The Skopos Assumption: Its Justification and Function in the Neoplatonic Commentaries on Plato

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of the theme (prothesis or skopos) in Neoplatonic interpretive practice, particularly with respect to Platonic dialogues. The belief that every dialogue has a single skopos and that every aspect of the dialogue can be seen as subserving that skopos is one of the most distinctive of the Neoplatonists’ interpretive principles. It is also the one that is most directly responsible for the forced and artificial character of their readings of Plato. The arguments offered in support of this principle are manifestly inadequate to justify the role that it plays. This is so even if we evaluate those arguments by the Neoplatonists’ own lights. If we want to understand how this practice seemed rational to them, we need to consider more than their texts and Plato’s. We need to consider the role that the shared act of reading a Platonic dialogue with the teacher had in transforming the souls of the students and in the self-understanding of Neoplatonic teachers. I. Hadot, among others, has argued that the continuous commentary was a kind of spiritual exercise. I largely agree with her conclusion, though I believe her analysis of the sense in which these were spiritual exercises needs to be deepened. I argue that the justification for the assumption that each dialogue has a single skopos is best understood by reference to the manner in which the practice of commentary functioned within the internal economy of their schools considered as textual communities.

1 Praechter 1910, 128-44 and 149 for Iamblichus’ role in introducing the discipline of the skopos assumption. One can disagree with much else in this influential early paper and yet agree with Praechter that the practice of identifying a skopos for each dialogue was central to Neoplatonic philosophising.
2 Hadot 1997.
3 For the Neoplatonic schools as textual communities see Baltzly 2014.
Keywords

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I  The Centrality of the Skopos

The writings of the Neoplatonists of late antiquity provide us with a number of introductions to the philosophers studied in the schools, as well as to specific works by them. Perhaps best known are the introductions to Aristotle’s philosophy and to the *Categories* in particular which are found at the beginning of many of our surviving eight commentaries on that little book. We find such prolegomena in the *Categories* commentaries of Ammonius, Philoponus, Olympiodorus, Simplicius and David (Elias). These are framed around ten questions about Aristotle and his philosophy generally, followed by six specific issues about the *Categories*. The role of the first of these questions—the question of the *skopos* of the *Categories*—has been discussed extensively in the context of the harmonisation of Plato and Aristotle. When we turn to our sole surviving introduction to the works of Plato, we will see that the issue of the *skopos* is very important there too.

The *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* probably stems from the lectures of Olympiodorus in Alexandria in the early to middle 6th century. It is the only surviving work that seeks to provide a general orientation to Plato’s works in the manner of the surviving six introductions to Aristotle. Nonetheless, Westerink’s notes on the text of Olympiodorus’

4 Hadot 1987 and Hoffmann 1998 have argued that the questions found in the Neoplatonic prolegomena to Aristotle derive from the practice of rhetoricians who, in their schools, would have engaged in the preparation of editions (*ekdosis*), textual criticism and literary criticism, especially with attention to issues of composition (*synthesis* or *systasis*). The first time that we find the six topics common to these *Categories* commentaries explicitly brought together is when they are discussed in Porphyry’s *Isagoge*. However, a parallel with Origen’s introduction to his commentary on the *Song of Songs* suggests that elements of the basic format go back to at least the middle of the third century. Cf. Mansfeld 1994, 11-19.

5 The harmonisation of Plato and Aristotle is a general tendency among the Neoplatonists, though different Neoplatonists had different views about the extent of this harmony. It was seldom accepted that they were completely in agreement. Cf. Sorabji 2005, 37 for texts and Karamanolis 2006 for detailed analysis of the harmonising tradition up to Porphyry. Karamanolis explains how Porphyry’s careful definition of the *prothesis* of the *Categories* removes the appearance of conflict with Platonism; cf. pp. 34-16.

