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THE VISIBLE COSMOS OF DIALOGUES. 
SOME HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL REMARKS ABOUT PLATO IN THE LATE ANTIQUE SCHOOLS

Anna Motta*

ABSTRACT: Between the 5th and the 6th centuries A.D., the Neoplatonic school of Alexandria, where the philosophical school-teaching follows a specific cursus studiorum, is opened also to the Christian students. Despite some divergences of religious (but also of economical and of political) nature, and after some violent events which occur in the Egyptian city, the Alexandrian school is linked to its contemporary Neoplatonic school in Athens. Indeed the Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy, i.e. the introductory lectures discussed by an Anonymous professor in order to present the characteristics of Platonic philosophy, show that the method of teaching Plato is still the same. According to the Neoplatonic exegetical tradition, the text emphasizes that the dialogical artefact fashioned as a cosmos by Plato is a paideutic instrument with the purpose to look away from the sensible and to guide towards the intelligible. Plato, through dialogues, eikones of the invisible, does not create illusions, but contributes to the practice of ‘assimilation’ by filling the writings with greater contents.

KEY-WORDS: Plato, Prolegomena, analogy, visible cosmos, invisible cosmos.

RESUMO: Entre os séculos V e VI d.C., a escola neoplatônica de Alexandria, onde a didática filosófica segue um preciso cursus studiorum, é aberta também aos estudantes cristãos. Não obstante algumas diferenças de natureza religiosa (mas também econômica e política), e em seguida a alguns violentos acontecimentos que golpeiam a cidade egípcia, a escola de Alexandria permanece...
ligada à contemporânea escola neoplatônica ateniense. E, de fato, os Prolegomena à filosofia de Platão, isto é as lições introdutórias dadas por um professor anônimo para apresentar as características da filosofia platônica, mostram que o método de ensinar Platão é ainda o mesmo. Seguindo a tradição exegetica neoplatônica, o texto sublinha que o artefato dialógico, plasmado como um cosmo por Platão, é um instrumento didático que tem o objetivo de desvendar o olhar do sensível e guiar rumo ao inteligível. Platão, através dos diálogos, eikones do invisível, não cria ilusões, mas contribui para a prática da “assimilação” preenchendo os escritos de maiores conteúdos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: Platão, Prolegomena, analogia, cosmo visível, cosmo invisível.

we have the text that marks in Alexandria the path of the ascent to Great Mysteries and proclaims not only the unity of a single dialogue, but the unity of the whole Platonic corpus in order to achieve a single purpose.

The Late Neoplatonists discuss, in some introductory texts, a set of preliminary questions, also called “headings” or “main points” (κεφαλαίων), in order to clarify main issues. The importance of the κεφαλαίων is underlined by Proclus who adds that this is the “model” pertinent to all Platonic dialogues:

On which and how many headings (κεφαλαίων) must be distinctly described before the reading in class of the Republic of Plato by those who wish to interpret it correctly (ισθούσα). (In Remp. I, 1, 3-5).

The text under our attention provides information concerned with eleven sections. It presents preliminary matters to be treated and discussed before the study of Plato’s works may begin, before the συνανάγνωσις of Platonic dialogues according to a schema isagogicum, as we can read:

The prolegomena to our joint reading of Plato’s philosophical works, comprised in eleven sections (ἐν ἑνδέκα κεφαλαίων περικλεισθέντα) (Prol. 28, 1-3).

The Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy, that is the complete title, are a compendium of speculation on the nature of the Platonic dialogues: here we can find a large number of exegetical principles in quite explicit form. The text cannot be traced to any precise individual, but it can be attributed to the Alexandrian Neoplatonic philosophical context of the 6th Century A.D. The Westerink’s edition is based on the Vienna manuscript, the codex Vindobonensis phil. gr. 314, written by John Grammaticus, a copy of the volume compiled by Arethas of Caesarea (10th Century A.D.).

The work is didactic, prescriptive and descriptive in nature and, precisely because of this, it is interesting from the point of view of both form and content.

If we cannot say anything about the author, on the contrary we can present briefly the complex historical and religious context of the Egyptian city in order to construct the background to the school program. This context represents the essential framework which makes it possible to examine the role of the Neoplatonic school in Alexandria that, despite some divergences of various natures, is linked to its contemporary Neoplatonic school in Athens. The sources from the Athenian school are vital to this phase, given the scarcity of surviving sources from Alexandria.

