

# The Place of the *Sophist* in Old Academic Theory and Curriculum

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I argue that the *Sophist* occupied a central place in Platonist curricula from the Old Academy on. The Megista Gene in particular were thought by Plutarch to relate to various passages in late Plato, and Plutarch engages with Xenocrates and Crantor on the basis of *Phaedrus* and hiatus-avoiding dialogues, excluding *Epinomis*. Hence Old Academic constructions of truly Platonic doctrine were founded principally on dialogues from *Phaedrus* to *Laws*. This reflects Apuleius' view that the true Plato (in whom philosophy was tripartite as in Xenocrates) emerged only *after* its base in Socratic ethics was supplemented by Pythagorean physics and Eleatic logic.

Xenocrates, corpus, curriculum, Plutarch, Apuleius

My focus here is on Xenocrates and to a lesser extent on Crantor, labelled the 'first exegete' by Proclus (*in Tim.* I 76. 10). Before them came Speusippus, well known for his classificatory activities in his *Homoia* and elsewhere. This involved division and is probably related to *Sophist*, for Speusippus was linked with the classificatory activities of Plato (and Menedemus) in the famous Epicrates fragment (fr. 11 = Speusippus T33 Tarán) in which the correct classification of a gourd-like vegetable is discussed with pupils. But Speusippus' *Homoia*, which did indeed group plants and animals on the basis of similarity,<sup>1</sup> probably pre-dated the *Sophist*, which warns of the pitfalls of this method.<sup>2</sup> Rather than see Speusippus ignoring Plato's warnings here and in *Philebus*, and writing a ten-book (*Republic* length!) work uncritically classifying things by degrees of similarity, I should see *Sophist*, presumably written when Speusippus was past the age of forty, as already responding to his early interests. Another Old Academic, Hermodorus, was, like Xenocrates, interested in categories-theory. Hermodorus is widely sus-

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1 The following words denoting similarity are used in this context: παραπλήσιος (F8, 9, 12a, 12b, 18a, 20, 23), ὁμοίος (12c, 15a, 16, 21, 24), ἐμφερής (14, 22), and εἰκώς (F6).

2 See especially 231a7-8: δεῖ πάντων μάλιστα περὶ τὰς ὁμοιότητας αἰεὶ ποιεῖσθαι τὴν φυλακὴν. Cf. *Phil.* 13d4-5 for Socrates' satirical response to Protarchus' question about pleasure being the most similar thing to itself (12e1): τὸ ἀνομοιοτάτον ἐστὶ τῷ ἁνομοιοτάτῳ πάντων ὁμοιοτάτον.

pected of being indebted to *Sophist* in the famous fragment that reaches us through Simplicius, Porphyry and Dercyllides (F5 I-P<sup>2</sup>).<sup>3</sup>

I attempt to build instead on the foundation of Sedley (2021a), which argues that Xenocrates' attempt to systematize Platonism is built upon the twin pillars of Timaeus' exposition in the *Timaeus* and the *Phaedrus*' palinode, with the possible addition of the *Sophist* for a theory of categories (29). I shall argue that Xenocrates and subsequently Crantor in fact had a rather wider canon of Platonic dialogues in mind, all relatively late. The place of the *Sophist* in the building of a canon underpinning the Old Academic system is virtually certain. This dialogue remained an essential part of the reduced curricula found in Aristophanes of Byzantium (c. 200 BCE), the new Apuleius (*Expositio Compendiosa*), and Neoplatonism from Iamblichus to Olympiodorus. No ancient commentary survives, but such commentaries have been attributed to Porphyry, Proclus and Olympiodorus,<sup>4</sup> while the dialogue attracts 54 entries in an index to Proclus' *Commentary on the Parmenides*,<sup>5</sup> behind the 68 for *Timaeus*, but ahead of the 48 for *Phaedrus* and 39 for *Republic*.