6 Westerink 1962, xlix.
Prolegomena demonstrate the strong parallels with the extant works of Proclus. These affinities are so strong that it seems plausible that much of the content of Olympiodorus’ Prolegomena comes from the introductory work to which Proclus himself refers in his commentary on Alcibiades I.7 There are also strong structural parallels between the Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy and the assorted introductions to Aristotle.8 If this is so, then we can legitimately suppose that the Anonymous Prolegomena codifies interpretive norms that governed the reading of the dialogues within the Neoplatonic schools from at least the mid fourth century and probably earlier.

So what things did a lecturer on Plato need to tell his audience prior to reading Plato together with them?9

1. The first and longest section gives us a life of Plato in order that ‘our admiration for his philosophy’ may become even greater.
2. The character (eidos) of Plato’s school (hairesis) compared with the schools that came before him and those that came after, showing the superiority of Plato’s thought to all the others.
3. Aporia: why did Plato write anything at all, given his remarks about the limitations of writing at Phaedrus 247b, ff?
4. What is the dialogue form? Why did Plato write in this form when elsewhere he (putatively) condemns variety (poikilia)?
5. The components (sunistônta) from which a Platonic dialogue is composed (i. persons, time & setting, ii. style, iii. manner of interaction [tropos tês synousias], iv. arguments, v. problem, vi. good at which the dialogue aims) correspond to the six things in the cosmos (i. matter, ii. form, iii. nature, iv. soul, v. intellect, vi. divinity).10
6. How are the dialogues named? Either from the persons, the setting or the thing sought (e.g. the Sophist).11
7. What determines how an individual dialogue is to be divided into parts? We could divide them by the situation and characters, or by the

7 In Alc. 10.4, ὡσπερ καὶ ἐν ἄλλοις εἴπομεν περὶ τῶν διαλόγων, cf. 11.15-17.
8 In fact, though we do not possess any of Proclus’ Aristotle commentaries, Ilsetraut Hadot thinks that the ten questions that are common to our later Neoplatonists’ introductions to Aristotle also come from Proclus. While he may have inherited the six specific questions about any Aristotelian work from Porphyry, it is likely that Proclus’ now lost Synanagnôsis gave them their definitive form. Cf. Hadot 1987 and Westerink 1962, xxxii.
9 The classroom context is established by the summing up that occurs in the final section: 28.1-2 Καὶ μέχρι μὲν τῶν τούτων ἔστω τὰ προτέλεια τῆς συναναγνώσεως τῆς Πλάτωνος φιλοσοφίας.
10 Cf. Proclus, in Remp. I 6.4-10.
arguments, or by the doctrines and facts presented. We should choose the last.

8. How are the conversations in the dialogues presented? Direct conversation; report of a conversation by someone who was present; second-hand report of conversation, third-hand report. These admit of correlations with various proportions in Platonic metaphysics.

9. Rules for determining the theme or objective of the work (skopos).

10. The order of the dialogues: chronological, tetralogical or the Iamblichean order?

The Prolegomena presents us with some elements that are familiar from the earlier introductions to Plato in Albinus and Diogenes Laertius but also some new elements and different degrees of emphasis.12 There is much that could be said on this score, but I want to focus on the centrality of the skopos in the Prolegomena.

To see how central the skopos is, consider the issues raised in (5) and (8). First, their salience as issues depends on a prior assumption about (9)—the skopos of a dialogue. The question of how many elements there are in a dialogue, or whether it is a second- or third-hand narration of events, has a point only on the assumption that every aspect of the dialogue plays a role in shedding light on the problem or skopos with which the dialogue deals. Absent such an assumption, questions like (5) and (8) are rather like the question, ‘How many instances of hiatus are there in a dialogue?’ This is a question that modern interpreters of Plato—or at least some of them—think is important to ask. (It could, perhaps, have found its way into a 20th century Prolegomena to the Reading of a Platonic Dialogue in a school of developmentalist Plato scholars.) But this is only because it is presupposed that the chronology of composition is relevant to the interpretation of the dialogues and that frequency of hiatus tells us something about chronology. Analogously, the issues in (5) and (8) and the fantastic correlations that emerge from them presuppose a substantive view about the skopos. That’s why they make it onto the list.

