nature of Plato's *auctoritas* takes too narrow a view of what that authority consists in. Proclus' Platonism includes the claim that Plato's philosophy is authoritative and dogmatic in Boys-Stones's sense, but it is not limited to that. Authority in Boys-Stones's narrower sense does not include the sense of moral urgency for those souls who are able to discern the truth in Plato's philosophy – a notion that is captured but largely unanalysed in Sedley's wider notion of *auctoritas*. This philosophy is not merely true: it is the possibility of salvation. The works of Euclid would have had a similar authority to those of Plato in Boys-Stones's understanding of 'authority'. By the first century C.E., there would be an overwhelming presumption that any apparent mistake in a proof in Euclid is in fact a misunderstanding of Euclid rather than a real mistake.[8] But we do not have 'Euclidism' in the same way in which we have 'Platonism'. The nature of the truths to be found in Plato and how the apprehension of those truths *affects souls* matter. Boys-Stones's understanding of Plato's authority misses the moral urgency and soteriological character that we see at the end of the trajectory in Neoplatonism. If we want to see how the evolution of Plato's authority culminated in such a soteriological character, we need to start with something richer.

In his 1997 paper Sedley was, I think, aware of this in some sense because he explores the question of Plato's authority in the context of understanding the origins of the practice of writing commentaries. He thought that the earliest commentaries by Crantor took their impetus from the need that speakers of *koinē* Greek would have had for guidance in understanding Plato's Attic style. Implicit in this need is a classroom setting. Implicit in this, in turn, is the notion that it is worthwhile to spend one's time elucidating what Plato said in order that young men might better understand the dialogues.[9]

When we turn to Neoplatonism, this teaching dimension is clear. Many of the commentaries on Plato (and Aristotle) have their origins in lectures given to students. This is clearest in the fifth- and sixth-century commentaries that are explicitly described as notes from lectures.[10] None the less, even where there are questions about the existence of a school – perhaps in the case of Porphyry – we find works such as the surviving *Categories Commentary* in question and answer form. Simplicius had no live audience of students, but he wrote for the hypothetical audience he would have had.[11] Thus the

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[8] Consider what proved to be the most controversial point in the *Elements* – the fifth postulate on parallel lines. Ptolemy thought that Euclid was mistaken to regard this as a postulate and that instead a proof could be offered. There was no question that the claim was true – the only question was its status as a postulate.

[9] Sedley thinks of this linguistic impetus for the formation of the commentary tradition as complementing other explanations rather than supplanting them. So P. Hadot, 'Théologie, exégèse, révélation: écriture dans la philosophie grecque', in M. Tardieu (ed.), *Les Règles de l'interprétation* (Paris, 1987), 13–34, had argued that after 88 B.C.E. the living school traditions in Athens had perished and philosophy as an activity was now scattered around other cities. Absent the day-to-day interaction between Stoics and Academics within the philosophical traditions of Athens, it was natural for the isolated groups to turn their attentions to the texts of their founders – hence the writing of commentaries. P.-L. Donini, 'Testi e commenti, manuali e insegnamento: la forma sistematica e i metodi della filosofia in età postellenistica', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II.36.7 (1994), 5027–5100, supposed that the tradition of commenting on the works of Plato and Aristotle arose as Peripatetics and Platonists tried to codify a view of the school to compete with rivals, the Stoics and Epicureans.

[10] See M. Richard, '*Apo phônês*', *Byzantion* 20 (1950), 191–222.

[11] H. Baltussen, *Philosophy and Exegesis in Simplicius: The Methodology of a Commentator* (London, 2008), 202.

late antique Platonists did not merely think that Plato's philosophy was true, but also that it needed to be communicated. So Sedley was right when he said that the notion of *auctoritas* involved leadership: it is important to follow Plato and thus to follow one's teacher's account of Plato. Yet the kind of leadership is of a very different sort from that of the Hellenistic schools. *From* reading Zeno and Chrysippus, the aspiring Stoic learns that she must discipline her assent to presentations so that she assents only to those that are cognitive. It is not the case that *in* reading Zeno or Chrysippus she acquires this discipline. Contrast this with Proclus' picture of Plato as chief initiator into mysteries. One has the revelation of the god *in* the mystic initiation. The guidance that the aspiring Stoic receives from her leader is guidance to a destination – ὁμολόγια or agreement with nature – where the destination is independent of the experience of being guided. Platonic philosophy as mystagogy involves leadership of a very different sort.

Boys-Stones's own explanation for the emergence of Platonism – understood as the view that Plato's philosophy is dogmatic and authoritative – appeals to ideas developed in the Stoic school. He identifies the Stoics Cornutus and Chaeremon as authors who worked on the assumption that ancient myths preserve, together with extraneous accretions, remnants of primitive wisdom expressed in allegorical ways from a golden age in which people perceived the world with uncorrupted concepts.[12] These philosophers of the distant past occupied a better epistemic vantage point than we currently do because they had not been corrupted by too much technology and luxury. They thought that this primitive wisdom could be recovered by allegorical interpretation of ancient myths, cultic rites, and poetry. This notion of primitive wisdom was adopted by Plutarch of Chaeronea, Celsus, and Numenius. Numenius added to it the idea that Plato himself had already achieved a complete understanding of this ancient wisdom. Plato's philosophy was, in effect, 'a textbook of ancient wisdom, reconstructed, compiled and explained'.[13] The truth of Plato's philosophy was then guaranteed by its origins in an epistemic golden age.

