

Zeitschrift: Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie = Revue philosophique et théologique de Fribourg = Rivista filosofica e teologica di Friburgo = Review of philosophy and theology of Fribourg

Band: 50 (2003)

Heft: 3

Artikel: Platonism in antiquity : a major source-book nears completion

Autor: O'Meara, Dominic J.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-761030>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 05.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

DOMINIC J. O'MEARA

Platonism in Antiquity: a Major Source-Book nears Completion

in memory of Matthias Baltes

The recent publication, in two parts, of volume 6 of *Der Platonismus in der Antike*, by Heinrich Dörrie and Matthias Baltes¹, deserves attention for many reasons. Volume 6 of *Der Platonismus in der Antike* (= *PA*) marks an important stage in the completion of a major scholarly project which already provides historians of philosophy and historians of Late Antiquity (not only as regards philosophy, but also as regards the literature, sciences and theology of the period) with an invaluable work of reference. In the successive volumes of *PA*, carefully selected documents of the period («Bausteine»), printed in the original Greek or Latin, translated into German and explained in detail, give very full and detailed information on Platonists, on their activities as teachers as well as on their very varied views on many philosophical questions, going from the successors of Plato up to the last members of the Platonist school in Alexandria in the sixth century AD. The broad approach of *PA* means that, as a work of reference, it is of use also to those interested in other ancient philosophical schools (Aristotelianism, Stoicism, Epicureanism and Scepticism) and in other aspects of Late Antique culture, since the Platonists are often approached in the context of a wider intellectual background. The project has evolved in some respects in relation to the format followed by its founder Heinrich Dörrie, as represented in the first volumes. Matthias Baltes, who took over the project after Dörrie's death in 1983, has extended the scope beyond the Middle Platonic period, i.e. essentially the first centuries AD², to include Neoplatonism going up to the sixth century³.

¹ H. DÖRRIE/M. BALTES, *Der Platonismus in der Antike. Grundlagen – System – Entwicklung. Band 6: Die philosophische Lehre des Platonismus. Von der «Seele» als der Ursache aller sinnvollen Abläufe. Band 6.1: Bausteine 151–168: Text, Übersetzung, Kommentar; Band 6.2: Bausteine 169–181: Text, Übersetzung, Kommentar. Stuttgart-Bad-Cannstatt: frommann-holzboog 2002, 451+466 pp.*

² H. DÖRRIE published major contributions (cf. his *Platonic minora*, Munich 1976) to the study of Middle Platonism, i.e. Platonism from its turn from scepticism to dogmatism in the first century BC up to Plotinus in the third century AD.

He has also added a very full and new *apparatus criticus* for the Greek and Latin texts that are selected. The six published volumes of *PA* meet the highest standards of scholarship, are beautifully printed and deserve to be considered as a primary work of reference and a mine of information for the intellectual life of Antiquity in the Imperial period.

Having presented in earlier volumes documents relating to the Hellenistic background to Middle Platonism (*PA*, vols. 1–2, published in 1987 and 1990), the institutional aspects and concrete details concerning the teaching of Platonic philosophy in the Imperial period (*PA*, vol. 3, 1993), *PA* moves, in volume 4 (1996), to the content of Platonic teaching, first illustrating how Platonists defined the nature and purpose of philosophy and how they divided philosophy into branches. Middle Platonists commonly divided philosophy into three branches: physics, ethics and logic (which included what we would call epistemology)⁴. *PA* follows in part this division of philosophy in its presentation of the contents of Platonic teaching, beginning with physics in volume 4, with the intention of covering ethics in a later volume. The account of physics begins in volume 4 with the various lists given by Platonists of the first principles and causes constitutive of the world and their conceptions of matter. Volumes 5 and 6 develop the account of Platonist physics as regards other causes of the world, the Platonic Forms (vol. 5, published in 1998) and soul (vol. 6, 2002). The treatment of physics will also cover in the next volume (vol. 7, in preparation) the theme of God, to be followed by a final volume dealing with themes in ethics⁵.

The recently published volume, dealing with soul (vol. 6), is by far the largest of the three published volumes of *PA* concerning Platonist physics. This already suggests the importance of the theme of soul, not only in Platonist physics, but also more generally in Platonic philosophy as a whole. Not only is soul, for the Platonist, the source of all movement and structure in the universe: it is also the ontological bridge between material reality and transcendent intelligible being, it is what constitutes us as humans and is the seat of our cognitive and ethical life. As Plotinus tells us,

It would be right to occupy ourselves with the soul, with all the points at which we find ourselves in difficulties about it ... For what could one more reasonably spend time in discussing and investigating extensively than this? There are many other reasons for doing so, and especially that it gives us

³ Having published his dissertation on a Pseudo-Pythagorean (in fact Middle Platonic) text attributed to Timaeus of Locri (Timaios Lokros. Über die Natur des Kosmos und der Seele, Leiden 1972), M. BALTES published a two-part study of Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic interpretations of Plato's Timaeus (Die Weltentstehung des platonischen Timaios nach den antiken Interpreten, Leiden 1976, 1978).