Earlier its importance was taken for granted by Plutarch of Chaeronea whose extant works perhaps demonstrate a greater awareness of Old Academic treatment of Platonic texts than any others. He devoted the tenth of his *Platonic Questions* (1009b-1011e) to discussing the statement at 262c that a *logos* is a blend of *onoma* and *rhêma*, and introduces the Megista Gene at *De Animae Procreatione* 1013d (cf. 1024d-1025a), at *De E apud Delphos* 391b-c (also alluding to them at 393b, Jones 1916: 148), and at *De Defectu Oraculorum* 428c-d. The *De Animae Procreatione* originated from Old Academic debate, while the other two works depict the younger Plutarch or his brother Lamprias drawing on what is presumably traditional material in the presence of his teacher Ammonius. Either device suggests that the mature Plutarch was not wholly committed to the views being expressed, and that they belonged in an earlier context.

*De E* 391b-c offers the view that the *meikton* (or *gignomenon*), *peras*, *apeiron*, cause of mixture, and cause of separation at *Phlb.* 23c-e are reflections in the familiar world of being, rest, motion, sameness and difference in the intellectual world.

3 See now Granieri 2023, 3-13.

4 See Gerson 2010, 915-965, for lists of ancient works, lost or surviving.

5 Morrow & Dillon 1987.

He demonstrates in the *Sophist* that there are five supreme principles, being, same and different, plus a fourth and fifth in addition to these, motion and rest, while, using a different method of division again in the *Philebus*, he says that the unlimited is one thing, limit another, and that all generation is established when these are mixed together; he posits the cause by which it is mixed as a fourth kind, and has suggested to us that we should suspect a fifth, by which the ingredients are distinguished and separated. I claim that these latter are spoken of like images of the former, what comes to be of what is, the unlimited of motion, the limit of rest, the mixing principle of the same, and the distinguishing principle of the different.<sup>6</sup>

Some such pattern is again detected immediately below (c-d), where the good is supposedly manifested 'in five Gene' at *Phlb.* 66a-c, of which 'the measured is first, the proportionate second, intelligence third, knowledge crafts and true opinion in the soul fourth and any pure pleasure unmixed with the painful fifth'.<sup>7</sup> *De Defectu* 428c-d thinks of the five regular solids of the *Timaeus* as a different set of imitations or representations (*mimêma, eidôlon*) of the Gene: the cube of rest, the pyramid of motion, the dodecahedron of being, the icosahedron of difference and the octahedron of sameness.<sup>8</sup> The Megista Gene are also assumed to be closely akin to, if not identical with, the five ingredients of soul at *Timaeus* 35a (*An.Proc.* 1013d), for it is on the basis of these Gene that Plutarch refutes the Xenocratean interpretation of the construction of the world-soul.<sup>9</sup> This in turn would mean

6 πέντε μὲν ἐν Σοφιστῇ τὰς κυριωτάτας ἀποδείκνυσιν ἀρχάς, τὸ ὄν τὸ ταῦτόν τὸ ἕτερον, τέταρτον δὲ καὶ πέμπτον ἐπὶ τούτοις κίνησιν καὶ στάσιν. ἄλλω δ' αὐτῷ τρόπῳ διαίρεσας ἐν Φιλήβῳ χρώμενος ἐν μὲν εἶναι φησι τὸ ἄπειρον ἕτερον δὲ τὸ πέρασ, τούτων δὲ μιγνυμένων πᾶσαν συνίστασθαι γένεσιν· αἰτίαν δ', ὅφ' ἧς μίγνυται, τέταρτον γένος τίθηται· καὶ πέμπτον ἡμῖν ὑπονοεῖν ἀπολέλοιπεν, ὃ τὰ μιχθέντα πάλιν ἴσχει διάκρισιν καὶ διάστασιν. τεκμαίρομαι δὲ ταῦτ' ἐκείνων ὡσπερ εἰκόνας λέγεσθαι, τοῦ μὲν ὄντος τὸ γιγνόμενον, κινήσεως δὲ τὸ ἄπειρον, τὸ δὲ πέρασ τῆς στάσεως, ταυτοῦ δὲ τὴν μιγνύουσαν ἀρχήν, θατέρου δὲ τὴν διακρίνουσαν.