Grant for the sake of argument that these Platonists believed, along with the Stoics, that there was such a thing as primitive wisdom whose truth was guaranteed by its origins in a superior epistemic vantage point. But a vantage point on what? The work by Cornutus that has come down to us is *A Cursory Examination of the Traditions of Greek Theology*. In it he uses etymological means to reveal Zeus and Hera as natural forces: Zeus as the sustaining cause and soul of the universe, Hera as the air. When the project of recovering primitive wisdom is transplanted to the Platonist context, Boys-Stones's examples are similarly theological. From the fragments of Plutarch's *On the Festival of the Images at Plataea* we get an allegory of Zeus and Hera in which they symbolize fire and the 'wet and windy nature'. In *On the Face of the Moon* (938F) Plutarch tells us, on the authority of 'ancient tradition' (παλαιὰ φήμη), that Artemis is to be identified with the Moon because she is virgin and sterile, but helpful to women in childbirth.

Theology is, of course, an important branch of knowledge in Stoic philosophy. But it is difficult to see the moral urgency behind attaining this particular sort of ancient wisdom. If one were trying to *understand* what is really important about Stoicism, a work on proper functions would be more to the point. If one were trying to *become* a Stoic, Epictetus' *Discourses* or Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* would offer better insights into the techniques of psychological self-transformation necessary to effect this change in

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[12] Boys-Stones (n. 6), 54.
[13] Ibid., 115.

one's outlook and responses. It is indeed true that the Stoic sage, in living in agreement with nature, lives in agreement with god, where the latter is understood in terms of fate or the sequence of causes and effects played out in each world cycle. But theological knowledge of the sort on offer in Cornutus' work seems to do little to facilitate this goal.

Of course, a Platonist such as Numenius, who shares this Stoic picture of primitive wisdom, would have had a different story about its source and nature. Rather than coming from a time when men in general did not suffer from the corrupted concepts to which we are now heirs, it came from Pythagoras. The gods that Numenius discusses are also very different from the natural forces allegorized in the Stoics. While the latter are immanent, Numenius' gods – at least some of them – are transcendent (and radically so). If Boys-Stones is right, then we can see why Platonists such as Plutarch, Celsus, and Numenius thought that Plato's philosophy contained ancient theological truths. We can also see that these theological truths may be rather different in their content from those recovered by Stoic allegorists. However, it is still a mystery why this theological knowledge should be regarded as one that it is urgent for us to recover, and thus why one should spend time composing commentaries to elucidate Plato's wisdom or attending lectures to hear about it.

II. TEXTUAL COMMUNITIES AND THE MIDDLE PLATONIC FOUNDATIONS FOR NEOPLATONISM

Let us step back and ask just what it is that we are seeking an explanation for. I think that the professional consensus is that the terminological distinction between Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism serves to obscure a not inconsiderable degree of continuity. There has long been a tendency to think about these continuities in terms of doctrine. So, for instance, we look for intimations of a wholly ineffable and utterly transcendent first principle. This is not, I think, a mistake. But it is importantly incomplete. The notion of *auctoritas* as Sedley thinks about it, or Boys-Stones's stipulative definition of Platonism in terms of the authority of Plato's text, starts to move beyond it. Authority is not so much a matter of doctrine as an attitude towards the text of Plato.

I wish to go even further. Neoplatonism of the sort associated with the Athenian and Alexandrian schools is not merely a body of doctrine, nor even a body of doctrine justified in a special way – that is, by appeal to Plato's authority. It is a set of privileged texts, subjected to a repertoire of reading strategies, and interpreted in front of an audience of people for the purpose of transforming their souls. Neoplatonic philosophy should really be thought of as Neoplatonic *philosophizing*. At its heart, it is a community convened around the practice of interpreting Platonism – one that does not merely seek to understand the dialogues, but to live a life in and through the concepts derived from this understanding, and by living this way to attain union with the divine.

Proclus' school in Athens is a clear example of what Brian Stock has called a 'textual community'.[14] Stock initially developed the concept as a means of thinking about religious dissenters, heretics, and reformers in western Europe in the eleventh century. In his book, a textual community refers to a group (1) that defines itself *in opposition* to a religious or cultural mainstream and does so on the basis of a *text* that members of

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[14] B. Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ, 1983).

the group regard as *authoritative*. Textual communities are (2) convened around *leaders* whose authority stems from the fact that they are regarded as having the correct insight into the meaning of the authoritative text. The surrounding culture may share the text, but understand it differently. A third key element in Stock's idea is that textual communities (3) *understand* themselves, their salvation, and the surrounding culture in terms of beliefs and concepts drawn from their authoritative texts. Stock's description of monastic communities such as the Cistercians applies in large measure to the Neoplatonic schools of Late Antiquity:

… [texts] played a predominant role in the internal and external relations of the members. The outside world was looked upon as a universe beyond the revelatory text; it represented a lower level of literacy and by implication of spirituality. Within the movement, texts were steps, so to speak, by which the individual climbed toward a perfection thought to represent complete understanding and effortless communication with God.[15]

Let us call this last feature (4) progressive salvation via text.[16]

As you can see from feature (1), the notion of an authoritative text plays a key role in the idea of a textual community. At a minimum, this means that members of the community think that the text contains teachings (δόγματα) and that, under the correct interpretation, what the text says is true. But this notion of authority is magnified and changed by its relations to other features of a textual community. Thus we should not consider it in isolation. Importantly, (4) places significant constraints on the content of the authoritative text. It has to be one whose teachings plausibly assist in the redemption of the human being from an existing separation from god. Further, if a text is to play the role of defining such a textual community, its meaning must be unobvious and/or contested. Otherwise there would be no need to distinguish between those who grasp its real meaning – those within the community – and those who do not: the outsiders. Nor would there be a place for leadership (2) based on insight into the text if its meaning were plain to see. Finally, the text or texts that are deemed to be authoritative must be rich enough to allow members of the community to define themselves in terms drawn from it (3). The authoritative text or texts must thus speak to a wide range of human experiences and relations. Viewed in this light, Euclid's *Elements* looks like an unlikely candidate for the basis of textual community, even if it is authoritative in some sense.

The Neoplatonic schools of Late Antiquity look like textual communities. With respect to (1), Niehof has already argued that one function of the writing of *Timaeus* commentaries was to deny the attempts by Christians and Jews to appropriate the prestige of this text to the cause of those who supposed that the world had a beginning.[17] She does not give an explanation of the authoritative status of Plato's dialogue. Rather, she employs the notion of authority that is found in Boys-Stones. None the less, the article does serve to show how pagan Platonic textual communities defined themselves in relation to others by appeal to a genuine understanding of the text. One might add that Platonist philosophers contrasted the genuinely *philosophical* treatment of Plato's works in their readings with the superficial and philological readings of those

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[15] Ibid., 90.

[16] As Stock develops this idea, there are other features of textual communities that concern literacy and orality. Since the Neoplatonic schools would have contained the most literate and textually oriented individuals in the Empire, I ignore these further dimensions of Stock's original notion.

[17] M. Niehof, 'Did the *Timaeus* create a textual community?', *GRBS* 47 (2007), 161–91.

too close to the rhetoricians and grammarians.[18] Here, then, is an example of Platonists defining those outside the community by reference to the text in a way that does not necessarily coincide with the religious distinctions between Christian and pagan.

One very striking feature of Neoplatonic interpretative practice concerns (4). The Iamblichean curriculum seeks to align the student's advancement through progressively more advanced works of Plato with a moral advancement through a hierarchy of virtues. The steps from the *Gorgias* to the *Phaedo* to the *Parmenides* are very much steps by which one re-ascended to the gods' presence.[19]

With respect to (2), Marinus' biography portrays Proclus' inevitable rise to leadership of the Platonic school after Syrianus not only as a matter of his natural, ethical, and cathartic virtues but also as a result of his easy grasp of the most difficult parts of Plato's philosophy (*Vit.* §13). Similarly, Damascius portrays the problems that beset the succession upon Proclus' death as coinciding with an absence of insight into the works of Plato on the part of Marinus (*Philosophical History* fr. 97 Athanassiadi).

To choose but one example under the heading of (3), consider the parallel drawn between the contemplative and yet providential demiurge and the teacher of philosophy. Thus Marinus describes Proclus himself as 'the father of many doctrines' (*Vit.* 21.1), a phrase that echoes Proclus' own parallel between the Demiurge as father of *works* and Timaeus/Plato as father of *logoi* (*In Ti.* 1.9.16–18 and 1.95.15–17). Finally, if the communal life of teaching Platonic philosophy – and thus conserving the souls of their auditors – was not at the absolute heart of the Platonic school, then why did the Platonists feel the need to leave Athens in 529 C.E.? Even the prohibition against leaving estates to the pagan school would not have prevented its members from a private discussion of the contents of Plato's works.[20] The order closed the school because the school was not a body of doctrine, or even an attitude towards the works of Plato. It was, rather, a textual community in which the *writing* about philosophy was grounded in a practice of psychological transformation (ψυχαγωγία) and the shared reading of authoritative texts. When the ban on teaching removed the Platonic school's core activity, ψυχαγωγία, the shared reading of the authoritative texts could have had only a vestige of life left – a vestige apparently extinguished after Simplicius' voluminous works were composed for his purely hypothetical audience.

I think it is equally obvious that neither the Stoic school nor the sceptical Academy was a textual community. This is not to deny that being a Stoic involved more than allegiance to a body of doctrine. In the Hellenistic period, philosophy was indeed a way of life, as Hadot once argued.[21] Textual communities have a communal way of life too, but not every shared way of life counts as a textual community. We have already discussed

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[18] See Proclus' criticisms of Longinus in his *Timaeus* Commentary. Plato's works were read in the schools of rhetoric, but Proclus and his fellow philosophers would not have regarded such teachers as having a proper understanding of the real meaning of these works.