Related remarks apply to (7), the division of the text into parts. This could be a sensible question to ask about Platonic dialogues even if one did not hold the assumption that every dialogue addresses a single subject for inquiry. Nonetheless, when we turn to the specific textual divisions assigned to various dialogues by the Neoplatonists, it is clear that the skopos of the dialogue shapes the decision about the parts of the text. It is a condition on any successful

12 The introductions to Plato in Diogenes Laertius, Albinus and Thrasylius are treated at length in chapter 2 of Mansfeld 1994.
textual division that it should reveal how all the parts of the dialogue provide a perspective on the skopos of the work. Conversely, it is a constraint on the correct identification of a dialogue’s skopos that it yields a sensible account of the relation of the parts to the whole.

The centrality of the skopos question in the Prolegomena may also be illustrated by the contrast between the way in which Plato’s Phaedrus is invoked in it as opposed to the way in which the very same passage is used by Albinus and Diogenes Laertius. As noted, the question of the nature of the dialogue form (4) is a common one in the various introductions to Plato and definitions of it are offered in both Albinus and Diogenes Laertius. Albinus uses Phaedrus 237b7-c5 in order to motivate the need to define what, in general, a dialogue is. The Prolegomena, by contrast, invokes the quotation to emphasise the crucial importance of establishing what the skopos of each dialogue is. I submit that this placement reflects the greater importance that Proclus, following Iamblichus, attached to the issue of the skopos. In this milieu, the surest way to convince a Platonist of the truth and importance of some claim is to exhibit Plato himself urging it upon us in his own words. The difference in the use of the Phaedrus 237b-c passage between Albinus and the Prolegomena illustrates the crucial importance of the skopos question for the later Neoplatonists. Rather than invoking inspired ipsissima verba of Plato to stress the importance of knowing what kind of discourse a dialogue is, Plato’s words are now invoked to stress the importance of knowing what the skopos of any particular dialogue is.

So what, then, is a skopos or prothesis? Despite its centrality, the Prolegomena does not give us an explicit definition, but it is clear that it is the subject about which the work informs us. Ideally, this theme or subject matter itself should be distinguished from the benefit that will accrue to the reader by virtue of understanding what the dialogue teaches us about the skopos. In the following passage Proclus draws this distinction carefully when he discusses the skopos of the Alcibiades I:

Even if one were to say that the telos for the dialogue is the care of the self and the understanding of this—though this is rightly said—let such a person understand that this [care of the self] applies to us as an end

13 DL 3.48.6-9 ἔστι δὲ διάλογος <λόγος> εξ ἐρωτήσεως καὶ ἀποκρίσεως συγκείμενος περὶ τινὸς τῶν φιλοσοφούμενων καὶ πολιτικῶν μετὰ τῆς πρεπούσης ἡσυχοίας τῶν παραλαμβανομένων προσώπων καὶ τῆς κατὰ τὴν λέξιν κατασκευῆς. Albinus, Introductio in Platonem 2.5-8 ἴδιον τοῦ διαλόγου ἐρωτήσεις καὶ ἀποκρίσεις· ὅθεν ὁ λόγος ἐξ ἐρωτήσεως εἶναι λέγεται. τὸ δὲ περὶ τινὸς τῶν φιλοσόφων καὶ πολιτικῶν πραγμάτων πρόσκειται, διότι οἰκεῖον εἶναι δεῖ τὴν ὑποκειμένην ὕλην τῷ διαλόγῳ.
(telos) or as the good that results from what is demonstrated [in the dialogue]. But what is sought is a subject for research (problêma) and that for the sake of which the syllogisms in the dialogue exist—the knowledge of the self, for it is one thing to know the skopos of the dialogue but another to know the good that results from its having such a theme.14