The two schools share the same Neoplatonic teaching, but after 529 they divide their destiny. The Academy is closed instead the School of Alexandria stays open.

But the Justinian ordinance of closing the school is not the only imperial action against the pagan culture. It is a real action, but among this and others more we can focus our attention on two interesting attempts of limiting the pagan sphere of influence. The ‘quasi-Justinian laws’ of Zeno in the Codex Iustinianus show the character of a Christian age in which pagan philosophy is seen as dangerous: moreover they seem to mark the differences between the fortunes of the two schools. The first ‘quasi-law’ denied the legality of testaments or gifts or anything given to persons or places for the support of the impiety of Hellenism. This law takes aim as well at attempts to increase the endowments that supported the late Hellenic παιδεία and its religious institutions. The second ‘quasi-law’ has a very important clause: it sets out to deny pagan professors of the Greek παιδεία the right to teach their ‘particular’ academic disciplines that destroy the souls of their students:


6. Because of the stratified character of the text we can’t say anything about its author. The Skowronski’s thesis, which ascribes the Prolegomena to Olympiodorus, is today not acceptable. In 1884 he argues that Olympiodorus wrote this introduction comparing his texts with some sections of the Anonymous. But these analogies are not sufficient, because – as Westerink has told – “none of these passages is characteristic in the sense that it expresses an opinion or idea of Olympiodorus not shared by others. Even the exordium (for which there is no traditional formula in the introductions to Porphyry and Aristotle) sounds like a commonplace. Several are demonstrably stock phrases. […] Olympiodorus is the only Alexandrian whose commentaries on Plato have been preserved, and, with rare exception, it is in this part of his work that the parallels occur” (WESTERINK 1962, p. XLVI = WESTERINK 1990, p. LXXII).

7. About the sources see MOTA (2012).

We forbid every science (τὰν δὲ μάθημα) to be taught by those who are sick with the madness of the Hellenes, that they might not according to this rule teach those who miserably approach them and destroy the souls of the persons supposedly studying truths with them (ταῖς δὲ ἀληθείαις τάς τῶν δήθεν παθοῦμένων διαφθείρειν ψυχάς) (Cod. Iust. 1.11.10).

We have no convincing evidence that these Zeno’s laws carried into effect. For instance the endowments administered by the diadochoi in Athens survives the ‘quasi-Justitian laws’. Photius’ summary of the Vita Isidori puts the endowment of 1000 solidi just in the time of Proclus and moreover the Atenian decurion Theagenes, called φιλόδοξος τε και μεγαλόδοξος, adds monies out of his own pocket for the philosophical institute of Athens.

If these and others private acts of generosity come during Marinus’ tenure as diadochos, Zeno could have allowed the force of the law to lapse after the successful suppression of Illus’ revolt (481-488). This was a pagan’s rebellion against the emperor Zeno raised by Illus, magister militum per Orientem, and his pagan faction of philosophers and rhetoricians who wanted to throw off the yoke of a Christian empire. So the emperor could have regarded the crowd of Hellenic philosophers, i.e. the mind of the rebellion, as something of little value. The state apparatus could not expeditiously suppress every pagan activity, although the degree of Christian belief varied considerably by locality and with the attitude of each individual monk or bishop and his congregation. Now it’s impossible to overlook that Alexandria is the seat of one of the most important episcopate of the Late Antiquity. Moreover I think we could link up the increase of activities of philosophoi in Alexandria after the Illus’ insurrection (and also after the Paralio’s conversion to Christianity) with the secret agreement between Ammonius and Peter Mongus, the patriarch of Alexandria. Damascus speaks about this act defining Ammonius as an opportunist (αἰσχοκερδὴς) and the secret agreement between Ammonius and Peter Mongus, the patriarch of Alexandria. Damascus speaks about this act defining Ammonius as an opportunist (αἰσχοκερδὴς). Indeed if we associate the ‘quasi-two laws’, an attempt to limit the pagan teaching estimated unnecessary and not carried into effect, with the admission of some Christian students in the Neoplatonic school, we can argue that the nature of the agreement is economical and political. However about the charge of opportunism and about the contents of the agreement the studies have divergent opinions.