[19] See D. Baltzly, 'Pathways to purification: the cathartic virtues in the Neoplatonic commentary tradition', in H. Tarrant and D. Baltzly (edd.), *Reading Plato in Antiquity* (London, 2006), 169–84.

[20] See E. J. Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* (Berkeley, CA, 2006), 111–42. The law of 531 (*C. Just.* 1.11.9) forbade pagans and pagan institutions to receive bequests. *C. Just.* 1.11.10 exhorted them to be baptized, forbade them to teach or receive a municipal salary, and mandated confiscation of property and exile for recalcitrant pagans. The prohibition on bequests would certainly have been the financial death knell. That the members of the Athenian school left prior to this suggests to me that the teaching role was more than a financial necessity.

[21] P. Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris, 1981).

the difference between the kind of authority had by Zeno and that characteristic of Plato's authority in the Neoplatonic schools. We have noted that *homologia* with nature is a kind of communion with the divine only in a rather adventitious way. We can add that the Stoic scholarchs had their authority as defenders of Stoic philosophy, not as interpreters of Zeno. Nor can we even say that they resembled leaders of textual communities in as much as they derived their authority from their insight into the proper interpretation of Socrates – the man whom the Stoics took to embody all the virtues – for Socratic tradition was not one that sought reunion with the divine through the interpretation of texts. Finally, Stoic philosophers sought to live *in accordance with* the tenets of Stoic philosophy, but not *in and through* the works of Zeno. This contrast is one that is easier to illustrate than to define. Epictetus' *Discourses* urge his audience to conceive themselves and things around them in one way or another: for instance, imagine your loved ones as fragile things, like a cup, so that when they die you are not surprised (*Ench.* §3). These re-imaginings are for the purpose of training the power of assent so that it operates in accordance with the precept that one should not assent to things that are incognitive (ἀκατάληπτος).[22]

Contrast this with the way in which Proclus uses the notion of god and matter as a means of revealing the similarity between the wise person and the person in the grips of double ignorance – that is, one who is ignorant and unaware of his ignorance (*In Alc. I.* 189.16–190.5). Each resembles the other in not going outside itself, but while god (and the wise man) are self-sufficient and full of goodness, matter (and the doubly ignorant person) are pure passivity and emptiness. Proclus uses images (allegedly) from Plato's philosophy to enrich our conceptual resources for understanding ourselves and those around us. Epictetus uses images drawn from life as a purely instrumental means of bringing one's power of assent into conformity with the Stoic norm. The role of Plato's dialogues in the communal life of the Academy is largely a matter of speculation.[23] However, there is no reason to believe that his works played any role remotely like the one they play in Neoplatonism.

After the death of Epicurus, the Epicurean school more closely resembled the Neoplatonic textual communities than did the Stoa or the Academy. If those textual communities can be characterized as a kind of 'Plato cult', then the Garden was something of an Epicurus cult.[24] But even so, there were some important differences of emphasis. First, the idea that one achieves divinization through an understanding of the master's authoritative text is slightly different. Epicurus' philosophical revelations were meant to facilitate a mortal *ataraxia*, which was an *imitation* of the blessedness of the gods – albeit for a limited duration. While the gods served as perfect examples of the blessed life, free from pain and disturbance, the content of that life was thought to be obvious to anyone capable of experiencing passions (παθή).[25] One did not need to grasp a positive picture of the gods' nature in order to facilitate *ataraxia*. Rather, one simply needed to avoid falling into the mistake of supposing that gods are vengeful or pose any threat to us. So, rather than relying on an understanding of the gods

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[22] P. Hadot, *La citadelle intérieure: introduction aux Pensées de Marc Aurèle* (Paris, 1992), examines Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* as a set of spiritual exercises, not as a repository of Stoic doctrine.

[23] For one bold hypothesis, see H. Tarrant, 'Antiochus: a new beginning?', in R.W. Sharples and R. Sorabji (edd.), *Greek and Roman Philosophy 100 BC–200 AD* (London, 2007), 2.317–32, at 321.

[24] See D. Clay, *Paradosis and Survival: Three Chapters in the History of Epicurean Philosophy* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1998), chs 1–3.

[25] Cicero, *Fin.* 1.29; Plutarch, *Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum*, 1089D.

to transform the student and reunite his or her fallen soul with its divine, intelligible origins, Epicurean philosophy required correct theology only as a prophylactic against false and harmful conceptions of the divine.[26] Thus the sense in which the members of the community sought to recover a life in communion with god through an understanding of the authoritative text is importantly different.