It must be granted, of course, that this notion of a theme is not entirely new, nor on the surface does it seem particularly controversial. After all, it is a poor book that doesn’t have some sort of unifying theme. Moreover, the question of the prothesis or skopos of a Platonic dialogue plays an important role in the Anonymous Theaetetus Commentary. So it is not as if the very idea is controversial or novel. What is different is the tightened specification in the Prolegomena (21.18, ff). Each dialogue has a single skopos. As a result of the uniqueness and all-inclusive character of this single skopos, it must be general and comprehensive in its specification so as to account for the whole dialogue, not merely parts. It must be exact so as not to conflate the subject matter of different works. The theme must be high and admirable. One must not confuse the method with the skopos. So while it may have been widely accepted by Platonic interpreters prior to the Neoplatonists that every dialogue has a skopos, the implications of taking this seriously transform the practice of writing commentaries. As we shall see in the next section, the skopos was utilised by them as a sort of ‘magnetic north’ for all aspects of interpretation, from small details of setting to broader questions of the salience of an issue to the dialogue at hand.

II The Single Skopos in Action

Let us consider two examples of Proclus’ use of the skopos in the detailed interpretation of a dialogue. I submit that, even if one is disposed to grant the general claim that Plato's dialogues are more or less about a single subject, you would not be willing to apply this generalisation as zealously as Proclus does. I will utilise two examples from the Alcibiades commentary. According to

14 In Alc. 9.16-10.3 Ἐπεὶ καὶ εἰ τις λέγει τέλος εἶναι τὴν ἑαυτῶν ἐπιμέλειαν καὶ τὴν ταύτης γνώσιν τῷ διαλόγῳ, πιθεῖται μὲν ὄρθως, ἐννοεῖτο δὲ ὅτι τοῦτο μὲν ὡς τέλος καὶ ὡς τὸ ἀγαθὸν ὑπάρχειν ἥμιν ἐκ τῶν ἀποδεικνυμένων προσήκει, τὸ δὲ ἥρημος ἔνθεται ἐν τῷ πρὸς πᾶσαν τὴν κακίαν, καὶ ἰδίως πάντως τῇ κακίᾳ δέδοται, τὸ γράφει εἰς τὸν σχόλιον γνώναι τῷ διαλόγῳ καὶ τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἄλλο τὸ ἐκ τῆς ταὐτής προθέσεως.
Proclus, the *Alcibiades* has the knowledge of the self as its *skopos*. Let us watch him put this *skopos* to work.

At 105a1 Socrates prepares to reveal to Alcibiades that he has had him continuously in mind, though he has not spoken to him in a long time (103a4). Alcibiades will know that Socrates has been paying quiet attention to him, for Socrates is about to tell the young man exactly how ambitious he is—a level of ambition that Alcibiades presumably does not suppose that he reveals to anyone. Comparing his ambitions to those of Cyrus or Xerxes might seem rather insulting. The lemma under discussion is 105a1-3:

> Νῦν δὲ ἕτερα αὖ κατηγορήσω διανοήματα πρὸς αὐτόν σε, ὥς καὶ γνώσῃ ὅτι προσέχων γέ σοι τὸν νοῦν διατετέλεκα.

Now I will put to you yourself some other considerations by means of which you will know that you have indeed been at the forefront of my mind.

Proclus entertains one possible explanation of the phrase πρὸς αὐτόν σε in order to reject it. According to this explanation, the presence of the phrase to be explained by the fact that, were it not there, what Socrates goes on to say might be taken the wrong way by ordinary people.\(^{15}\) This explanation is a mistake, Proclus insists. The words should instead be related directly to the *skopos* of the dialogue, which is the knowledge of the self. The words foreshadow the conclusion of our investigation of the nature of the self: that Alcibiades is his soul.