The method of teaching Plato doesn’t change necessarily in Alexandria. The text quoted from Damascius doesn’t say anything about the teaching but only about money: in fact we know that in these years Ammonius is in some financial troubles. So what it’s possible is that the social, economical and religious situation could had forced Ammonius to compromise with the Christian institution: the school of Alexandria already before Illus was a public institution (that is an important difference from Athenian school) founded on public funds. After Illus the imperial court must have cast distrustful glances on men like Ammonius: the philosophers were prominent supporters of Illus and Ammonius, who was a publicly funded teacher, was subject to close official scrutiny. This historical background and some matters are useful to demonstrate that the school of Alexandria in the Late Antiquity is a pagan institution, but it must come to terms to survive. It is probably that the result of the agreement is a school open also to Christian students like John Philoponus. So although the teaching extends across religious divides, it seems that the Christianity hasn’t a deep influence on the Neoplatonic way to teach Plato.

The ‘theistic’ system – as Praechter called Hierocles’ metaphysics (PRAECHTER 1912, p. 1-27) – and the interpretation of Aristotle’s God according to Ammonius seem rather inspired by pre-Plotinian Platonism and not so much by Christianity: Ilsenau and Hadot has demonstrated the fact that Hierocles nowhere refers to a principle above the Demiurge and therefore this topic doesn’t imply that his philosophy is theistic (HADOT 1978, p. 189-171). Also the Ammonian metaphysics simplification isn’t influenced by Christianity – as Verrycken has shown (VERRYCKEN 1990, p. 199-231) – although Praechter was not completely wrong in ascribing to Ammonius a regressive tendency. But not in all cases, we can say that the system is simplified because of the preparatory level of the texts. Unfortunately we have a lot of Alexandrian commentaries on Aristotle and only
very few texts on Plato, so we cannot compare with satisfactory results this production and the Athenian one. However, according to Saffrey, if Ammonius gives up teaching Platonist philosophy as Asclepius and Olympiodorus refer – the agreement with the Church probably doesn’t affect the teaching of Plato (SAFFREY 1954, p. 400-401). So if we have not confirmation in the texts, we may say that, about the general method of teaching Plato, the Athenian and Alexandrian school are linked, although every philosopher has his theory and his preferences.

In the Prolegomena the general method of teaching Plato follows the Neoplatonic exegetical tradition, but sometimes the teacher, or in all probability the student, who sorts out the notes on the lectures of Plato, handles some argument with care: the text seems to show respect also for the Christian cluster in the school. The teaching program shows the attempt to defend Plato against the charge of παλαιόδοξια through sharp examples of hermeneutics. So the Anonymous, through a synergy between philosophical, rhetorical and poetic structures, doesn’t give up to introduce Plato as θείος λάτρη and guide (καθηγητής) of divine wisdom: the harmonious unity of his life, his writings and doctrine show the importance of Hellenic παιδεία towards the attainment of knowledge of divine truth. Such knowledge is the goal of all philosophy and it can be reached through progressive stages that prepare to the study of Platonic philosophy.

The assumption of a teleological perspective on the analysis of the whole writing makes us possible to detect some exegetical and metaphysical structures constitutive of the Neoplatonic teaching in Late Antiquity. It is not superficial a text in which, for example, the bios does not offer a detailed progression of the episodes of Plato’s life: more important is the relationship established with the divine, which is able to ensure the privileged access of the philosopher to the intelligible truth. It makes him the bearer of that divine gift, this is precisely the philosophy that in the Timaeus is necessary for the improvement of the human life.

This aspect also characterizes the Prolegomena Philosopher that are the more general protreptici in philosophy. In his introductory lectures Elias stresses on the benefits brought by the philosophy: it is a great good (ἀγαθόν) and a gift of God, is divine and can make the philosopher like a God.

David, who in order to conclude his introductory lectures, picks up the quotation of the same passage of the Timaeus which had been chosen by Elias to introduce, affirms that philosophy is a gift from God and its function is to confer prestige to the souls and bring them to the corporeality to what is divine. The divine man, or rather the one who is closer to the divine, is the philosopher, but not all philosophers are divine: Aristotle and Chrysippus extremely greedy for knowledge, referring, in fact, only to the study of what is human, do not attain the divine wisdom. Aristotle is for the Anonymous only δαίμονιος like happens in Syrianus: his study is the ὁργανὸν necessary to continue the cognitive ascent. The Stagirite, together with Chrysippus, remains – in accordance with Damascius – φιλοσωφής: they are only Plato and Pythagoras, winged souls who dwell above the heavens, in the plain of truth and in the meadow of divine ideas.