It is also true that Epicureans wrote commentaries on Epicurus' works, just as the members of the Platonic textual communities wrote commentaries on Plato's works. We know of commentaries on Epicurus' massive work *On Nature* from both Artemon of Laodicea and his pupil Philonides. So both the Epicureans and the Platonists thought that the works of their respective masters contained important truths and stood in need of exegesis. The reasons for the generation of the commentary traditions, however, were rather different. Sedley describes the nature of Epicurus' *On Nature* and the challenges that it would have presented to the student's understanding.[27] The work is long, the material difficult, and Epicurus' style problematic. By contrast, the commentary tradition in Neoplatonism is predicated on the idea that the core texts of the curriculum have a meaning that has been *deliberately veiled*.[28] The different sources for the obscurity of the texts that stand at the centre of the Epicurean and Platonic communities invite different ways of thinking about leadership within the communities. An Epicurean scholarch was regarded as expert and insightful, but would not be characterized as a mystagoge or an initiate into divine mysteries. So, while the Epicureans anticipate the notion of textual community that I have attributed to the Neoplatonic schools in many ways, there are none the less some important differences as well.[29]

If the argument up to this point is correct, then the dominant social form of late antique Platonism is the textual community. The schools of the Hellenistic period were not similarly textual communities – or perhaps, in the case of the Epicureans, not textual communities of a similar sort. It is widely agreed that one of the key elements in the transition to a new, post-Hellenistic form of Platonism is the fact that Plato's dialogues became authoritative for Platonists in a novel way. If we reconsider this question in light of the notion of a textual community, then our question should not be merely 'How did Plato's dialogues come to be regarded as true?' but rather 'How did Plato's dialogues come to constitute the defining text for Neoplatonic *textual communities*?'

The questions are related, but importantly different. The only texts that can stand at the centre of a textual community's way of life are those of a certain kind: those (a) whose interpretation is unobvious or hidden; (b) which can be seen as an essential means for the redemption of the members' souls and communication with god; and (c) which are broad enough in their contents that members can understand themselves and their world in the text's terms. What orientation on Plato's dialogues must one have in order to see them as candidates for this role?

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[26] Epicurus, *Ep. Men.* 123–4; Lucr. 6.68–79.
[27] D.N. Sedley, *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom* (Cambridge, 2003), 102–8.
[28] See Ammonius, *In Cat.* 7.7–14, for the claim that the 'lesser mysteries' that introduce the student to Plato (i.e. the works of Aristotle) are deliberately obscure. Ammonius likens this to the curtains in temples that keep the many from encountering things that they are not pure enough to witness.
[29] I am grateful to the anonymous referee for *CQ* who pressed me to clarify the sense in which the Epicurean schools do and do not anticipate the Platonic textual communities.

III. THE PLATONIC *TELOS* AND THE ORIGINS OF PLATO'S *AUCTORITAS*

Tarrant has documented the earliest occurrences of the formulation of a distinctively Platonic *telos* in Middle Platonism.[30] The anonymous *Theaetetus* commentator, Plutarch, Alcinous, Albinus, Philo of Alexandria, Theon of Smyrna, and (perhaps) Eudorus all tell us that, according to Plato, the goal of living is 'assimilation to god in so far as possible' (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν). This, of course, is an idea drawn from *Theaetetus* 176a–c, *Timaeus* 90a–d, and (less directly) *Republic* 613a–b. The doxography in Stobaeus (*Ecl.* 2.7), which may go back to Eudorus of Alexandria, mentions all three texts as places in which this insight is communicated, albeit in different modes.

   This formulation has the advantage of being novel, but not wildly at variance with its philosophical competitors. The framework within which the Platonic *telos* is presented is, of course, the Hellenistic formalization of the framework for discussing ethics in Aristotle. To read the dialogues' various comments on the good, happiness, and the rationality of action within this framework is already to take a significant step towards seeing them as presenting a unified, positive ethical view.

   The virtues are naturally connected with the *telos* since they are virtues precisely because they enable the achievement of the *telos*, whether instrumentally or constitutively. Thus the famous *Theaetetus* passage goes on to tell us that the virtues are ways of being assimilated to god: 'to become like god is to become just and holy in conjunction with wisdom' (ὁμοίωσις δὲ δίκαιον καὶ ὅσιον μετὰ φρονήσεως γενέσθαι). This passage, which has been attributed to Eudorus of Alexandria,[31] is worth quoting at length for the various elements that it weaves together.

Socrates and Plato thought the same thing as Pythagoras – that the *telos* was assimilation to god. But Plato made this point clearer by adding 'as far as possible', for it is only by wisdom (φρόνησις) that this is possible and this would be to live in accordance with virtue. For while, on the one hand, the world-making [faculty] and the world-governing [faculty] are in god, on the other hand the settled order of life and the management of life are in the wise way of life. That which Homer said in an enigmatic way

      … 'following in the footsteps of the god' [*Od.* 2.406; 3.30; 5.193; 7.38]

is what Pythagoras himself said too: follow god – obviously not by means of what is visible or what proceeds, but by the intelligible and by the harmony of the cosmic order. And this is what was said by Plato in accordance with the three parts of philosophy. In the *Timaeus* he said it in a physical manner (and let us add in a Pythagorean manner, ungrudgingly signifying the latter's prior thought). But in the *Republic* in an ethical manner; while in the *Theaetetus* he does so in a logical manner. It is expressed periphrastically but at the same time clearly and abundantly in the fourth book of the *Laws* (716a) on the subject of conformity with god. This is, of course, a case of Plato expressing things in a plurality of ways – <not a plurality of opinions>. The matters that concern the *telos* have been stated by him in various ways. He has a variety of ways of putting it due to the oracular and majestic character [of his writing which] contributes toward the sameness and consistency of the doctrine. This [doctrine] is to live in accordance with virtue. But this, in turn, is the possession and exercise of complete virtue. Because the *telos* leads to