For the words ‘considerations’ (διανοήματα) and ‘to you yourself’ (πρὸς αὐτόν σέ) place Alcibiades among the things have a discursive sort of life and intimate that he is exclusively a soul, essentially transcending other forms of life.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{15}\) Presumably the thought is that the πρὸς αὐτόν σέ indicates that Socrates’ engagement with Alcibiades is purely ad hominem. He is simply working with the beliefs and ambitions that the young man has—not influencing him in any way. It is Alcibiades—he himself—that is entirely responsible for what Alcibiades does (and not Socrates).

\(^{16}\) In Alc. 141.16-18 τὸ γάρ “τὰ διανοήματα” καὶ “πρὸς αὐτόν σέ” τὸν Ἀλκιβιάδην ἐν τῇ διανοητικῇ τίθεται ζωὴ καὶ ψυχὴν αὐτόν μόνως εἶναι ὑποσημαίνει, τῶν ἄλλων εἰδών τῆς ζωῆς ἐξηρημένην καὶ τὸν ὑώσκιν.
So strong is the single *skopos* presumption that it can be invoked right down to the level of *lexis*—that is, the phase of analysis of Plato’s texts that considers individual words and phrases. This is not just the weak generalisation that Plato succeeds in writing dialogues that are more or less about one thing. In Proclus’ hands, the *skopos* assumption is a powerful magnet that can be used to align even individual words and phrases with an overarching dialogic purpose.

Here is a second example—again from the *Alcibiades* commentary. At 114b6, ff Socrates invites Alcibiades to pretend that he, Socrates, is the Assembly and proposes that Alcibiades should persuade *him* in the same manner in which he will persuade the Assembly when he speaks to *them*. The substitution of a single auditor for the many is justified, according to Socrates, because the only real difference between the orator and the teacher of grammar is that the former persuades many, while the latter persuades just one student at a time. Alcibiades accedes to this argument about the similarity between teaching a single person and persuading a crowd. Proclus says that this contributes to the variety in the dialogue by utilising arguments that come before the demonstrations sought for the main theme of the dialogue. Some people have faulted Plato for this, saying that this fails to exhibit any of the main points. Proclus insists that this sort of criticism is mistaken. Each of the arguments does in fact contribute *directly* to the *skopos* of the dialogue. In addition to preparing the way for the subsequent conclusions that Socrates will establish, the argument at hand also shows the power of knowledge and in doing so it illuminates the nature of the soul with which the self is identified. After all, it is on the basis of knowledge that a person can persuade both one person and a multitude. Knowledge in the speaker is like the Sun. It can shine on one or many and be undivided and undiminished. It remains in itself, and yet perfects the things that share in it.

In as much as the knowledge which is our perfection has been allocated a power such as this, these facts reveal that our own essence is separate from the body and resides in itself. While corporeal powers are themselves weakened when they are communicated, *knowledge* remains one and the same, self-sufficient and undiminished whether it is communicated to one or to many. So in the same way the *soul* doubtless is present to the entire body and to all its parts, though one part may participate in

18 In Alc. 307.15-18 ἰσοποικιλεῖ δὲ αὐτῶν συνεισφέρει διαλεκτικὴν πρὸ τῶν ζητομένων ἄποδειξεως ἀλλοις συλλογισμοῖς χρώμενος ἔξηγος συλλογισμενοῖς κατά τα συμπεράσματα, καὶ διὰ ταῦτα προηγομένως δοκεῖ τισιν ἐνια τῶν κεφαλαίων μη δεικνύναι.
the soul in one way, while others do so in other ways. Thus, as we said, this argument also contributes to the discovery of our essence [which is the skopos of the dialogue].

I submit that this brief example nicely illustrates the kind of “interpretive overkill” that is characteristic of the neoplatonic commentary tradition. We are supposed to believe that, in addition to setting Alcibiades up for a cleansing refutation of his pretensions to knowledge, this passage illuminates the soul–body relation because there is an analogy between knowledge and soul. As unitary knowledge is to the multitude who may share in it, the unitary soul is to the body that it animates by participation. Proclus’ insistence that all aspects of the dialogue contribute to the skopos makes for very forced interpretations.