However, one of the aspects perhaps more interesting of the Prolegomena, that I would try to examine here, is a sort of ‘casting of the tale of the Timaeus where, in the original way, the dialogue is presented as a visible cosmos and Plato as the literary analogue of the cosmic Demiurge. In the Timaeus, the visible cosmos is a visible living creature embracing all that are visible (ἐνων ὀρατον τὰ ὀρατα περιέχον), a sensible divinity that is the image of the intelligible divinity (εἰκὼν τοῦ νοητοῦ θεος αἰσθητος). The consideration of these statements is the starting point of the κεφάλαιοι of Prolegomena, quoted below:

For just as Plato has made some parts of his creation invisible, namely all incorporeal beings, angels, souls, intelligences, etc., others, however, subject to our perception and visible, such as for example the heavenly bodies and the world of coming-to-be and passing-away, so Plato too (ὑπ’ τους καὶ υπ’ τους) has handed on some of his ideas in writing and some by word of mouth, like incorporeal entities, imperceptible to the senses, namely what he said in his lectures (Prol. 13, 18-25).
The possibility to see in Plato a divine artisan seems to me, however, an idea already foreseen in the section of the *Prolegomena* in which the Alexandrian professor expresses his personal views about the development of various philosophical doctrines of the antiquity. So in his program the Anonymous shows the συμμετοχή between the different theological traditions, an essential aspect in the Athenian school. He cites firstly the αἴσθησις of poets Orpheus, Homer, Musaeus and Hesiod. Plato has just learned from them to enhance the order of the universe. Nevertheless, he is superior to the poets because, while they have spoken with no evidence, he has demonstrated the truth of his words and has used the myths with correctness. It is clear that Plato is not only a poet when he ‘creates’ the dialogues but he is, in a broader sense, a demiurge. Actually the philosophical work, in the presentation of the Anonymous, does not exclude the poetry. In addition, every production – for Plato – is poetry: adapted from the *Symposium*, all demiurgers might be called ‘poets’ because their activity involves a ‘creation’; nevertheless, some call ‘poets’ only the men who deal with music and verses. It doesn’t astonish that the Demiurge in the *Timaeus* is defined as the ποιητής καὶ πατήρ: his work, like the poet one, μίμησις of a paradigm, is also a γένεσις.

Even if the creative activity belongs to the poet and to the philosopher, the demiurgic product is different. In the *Phaedo* – the dialogue whose exegesis comes from the Anonymous primarily to underline, in the new reading of the image of the swan, the Apollonian character of Plato – Socrates receives in a dream the invitation to compose and perform music, as the philosophy was the highest music. If the highest form of music is the philosophy, Proclus can argue that this is moreover:

> The most intense form of love, because the philosophy does not grant any money, but the soul itself with the most perfect form of harmony, whereby the soul is able to bring order to everything concerning men, and at the same time, to raise in a perfect way hymns in honor of the divinity, imitating the same μορφήγησις, which celebrates the Father with intellectual songs and holds together the entire universe with indissoluble bonds,

moving everything together, as stated by Socrates in the *Cratylus*. The music divinely inspired is close to the philosopher (ὅιο καὶ τὴν ἑνόθεν μορφήγησιν παρά τῷ φιλοσόφῳ ποιῶς) *(In Remp. I, 57, 10-17)*.

The philosophy, the highest form of music, harmonizes the soul with the entire universe: with this kind of philosophy Plato, the best musician, may bring order to everything and celebrate the divine.

Plato, to which in the *bios* of the Prolegomena are associated ‘symbols’ commonly attributed to poets, is the one that – as stated clearly in Proclus – by imitating the cosmic activity of μορφήγησις, becomes the creator of a cosmos of high music. The philosopher, divinely inspired, writes because he ‘sees’ and his writing is a ‘put before the eyes’; it is the sight – as stated in the *Timaeus* and in accordance with a typical conception of the Greek thinking – the most powerful and effective of our senses. From the observation of the reality is derived the stimulus to the reasoning, and then to the philosophy, and from the observation of the order of the cosmos, derives the criterion by which adjusting our behavior in intellectual and moral terms. It is no coincidence that the Prolegomena start with the well-known opening words of Aristotelian *Metaphysics*. The senses are tools of human knowledge, because through the sensible objects we reach the reminiscence.