7 ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ τάγαθὸν ἐν πέντε γένεσι φανταζόμενον κατανοήσας, ὃν πρῶτόν ἐστι τὸ μέτριον δεύτερον δὲ τὸ σύμμετρον, καὶ τρίτον ὁ νοῦς καὶ τέταρτον αἰὲρ περὶ ψυχῆν ἐπιστήμαι καὶ τέχναι καὶ δόξαι ἀληθεῖς, πέμπτον <δ'> εἴ τις ἡδονὴ καθαρὰ καὶ πρὸς τὸ λυποῦν ἄκρατος, ἐνταῦθα λήγει ....

8 ... ὁ Πλάτων τὸ τ' ὄν εἶναι φησι καὶ τὸ ταῦτόν καὶ τὸ ἕτερον, ἐπὶ πᾶσι δὲ κίνησιν καὶ στάσιν. ὄντων οὖν πέντε τούτων οὐ θαυμαστόν ἦν, εἰ τῶν πέντε σωματικῶν στοιχείων ἐκείνων ἕκαστον ἐκάστου μίμημα τῆ φύσει καὶ εἰδωλόν ἐστι γεγενημένον οὐκ ἄμικτον οὐδ' εἰλικρινές, ἀλλὰ τῷ μάλιστα μετέχειν ἕκαστον ἐκάστης δυνάμεως.

9 αὐτοῦ Πλάτωνος ἐν τῷ Σοφιστῇ τὸ ὄν καὶ τὸ ταῦτόν καὶ τὸ ἕτερον, πρὸς δὲ τούτοις στάσιν καὶ κίνησιν, ὡς ἕκαστον ἐκάστου διαφέρον καὶ πέντε ὄντα χωρὶς ἀλλήλων

that the most basic constituents of the cosmos as a whole should somehow be reflected in the constituents of the cosmic soul. Even if Xenocrates had not made this assumption,<sup>10</sup> Plutarch makes it clear that Crantor had done so, assuming that the ingredients of the soul needed to resemble the ingredients of the wider world in order to perceive them.<sup>11</sup>

Hence a web of connections link key passages across three hiatus-avoiding dialogues according to three key Plutarchian works, constituting an attempt to create a metaphysic far more tightly knit than Plutarch would ordinarily attempt, and one to which the mature Plutarch seems uncommitted. Whoever it was who stressed these links, the Megista Gene of the *Sophist* are at the centre of it.

The systematization of Plato is regularly linked instead with Xenocrates, and Ge (2019) suspects this systematization extended to the organization of the corpus too. Yet his name is also linked prominently with the account of an *oral* tradition in the Old Academy that Hermias tells us went hand in hand with the written tradition,<sup>12</sup> so that Plato's written works cannot be his only source of Platonic authority, and it is rather unlikely that all of them provided similar authority in his eyes. A closer look at *De Anima Procreatione* suggests that, for as long as Plutarch deals with Xenocrates and Crantor, he is concerned with a restricted corpus of late dialogues,<sup>13</sup> including *Laws* (1013e-f, 1015e), *Statesman* (1015a, c, 1017c, cf. 1026e), and even *Critias* (1017c) as well as *Timaeus*, *Sophist*, and *Philebus*. All these dialogues plus *Phaedrus* (particularly the palinode, 1013c, 1015e, 1016a)<sup>14</sup> and a rather personal remark about *Phaedo* (1013d: note οἶμαι) enter the argument before *Republic* is first mentioned at 1017c.<sup>15</sup>

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τιθεμένου καὶ διορίζοντος. Plutarch is using this to disprove Xenocrates' idea (F108, F78 I-P2), stated earlier, that sameness and difference can be the causes of rest and motion respectively.