Now that we can see just what is at stake in the claim that every Platonic dialogue has a single skopos that unites every part of it, we have some benchmark for deciding how strong the arguments in support of this claim need to be. After all, the following is a sound maxim of philosophical methodology: the justification offered for a principle should be proportionate to the theoretical weight that rests upon it. Let us turn to the justification of the single skopos assumption that is offered in the Anonymous Prolegomena.

The first argument offered by our author is simply a rhetorical question: ‘How could Plato treat more than one theme in a dialogue when he praises that which is divine for the reason that it is one?’ This question seems to imply that a premise of the form ‘x is a good thing to the extent that it is unified’ is obviously true and then infers that Plato’s dialogues would be more unified if they had a single theme. But Plato’s dialogues are the very best dialogues ever written. (Obviously, since we members of the Platonic school have dedicated our lives to understanding them!) Therefore they have only a single theme.

Even by the Neoplatonists’ own lights, this argument is problematic. The first premise requires clarification. The equivalence of goodness and unity in Proclus’ Elements of Theology prop. 13 shows only that it is good for the thing

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19 In Alc. 308.2-11 ταῦτα δὲ ἐμφαίνει τὴν οὐσίαν ἢμων χωριστὴν οὐσιαν σῶματος καὶ ἐν ἑαυτῇ ἐστῶσαν, ὅπου θεία καὶ ἡ ἐπιστήμη τελείοτης ήμων ὑπάρχουσα τοιαύτην ἔλαχε δύναμιν. αἱ μὲν σωματειδεῖς δυνάμεις ἐν ταῖς μεταδόσεις ἑαυτὰς ἐλαττοῦσιν, ἡ δ’ ἐπιστήμη μία μένουσα καὶ ἡ πολλὴ καὶ αὐτὴρκης καὶ ἀνελάττωτος ἑνὶ καὶ πολλοῖς ὡσαύτως ἑαυτῆς μεταδίδωσιν, οὕτω δὴ οὖν καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ παντὶ τῷ σώματι πάρεστι καὶ πᾶσι τοῖς μορίοις, καὶ εἰ τὸ μὲν ἄλλως αὐτῆς μετέχει, τὸ δὲ ἄλλως. Συντελεῖ μὲν οὖν οὕτως, ὡς ἔφαμεν, ὁ λόγος καὶ πρός πάσαν τὴν ἐνεργίαν τῆς οὐσίας ἡμῶν.

unified that it is unified.\textsuperscript{21} The absence of unity is equated with being displaced from existence. If it is assumed that a thing’s existence is a good to that thing, and if things exist longer or to a higher degree by virtue of the extent or manner in which they participate in unity, then degree of unity tracks degree of goodness for the thing unified. However, clearly the non-existence of some things (for example, the poisonous gas in the air in this room) is a great good to other things (e.g. the people in this room). So the identity of the One (as source of unity) with the Good (as source of benefit) does not entail that for any x it is better all things considered that x should be unified.

Presumably what the argument requires is a premise to the effect that x is a good thing of its kind to the extent that it is unified. A moment’s reflection, however, shows that this too requires clarification. After all, unity is said in many ways. A bird is a material object and a material object is more unified to the extent that its pieces are in closer proximity to one another. A bird dismembered and scattered over a wide area is less unified than one not so dismembered. But equally, a bird with wings folded has its parts in closer proximity to one another than one with its wings spread. Yet being unable to spread its wings hardly makes it a good thing of its kind. If being unified is to function as a criterion for being a good F, then the kind of unity in question must be the kind appropriate to things of that kind. This is, in fact, precisely how Proclus himself responds to Aristotle’s criticisms of the ideal of unity in the Republic.\textsuperscript{22}

When Socrates aims to make the ideal city a unity, he does not simply aim to make numerically single, but rather the unity that he aims at is the sort of unity that it is good for a city to have—what Proclus calls unity as final cause.