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   [30] H. Tarrant, 'Moral goal and moral virtues in Middle Platonism', in Sharples and Sorabji (n. 23), 2.419–29.
   [31] Against the attribution, see T. Göransson, *Albinus, Alcinous, Arius Didymus* (Göteborg, 1995). M. Bonazzi, 'Eudorus and early Imperial Platonism', in Sharples and Sorabji (n. 23), 2.365–77, suspends judgement. H. Tarrant, *Plato's First Interpreters* (London, 2000), 227, settles for the claim that the passage reports a 'broadly Eudoran' approach to Plato.

this it has been ordained in the *Timaeus* where he also says the word. I mean the last bit of the passage that goes like this: 'when we have attained this likeness, we shall have achieved the goal that has been set before men by the gods – the best life, both for the present and for the time to come'.   (90d9–10)

Even if the author(s) whose views are being related here is not Eudorus, I take it that this report has Neopythagorean or Middle Platonic origins.[32] With respect to the sort of authority that would be relevant for a text to stand at the centre of a textual community, this passage is pregnant with many possibilities for the Platonic corpus.

First and most obviously, it suggests that there is an intimate connection between becoming a better person and an understanding of divine nature. This is not merely the Stoic or Epicurean platitude that the wise and virtuous person will act in conformity with the divine will or enjoy a condition that approximates the condition of the gods. The connection is far more intimate. In each of the passages where it is said that Homer teaches the same thing 'enigmatically', Telemachus or Odysseus is guided by a goddess, Athena (save for *Od.* 5.30, where it is Calypso), who *appears* to him, and receives benevolent treatment at her hands.[33] Thus 'following god' is interpreted at a variety of levels. On the one hand, it means living the virtuous life. This moral condition is itself equated with cognitive excellence or φρόνησις. However, both these achievements are illustrated by appeal to an account of a divine epiphany or communication with a god. Here, then, we close the circuit that I said was left open in Boys-Stones's view of the evolution of dogmatic Platonism. An understanding of the primarily theological content of primitive wisdom acquires a moral urgency once one comes to believe that the goal of living is assimilation to god.

This connection between ethics and theology invites an equal and opposite reaction. If the goal of life and the virtues are to consist in assimilation to god, which god? And what is this god like? We can see this implicit demand for a suitably abstract conception of god at work in the quoted passage. In it we have the following account of likeness with god: 'the world-making [faculty] and the world-governing [faculty] are in god, on the other hand the settled order of life and the management of life are in the wise way of life' (ἐν μὲν γὰρ θεῷ τὸ κοσμοποιὸν καὶ κοσμοδιοικητικόν· ἐν δὲ τῷ σοφῷ βίου κατάστασις καὶ ζωῆς διαγωγή). It is not easy to know what to make of the former distinction in the divine between τὸ κοσμοποιὸν καὶ κοσμοδιοικητικόν.[34] This question

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[32] First we can see that Plato is presented as amplifying what is already stated briefly in Pythagoras and in a riddling way in Homer. This is a philosophical lineage that looks similar to that which Numenius would give for Plato's views. But it is unlikely to be a later Platonic source since the opposition involved in the statement 'not by means of what is visible or what proceeds, but by the intelligible and by the harmony of the cosmic order' (οὐχ ὁρατῷ καὶ προηγουμένῳ, νοητῷ δὲ καὶ τῆς κοσμικῆς εὐταξίας ἁρμονικῷ) is not expressed in terms that would be typical of post-Plotinian Platonism. The talk of the possession as opposed to the exercise of virtue, or indeed possession generally as opposed to use, is common in Peripatetic sources, and especially in Aspasius.

[33] That pagans had hopes and expectations for such divine epiphanies is amply documented in R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York, 1987), 102–67, in a fascinating chapter aptly titled 'Seeing the gods'.

[34] It is not implausible, it seems to me, to see it as related to the distinction within Numenius' second god – or the distinction between his second and third gods, depending on what you make of Numenius' theology in the much-discussed fr. 11. Perhaps the second god – or the first phase of the second god – creates the cosmos by dint of contemplating the first god, but administers the universe in its second phase by being engaged with it. In a sense, the details are not that important. What is important is that we see a tendency here to cast god(s) in an image that nicely corresponds to the picture of the virtuous and blessed life. The latter is, after all, supposed to be a model of the former. Thus if we imagine that such a life will be not only active and engaged in the benevolent and

about the identity and nature of the god to which the soul should be assimilated is posed by Alcinous, but not answered very satisfactorily. As it turns out, in the history of Neoplatonism the working through of this problem is the impetus for the idea of degrees of virtues – natural ones, ethical ones, cathartic ones, intellectual ones, and even hieratic ones.[35] In the fullness of time, Neoplatonic interpreters will 'discover' that the *Gorgias* teaches us about constitutional virtues, while the *Phaedo* teaches us about purificatory ones.[36]

The use of Pythagoras and Homer in the passage just considered also reveals the tendency on the part of Platonists (as rightly noted by Boys-Stones) to seek confirmation of an interpretation of Plato by reference to ancient wisdom. The involvement of Pythagoras[37] and Homer is obvious. What is less obvious is the connection to the Orphic tradition. The *Laws* passage that is invoked alludes to an Orphic poem immediately prior to the discussion of conformity with god.[38] The content of the Orphic verses that it cites does not, of course, directly confirm the identification of the *telos* with assimilation to god. None the less, their 'oracular and majestic tone' alerts the enlightened Platonist that something very important is about to be announced. A text, or the entire corpus of an author, is better able to play the foundational role in a textual community if it is one that can be seen to epitomize a wider body of earlier wisdom. Thus this passage from Stobaeus marks an important way-point in the process through which Plato's works come to ground the Neoplatonic textual communities.