- 10 Opsomer 2020 suggests that Plutarch distinguishes too sharply between the theories of Xenocrates and Crantor, and I am inclined to agree.
- 11 Crantor (*De An. Proc.* 1012f = F10. 2 Mette) is applying the like-by-like theory of cognition that Aristotle and Theophrastus, and subsequently Posidonius (Sextus, *Adv. Math.* 7. 93) had found in the Presocratics and in the *Timaeus*. On Crantor's theory see Opsomer 2020.
- 12 Hermias discovers advice for determining when writing will be preferable at *in Phdr.* 271. 10–18). See also Tarrant and Baltzly 2018, 494–496.
- 13 On the limited corpus with which Plutarch here deals see Tarrant forthcoming.
- 14 Also mentioned later at 1026d.
- 15 A reference to the Nuptial Number passage, 546b; the Sirens in the Myth of Er (*R.* 617b) are later mentioned 1029c, but, even supposing Plutarch is still in dialogue

It is natural to ask whether this pattern of Platonic references in the discussion of Old Academic interpretation of Plato bears any relation to the corpus employed by Xenocrates and Crantor. Sedley explicitly excludes *Republic's* having been important for him,<sup>16</sup> but we are not expecting evidence for every dialogue that was thought authoritative by Xenocrates' followers. Olga Alieva's paper at our conference began its consideration of Xenocratean dialectic from four passages in particular: *Phlb.* 17b-c, *Sph.* 253a-b, *Tht.* 206a-b and *Plt.* 278d,<sup>17</sup> supporting the impression that Xenocrates built his system on the philosophy of dialogues thought later than the *Republic*, if not always stylistically late.<sup>18</sup> I would thus argue that Xenocrates took dialogues from *Phaedrus* to *Laws* (but excluding *Epinomis*)<sup>19</sup> as being truly representative of Platonic philosophy, and thus as endorsing the position of those who offered a chronological arrangement of dialogues from *Phaedrus* to *Laws* according to the anonymous *Prolegomena to Plato's Philosophy*.<sup>20</sup>

While Szlezák too has adopted the position that the *Republic* is pivotal, seeing a fundamental difference between earlier dialogues looking forwards to the *Republic*, and a new phase looking towards the *agrapha dogmata*, I suspect that Xenocrates distinguished two groups of similar composition based on rather different criteria: he recognized the Plato *that he had known* principally in the later dialogues, and saw what preceded as essentially 'Socratic' in nature (cf. *Ep.* II 314c), a view now found in the new Apuleius (*Ex-*

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with Crantor, the 'inspired' purple passages where Socrates adopts a different, more imagistic, voice, seem to have had a special status.

- 16 It might be more accurate to say that the *Republic* was important in specific ways; Horkey (2022), 108, refers to Xenocrates' 'creative readings of Plato's imagistic passages, including the Divided Line, the Myth of Er in *Republic* X and the cosmological account of *Timaeus* ...'.
- 17 For an expanded treatment see now Alieva 2024, especially 125.
- 18 *Phdr.* and *Tht.* do not share the same exaggerated avoidance of hiatus and of certain clausulae as stylistically late dialogues, but most would regard them, with *Prm.*, as post-dating the *Republic*. I have special doubts about whether *Tht.* is so late, but at very least I should have to postulate a revision not long before the dialogue was adopted as a prelude to *Sph.*, and a revision especially of passages exhibiting the most advanced dialectical theory.
- 19 This is noteworthy in view of the attention paid to *Epinomis* by Plutarch's contemporary Theon of Smyrna and by the new Apuleius, which treats it as the thirteenth book of the *Laws*, as opposed to Plutarch himself. I find no list of parallels between Plutarch and the *Epinomis* in Jones 1916.
- 20 See 24. 7-19, and note that Xenocrates would have been at a particular advantage when affirming what the actual chronological order of dialogues was. For the view that the early-*Phaedrus* arrangement simply did not include dialogues earlier than *Phaedrus* see Tarrant (forthcoming).

pos. 14 in Stover 2016) where the works presenting ‘Socratic’ philosophy included *R.*, *Euthphr.*, *Ap.*, *Cr.*, *Ph.* and *Menex.*, and possibly others.<sup>21</sup> These are contrasted with a group employing Pythagorean or Eleatic protagonists,<sup>22</sup> and those where Plato sets out his own views in a more thinly veiled way: *Lg.* (with *Epin.* = *Lg.* XIII) and *Ep.*