The recognition that there are different ways of being unified corresponding to the good condition of different kinds of things shows that the first consideration invoked in favor of the single skopos assumption in the Prolegomena is far from convincing. Absent a specification of the kind of thing that a dialogue should be, we do not yet know that its possession of a single unique skopos is the kind of unity that makes it a good thing of its kind.

As if cognisant of this shortcoming, the second argument offered in the Prolegomena for the single skopos assumption likens the dialogue to a living creature.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} Inst. 13.4-8 τὸ δὲ σωστικὸν καὶ συνεκτικὸν τῆς ἑκάστων οὐσίας ἐστὶ τὸ ἕν (τῷ γὰρ ἑνὶ σώζεται πάντα, καὶ ὁ σκεδασμὸς ἐκαστὸν ἐξίστησι τῆς οὐσίας), τὸ ἁγιάδον, οἷς ἂν παρῇ, ταῦτα ἐν ἀπεργάζεται καὶ συνεχεῖ κατὰ τὴν ἐνώσιν.

\textsuperscript{22} In Remp. I 362.1-24.

\textsuperscript{23} Prolegomena 21.20-25 καὶ ἄλλως, εἰ αὐτὸς ἐστιν ὁ λέγων ὃ ὁ διάλογος ζῷῳ ἐστίκει, ἐπεὶ οὐ διάλογος ζῷῳ ἐστίκει, ἐπεὶ οὖν ὁ διάλογος ζῷῳ ἐστίκει, τὸ
1. A dialogue is like a living creature, because a dialogue is a species of *logos* and every *logos* is like a living creature (Plato, *Phaedrus* 264c)

2. A living creature has a single end or goal (*telos*)—the good for the sake of which it has come to be.

3. Therefore the dialogue also ought to have a single end or goal by which it benefits and this is the *skopos*.

4. Plato’s dialogues have everything that a dialogue ought to have.

5. Therefore Plato’s dialogues have a single end or goal which is the *skopos*.

Suppose we accept the notion of final causation that seems implicit in premise 2 and grant that since all living creatures have a *telos*, so too do dialogues. But when we reflect on what a *telos* is, in the sense relevant to this premise, the identification of the *telos* with the *skopos* seems implausible. The *telos* for a living creature is the form realised in a mature and undamaged specimen. Every part of the creature is for the sake of this. But it does not follow that even a fine specimen of that creature serves a single purpose *for us*. Every part of the pig is for the sake of the realisation of Porky’s porcine perfection. But it does not follow from this that even Porky Perfect benefits *us* in only one way. One part benefits us with bacon; another part with the cover of a football.

Furthermore, the *skopos* is the *subject matter* about which the dialogue is supposed to instruct us. So, for instance, Iamblichus thought that the *skopos* of the *Sophist* was the sub-lunar Demiurge. While it might be plausible that every part of the dialogue serves the purpose of informing *us* about such a Creator, it is implausible that every part of the dialogue serves the purpose of realising the perfection of the Demiurge. There is thus an asymmetry with respect to the ‘cui bono’ question between the *telos* of a living creature and the *skopos* of a dialogue. Therefore one should not identify the two notions.

Now, a Neoplatonist might reply that this is just a measure of the difference between living creatures and artefacts, like books. While a living creature is such that every part of it promotes *its* good, an ideal dialogue is such that every part of it serves the purpose of informing the reader about its *skopos*. Fine—let this be granted. But then all we have done is to undermine the first premise with this qualification. A dialogue is actually not just like a living being. They differ in the respect just noted by the qualification.

δὲ ζῷον ἓν τέλος ἔχει τὸ ἀγαθόν (τούτου <γὰρ> χάριν καὶ γέγονεν), καὶ ὁ διάλογος ἄρα ἐν ὁρεῖλε ἔχειν τέλος, τούτ’ ἐστιν ἕνα σκοπόν. Cf. Proclus, *in Remp.* 1 6.24-7.2 and *in Parm.* 659.12-18 where *Phaedrus* 264c is also invoked to justify the Iamblichean procedure of relating all aspects of the dialogue back to its *skopos*.