⁴ However, beginning with Iamblichus, later Neoplatonists tended to prefer an Aristotelian division of philosophy into practical sciences (ethics, economics and politics) and theoretical sciences (physics, mathematics, and metaphysics).

⁵ For the general thematic plan of *PA*, cf. *PA* vol. 1, pp. 54–61.

knowledge in both directions, of the things of which soul is the principle and those from which it is derived. And in enquiring into this we should be obeying the command of the god who urged us to know ourselves (*Enn.* IV, 3, 1, 1–10, Armstrong transl.)

Thus the question of soul extends to all parts of philosophy, metaphysics, physics, ethics and logic (epistemology), a range represented in the series of themes relating to soul covered by the documents presented in *PA* volume 6. These themes include: the definition of soul, the nature of soul, soul in relation to mathematical and intelligible reality, soul and humanity, soul and life, the origin of soul, individual souls, types of souls, good and evil souls, souls and embryos, parts of soul, the «vehicle» of the soul, harmony and conflict in the soul, the immortality of the soul, faculties of the soul, soul and divination, the preexistence of the soul, the descent of the soul in the body, the relation between soul and body, the freedom of the soul, its purification, its fate after death, its return to its «homeland», the transmigration of souls (humans, animals, plants), the liberation of the soul from the cycle of transmigration. On each of these various themes, selected passages taken from Platonists, from the first to the fifth century AD, are presented and explained in detail: the sources in Plato's dialogues are fully identified⁶, the structure of the chosen passages is analysed and their contents summarized, difficulties in the interpretation of the passages are discussed in detail, and the Platonic doctrines at issue are set within the wider context of the evolution of the often diverging views of Platonists on the theme throughout Late Antiquity. This means in effect that each of the 20 sections of *PA* volume 6 amounts to a rich and useful monograph on the theme it covers, for example on the questions of immortality, of parts, faculties and types of soul, the descent of soul in the body, the later Platonic doctrine of the «vehicle» of the soul, the transmigration of souls, soul and divination, the souls of embryos. Full account is also taken of the secondary literature, which is listed in a Bibliography at the end of the volume.

The approach followed in *PA* might be described as «doxographical» in the sense that, in its aim to present the various teachings of Platonists on a systematically structured series of themes, it recalls the works of ancient doxographers who collected under thematic headings the diverging «opinions» (*doxai*) of the philosophers. This approach has the advantage that it provides a conspectus of the range of different positions taken by a large number of Platonists on a given question. It also allows us rapid access to information relating to particular themes that may interest us. The approach also affects the choice of ancient documents, which tend themselves to be doxographical, representing not so much the elaboration of the views of a

⁶ M. BALTES has also published important articles on Plato, included in his *ΔΙΑΝΟΗΜΑΤΑ*. Kleine Schriften zu Platon und zum Platonismus, Stuttgart-Leipzig, 1999.

particular ancient Platonist, as his survey of the opinions of his predecessors, an example being provided by the extracts cited from doxographical reports in Iamblichus, whose obscurities are discussed in great detail in *PA* 6. The doxographical approach also suggests the view that philosophy is a set of «doctrines» or «teachings», a view that seems true for many of the teachers of Platonic philosophy in Late Antiquity, but which scarcely does justice to the undogmatic, open life of thought that makes a philosopher such as Plotinus so interesting to us. *PA* 6 also includes, however, passages from Plotinus which remind us of this. And in any case, as a work of reference, *PA* gives us the means to find our way to ancient texts of most interest to us. The comprehensive scope of *PA* means also that a wide range in philosophical quality is represented: not every ancient Platonist is a Plotinus.

Not long after the publication of *PA* volume 6, on the 21st of January 2003, Matthias Baltes died after a battle with disease over very many long years. The sheer quantity of work, the very high levels of erudition involved in bringing Heinrich Dörrie's project so far and under such difficult circumstances suggest something of the spiritual interest and moral strength that Matthias Baltes could find in Platonic philosophy and more particularly perhaps in the Platonic conception of the soul. Along the path followed by *PA* volume 6, from the divine origin of soul to its life in the body and return to its origin, despite so many differences of opinion on many specific questions, Platonists can be found to agree with what the Middle Platonist Atticus claims in his attack on Aristotle (ironically described as a blind «secretary» of nature, *PA* vol. 6, p. 16 line 49): denial of the divinity and immortality of soul is to destroy Platonism, since the foundation of Platonic claims about the life and order of the universe, about the basis of moral value and the possibility of knowledge is removed. It is also with this claim that the commentary in *PA* volume 6 concludes. In publishing the successive volumes of *PA*, Matthias Baltes trained and was assisted by a team of young scholars at the University of Münster⁷ and there is good reason to hope that his work will be continued and that the last two volumes in preparation of *PA* will complete what is already a major scholarly achievement.

⁷ He also founded in 1999 an international group of scholars working on Platonism from Antiquity to the Renaissance, the Academia Platonica Septima Monasteriensis (internet site: www.uni-muenster.de/GeschichtePhilosophie/AcademiaPlatonica/), which intends to develop the activity he had initiated.