In this perspective, the image becomes an educational tool for mediation: it brings a message able to connect, making evident the different levels of reality because the whole universe is pervaded by an analogy. According to Proclus, in the *Prolegomena*, Plato seems to have understood the invisible structure of the cosmos and the iconic relationship between the intelligible and the sensible: so, only through the medium of images, he can represent the divine cosmos. The testimony of Proclus is, once again, essential to clarify this matter. By comparing the two dialogues which conclude the Neoplatonic *curriculum*, he writes:

> The whole of philosophy being divided into study of intelligible and study of immanent things – quite rightly too, as cosmos too is twofold, intelligible cosmos and sensible cosmos as Plato will go on to say – the Parmenides has embraced the treatment of intelligibles,
and the Timaeus that of the sensibles. That one, you see, teaches us all the divine orders, and this one all the processions of things in the cosmos. But neither does the former entirely leave aside the study of things within the All, nor does the latter fail to study the intelligible, because sensible too are present paradigmatically in the intelligibles (τὰ αἰσθητὰ ἐν τοῖς νοητοῖς ἐστὶ παραδειγματικῶς), while the intelligibles are present iconically among sensible (καὶ τὰ νοητὰ ἐν τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς εἰκονικῶς) (In Tim. I, 132, 21-27).

The analogy – the most important type of metaphor, as Aristotle confirms – here is the privileged instrument of the philosopher: this rhetoric figure is what permits to switch constantly from one world to another. But in order to get such analogy is necessary that a similarity derives from the equality relations between four elements, for example, between things totally different, such as the Demiurge and Plato, and the world and the dialogues. What the Anonymous creates is the following connection: the Demiurge moulds the visible cosmos as Plato moulds the dialogues. Plato resembles the Demiurge as well as the relationship between Plato and the dialogues resembles the relationship between the Demiurge and the sensible cosmos. If the dialogue were not a properly Platonic creation, between the Demiurge and Plato would not exist metaphor. This analogy permits to consider the analogical relationship between the One and the σκοπός of the dialogues. If the One is the inexhaustible source, absolutely unique and simple from all that exists, in a similar way, the σκοπός, by harmonizing all the elements of the universe present in individual dialogues, gives completeness and unity to each single λόγος and makes it a literary microcosm that can reflect the structure of the universe-macrocosm (COULTER 1976, p. 95-126). The Anonymous builds an educational way to reach the divine truth: in fact by capturing the similarities and relationships between macrocosm and microcosm, he makes the invisible available for learning.

The supreme literary artist is thus the organizing mind that holds together, by giving harmony, the components of the dialogic universe. He is the one who ‘makes visible’, ἐν τούτῳ τὸ θεῖον μμοῦμενος, and is able to get the analogy between macrocosm and microcosm. In fact, the Anonymous writes:

As we have seen, then, that the dialogue is a cosmos and the cosmos a dialogue, we may expect to find all the components of the universe in the dialogue. The constituents of the universe are these: matter (ὕλη), form (εἶδος), nature (φύσις) – which unites form with matter –, soul (ψυχή), intelligence (νοῦς) and divinity (Θεότης) (Prol. 16, 3-7).

Proclus also says in the Commentary on the First Alcibiades that dialogue must show close analogies with the All according to five points of reference (he omits, however, the nature) Good, Intellect, Soul, Form and matter. It is therefore evident that the text is the opening to a literary microcosm in which the hierarchies present in the macrocosm are reflected and in which the Demiurge works to harmonize all the diversity of creation.

In this way in the Prolegomena to the matter of the universe concerns the setting for the work, the characters involved, the circumstances of the action; to the cosmic form the style; to the nature the method of exposition; to the soul the arguments; to the intellect the problem examined; to the divinity the end of the composition. So if the Good is that in view of which the dialogue is written, the analogy between a theory of the six causes (material, formal, efficient, exemplary, instrumental and final) and the literary production is also justified: here the Good is clearly the final cause. In fact God creates, being aware of the good that his creation brings. The Good is the reason why it is created and the aim, the cause of creation itself. Similarly and according to Timaeus 29d-30a, the relationship between creator and artifact is seen in terms of final cause. This one is then the speculative-philosophical foundation on which is based the literary theory of unity as it is expressed by the Anonymous:

One or many: we must maintain that a dialogue has one theme, not many. How indeed could Plato treat more than one theme in a dialogue, when he praises