The final foretaste of the future of Platonism consists in the notion of Platonic polyphony. Plato communicates the same truths in different modes or voices in different kinds of works. The dialogues are here given a threefold distinction: physical, logical, and ethical. While this specific tripartite division of the dialogues will not itself become part of the standard Neoplatonic doctrine, the basic notion that dialogues communicate one and the same philosophical content in different modes is one that will endure.[39]

This point about how Plato communicates affords a convenient occasion for clarifying an aspect of textual community that is left vague in Stock, but which needs to be made more precise for our purposes. The founding texts around which such a community is convened must be texts that could be seen as 'steps, so to speak, by which the

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providential administration of the world, but also peaceful and self-sufficient, we will also be inclined to see counterparts to these in the divine upon which such a life is modelled.

[35] See Plotinus, *Enn*. 1.2.3; D. Baltzly, 'The virtues and "becoming like god": Alcinous to Proclus', *OSAPh* 26 (2004), 297–322.

[36] See *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, 26.23–6.

[37] Note that Plutarch's discussion of the *Theaetetus* passage also invokes the Pythagorean precept: *De sera* 550D3, ἕπεσθαι θεῷ.

[38] 715e7–716a1: 'Our address to them should go like this: "Men, according to the ancient account there is a god who possesses the beginning, the end and middle of all things."' The scholiast adds: 'Zeus is the beginning, Zeus the middle, Zeus the completion of all things; Zeus is the foundation of both the Earth and the starry heavens' (Ζεὺς ἀρχή, Ζεὺς μέσσα, Διὸς δ᾽ ἐκ πάντα τέτυκται· Ζεὺς πύθμην γαίης τε καὶ οὐρανοῦ ἀστεροέντος) = fr. 21a Kern. Cf. Plutarch, *De def. or.* 436d9 and *Comm. not.* 1074e3.

[39] The *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, 26.12–14, reports that Iamblichus reduced the division to the physical and the theological. In fact, the typical Neoplatonic method is to suppose that many passages in the dialogues admit of simultaneous readings in different modes: physical, ethical, and theological. So the scheme in which the same message is communicated in different dialogues in a manner corresponding to the nature of the dialogue is replaced with one in which each Platonic dialogue is a cosmos, containing all things (i.e. physical, ethical, and theological teachings) when read in different ways. See H. Tarrant, 'Proclus on how Plato communicates', in K. Boudouris and J. Poulakos (edd.), *The Philosophy of Communication* (Athens, 2002), 177–83.

individual climbed towards a perfection thought to represent complete understanding and effortless communication with God'.[40] The image is vivid and arresting, but it can and must be more clearly analysed. A text might (i) convey information that is instrumental in achieving understanding of and communication with god. It might, for instance, tell one how to pray or how to perform a ritual to invoke a divine presence. This is information that could be conveyed by another text, so that there is nothing unique about this one. Alternatively (ii) a text might *uniquely* contain information that is instrumentally valuable for understanding of and communication with god. This uniqueness might be *historical*: the text is one written by the sole person to whom these insights were granted, perhaps even divinely revealed. Alternatively, the uniqueness might be owed to the *manner* in which the information is conveyed. In the former case, the uniqueness is not a matter of principle – though one might well prefer to have it right from the horse's mouth, so to speak. The latter basis for uniqueness is harder to grasp. One might suppose that the information is conveyed in such a manner that the form and the content are inseparable, or at least exist in a mutually reinforcing relation that is hard to replicate. In fact, I think we find such a claim made on behalf of the Pythagorean sayings (ὑπομνήματα) by Iamblichus:

They contain the truth about everything; by comparison with all other writings, they are terse, but they are exceptional in their antique patina, like a surface bloom which cannot be touched. They have been composed with consummate and supernatural knowledge, packed full of ideas, yet complex and varied in form and material. They include nothing superfluous yet show no deficiency of language: they are full to capacity of clear and indisputable fact, presented with scientific demonstration and (as the phrase is) complete deductive arguments. One need only approach them by the proper route, not casually, carelessly, or for form's sake. These, then, convey the knowledge he handed down from the beginning about the objects of thought and about the gods. (*VP* 29.157.3–158.1)[41]