So could the Apuleian *Expositio* be ultimately of Xenocratean inspiration? There were in fact important and obvious differences. Apuleius accepts that dialogues up to the *Republic* were Socratic, but for him Socratic philosophy was philosophy in the truest sense of the word.<sup>23</sup> He also regards *Epinomis* as authentic, and sees *Laws* and *Epistles* as being most openly Platonic works, supposing that the other hiatus-avoiding works rather present Eleatic and Pythagorean doctrine. While this seems to involve conscious modification of any division of dialogues attributable to Xenocrates, one wonders whether Apuleius’ life of Plato does not nevertheless preserve the true considerations behind the notion that Platonic philosophy began with *Phaedrus*. Plato is said to have brought philosophy to completion by supplementing Socratic ethics with Pythagorean physics and Eleatic logic (*De Platone* 1. 3. 187).<sup>24</sup> Only when the two latter elements are blended with Socratic ethics does the complete three-part Platonic philosophy come about: and the notion that philosophy has just these three parts is reliably attributed to Xenocrates and his school by Sextus (*Math.* 7.16 = F1 I-P2). For him the true Platonic philosophy must include all three parts, and presupposes some cosmology and some serious logic. Even in the later dialogues Xenocrates probably saw Plato working towards a position that had been left for his true successor, i.e. himself,<sup>25</sup> to explain clearly and in detail. Among these Xenocrates would have included *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Timaeus*, *Critias*, and *Laws*. The rationale for regarding these works as authentic, i.e. the presence of cosmology or logic in the Pythagorean or Eleatic traditions, might easily have entailed the inclusion of *Parmenides* as in the corresponding group in the *Expositio*, while the position of Xenocrates regarding *Theaetetus* is unclear. The respect afforded to Parmenides at 183e-184a, as well as the type of argument in the false-opinion and dream sections may well have merited its inclusion.

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21 An initial lacuna means that a small amount of material pertaining to other allegedly ‘Socratic’ dialogues could be missing.

22 Yet apparently including *Critias*.

23 Note at *Expos.* 14: *Socraticae ... philosophiae, quae eadem est verae philosophiae [= ὡς ἀληθῶς φιλοσοφία?], in his maxime libris ...*

24 See Stover 2016, 24.

25 cf. Sedley 2021b, Tarrant and Baltzly 2018, 494-496; Tarrant 2020, 199-200.

Hence, I would attribute to Xenocrates a 'Platonic' corpus of which *Phaedrus* could be described as chronologically the first dialogue (though not of course an immature one), showing Plato still debating whether to record *his own teachings* or not,<sup>26</sup> and *Laws* the last, as reported in the anonymous *Prolegomena*, 24. 7-19—excluding *Epinomis*, which the adherents of this corpus ascribed to Philip of Opus. This tradition of the 'early' *Phaedrus* with its dithyrambic nature is also accepted in the lives of Plato early in the *Prolegomena* (3. 3-4) and Olympiodorus' *Commentary on the First Alcibiades* (2. 63-65), while Diogenes Laertius (3. 62) also acknowledges that an arrangement beginning with *Phaedrus* had existed.

Xenocrates exercised a considerable influence over how Plato was seen in later antiquity. Apart from the *Critias*, and also the *Laws*, which was used a good deal but did not meet the criteria of a 'dialogue', the works that we here assign to his corpus are also present in the Neoplatonist corpus that endured from Iamblichus to the school of Olympiodorus in sixth century Alexandria. Nor does the situation seem to have differed much for Plotinus, in whom the *Timaeus* remains supreme, the *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, and *Philebus* continue to be broadly used, and the *Statesman* and *Laws* are used rather selectively. As in Plutarch, the Megista Gene of *Sph.* 254-255 remain of central interest. As in Plutarch, I would claim, the Xenocratean influence endures, but by no means dictates.

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26 Note that 'Socrates' here seems constantly to adopt unfamiliar voices, inspired by his situation and his love of discourse; he also resorts to discussing such unfamiliar subjects as the heavens and dialectical or rhetorical procedures.