Where both the form and content serve to communicate information that is relevant to achieving understanding of and communication with god, the act of interpreting might take on a special significance. Thus we can distinguish (iia) texts of sort (ii) where the act of *extracting* the hidden meaning itself sanctifies and makes one ready for communion with the divine. This would be a kind of 'perlocutionary hermeneutics', where the interpretation of the text does not merely reveal information that is subsequently useful in achieving communion with the divine, but *by the interpretative act itself* one comes closer to god. Texts of this sort will be mystagogic ones, and it is clear that this is precisely how Proclus regards the texts of Plato. This is very clear from the prayer that opens the great *Parmenides Commentary*. Proclus asks different blessings from different levels of gods in order that he may 'receive the inspired guidance of Plato' and be 'in intellectual converse with those realities from which alone the eye of the soul is refreshed and nourished'. Syrianus is not merely his teacher, but 'a true hierophant of these divine doctrines' (τῶν θείων τούτων λόγων ὄντως ἱεροφάντης).[42] To have Plato's guidance mediated to you by a qualified teacher is not simply to receive instructions that are useful for achieving salvation and happiness. It is itself a communion with souls who are filled with god (ἔνθεος). Texts that can be seen to be mystagogic in this sense are an ideal foundation for a textual community. Not only is their content such as

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[40] Stock (n. 14), 90.
[41] Trans. G. Clark, *Iamblichus: On the Pythagorean Life* (Liverpool, 1989).
[42] Cf. *In Prm.* 617.5–618.8.

to facilitate communion with the divine, but the very act of interpreting them is already a step on the path that leads to the divine epiphany. The model is the mystery ceremonies in which rites of initiation and purification culminate in the revelation of the divine manifestation (φάσμα).

Merely identifying assimilation to god as an important ethical theme in a dogmatic Platonism is not yet to see Plato's dialogues as mystagogic in the sense just identified. It is, however, to look at the dialogues from an orientation that is conducive to such a conception. Think of the Platonic dialogues as a devilishly complex child's toy. It consists of an irregular solid with holes of different dimensions and different sizes on different faces. Looking through different holes, you see different things. To construct a dogmatic Platonism, you must first make a decision about the right orientation in which to hold the device and the proper hole into which to look. You then select any one of a number of slender tools that come with the game in order to draw the doctrines out of that hole and set them on the table in an orderly fashion.

For much of the latter part of the twentieth century, the developmentalist view suggested that the right hole to look through was the one on the face labelled 'chronological order of composition'. The chosen tool was one that did very well in extracting arguments, but largely left matters of setting and characterization inside the mysterious box. I submit that, for Neoplatonism, the relevant face of the toy is one labelled 'assimilation to god'. The preferred tool for extraction is one that favours pieces that can be aligned with ancient wisdom of the sort found in (what the Neoplatonists take to be) Pythagoreanism and the allegorical interpretation of Homer, the Orphic poems, and – in due time – the *Chaldean Oracles*.

In this orientation the Platonic dialogues can serve as the basis for a textual community. Any text or set of texts that is to serve as the authoritative text for a textual community must, by definition, serve as a means for direct communication with the divine. The Platonic *telos* envisions the goal of living, and thus happiness, as just some kind of communion or κοινωνία with the divine.[43] Second, this passage weaves together Plato's text with those of Pythagoras and Homer. If a textual community is to be made up of creative, philosophically inclined minds, then the greater the scope for intertextuality had by its authoritative text, the better for that particular community. Third, the passage identifies several means or modes by which the message of the Platonic *telos* is communicated. Within Plato's works themselves, the message is communicated physically, ethically, and logically, corresponding to the genres of the dialogues in which it is embedded. Moreover, we have Homer communicating the same message in an enigmatic or hidden way. As we noted, semantically simple texts are not likely to function as the defining text for a textual community. Such communities have leaders whose authority is grounded in their particularly acute insight into the meaning of the central text. What can this authority amount to if the text wears its meaning on its sleeve? Platonic polyphony and Homeric allegory provide a rich basis for leadership within the community. When we add to this the sort of numerical allegory of the Pythagoreans (for example, that friendship is 220 and 284), then the semantic ground to be mined for philosophical

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[43] The idea is not always expressed in terms of assimilation or ὁμοίωσις. Thus at *Republic* 500c9–d1 the philosopher, through his love of wisdom – and thus of the eternal and unchanging order of the intelligibles – becomes both well ordered and as divine as it is possible for a human to be. Plato goes on to discuss the way in which the wise and virtuous person is rendered 'divine in form or godlike' (θεοειδές τε καὶ θεοείκελον, 501b7).

gold is particularly rich. The person with the right insight can reveal to other members of the community many unexpected things that had been hidden up to that point.

I have argued that it would be useful to understand the notion of Plato's *auctoritas* in terms of the existence of a textual community centred around Plato's dialogues – and, of course, such other works as may have standing for a Platonist given the Neoplatonists' understanding of what constitutes Platonism. We know that it is not inevitable that the dialogues compel a textual community. They did not in the Old Academy, nor in the sceptical Academy, and they do not now. It is easy to see why. First, to revert to the image of the toy, the dialogues do not come with a set of hermeneutic instructions: 'This Side Up'. Second, only on some orientations will the dialogues appear to be principally concerned with the soul's communion (κοινωνία) or assimilation (ὁμοίωσις) with the divine. The Middle Platonic identification of the *telos* provides exactly such an orientation. It thus forms the basis of Plato's *auctoritas*, at least in the terms in which I think it is most fruitful to consider that complex phenomenon.

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