In fact, we saw above that Proclus himself draws the distinction that is needed to undermine the argument given in the Prolegomena. The Prolegomena’s argument effectively collapses the skopos into the ‘good for the sake of which’ the dialogue exists and infers that the former must be single because the latter is. But in the passage quoted above that clarified the very idea of a skopos, Proclus explicitly denies the identification of the skopos with the telos understood in the way that the argument in the Prolegomena understands it.

This is a peculiar situation then, for I accept the conclusion that the content of the Prolegomena is largely derived from Proclus’ own—now lost—Synanagnôsis. Yet the fuller of the two arguments in support of the skopos assumption in the Prolegomena is undermined by the very distinctions that Proclus himself draws in his application of the thesis to the Alcibiades. Nothing could be clearer from that work than that Proclus accepts that the Alcibiades has but one theme and that he has successfully defended his determination of that theme from rival claims (in Alc. 7.10-8.12). If the Prolegomena reflects the content of the Synanagnôsis, then Proclus has failed to articulate a good argument for a key interpretive premise and, moreover, is in a position to know this.

On the basis of the arguments that have been offered then, the sole skopos hypothesis is not justified. Or at least it is not justified independently of the authority of Socrates’ statement at Phaedrus 264c that every logos must have the same kind of unity that a living being does. Moreover, when we see what the thesis itself amounts to in its application, it looks like the sort of thing that demands a strong justification. So why does Proclus accept it? Why is it part and parcel of the rules set down for interpreting dialogues in the Anonymous Prolegomena perhaps 100 years later?

When we find philosophers accepting conclusions on the basis of bad arguments, and doing so consistently and over a long period of time, we should suspect that there is something else going on. These conclusions serve some kind essential institutional purpose.

25 In Remp. I 13.9, ff similarly denies that there are two themes for the Republic—justice in the individual and justice in the state—but Proclus provides no principled reason for the insistence on a single skopos. He simply shows that both can be brought under the same heading of justice.

26 It is worth noting that, even if we were to accept Plato’s authority, the Neoplatonists’ interpretation of Phaedrus 264c has been strongly challenged by Malcolm Heath. So it is not obvious that the single skopos assumption is something that one is committed to simply by virtue of being a Platonist! Cf. Heath 1989, 26.
III The Teaching Context and the Single Skopos Assumption

The Platonic commentaries that we now study simply as texts had their genesis in a teaching context. The Iamblichean curriculum of twelve Platonic dialogues and its correlation with the gradations of the cardinal virtues is now familiar to scholars of Neoplatonism.\(^\text{27}\) In progressing from the introductory *Alcibiades* I to the capstone texts of the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*, the student was intended to acquire increasingly more demanding versions of courage, self-control, justice and wisdom, ranging from the civic virtues associated with the *Gorgias* to the theoretical virtues associated with the most advanced dialogues. The course of study is meant to transform the souls of the aspiring students so that they may be assimilated to God.

Philip Hoffman has given considerable thought to the institutional role of prologues and the neoplatonic introductions to Aristotle.\(^\text{28}\) He notes that the point of the teaching is not merely to reveal the content of the text under discussion but to *change the students psychologically*. This communicative situation means that the prologue of a philosophical commentary is assimilated to rhetorical exhortation.

The thought of late antiquity is marked by the reconciliation of the two disciplines [sc. rhetoric and philosophy] and one conforms to the norms of the other so as to determine the manner in which a discourse apt to realise the sought-after effect in the souls of the audience might be produced.

\[\text{Hoffman, 1998: 224}\]

Given that the students’ understanding and consequent psychic transformation guides the production of teaching—and thus of interpretation—Hoffman argues that we can deduce some rules for interpretation, the foremost of which is that it must proceed from the simple to the complex.\(^\text{29}\)

What Hoffman has in mind here is primarily a *diachronic* educational passage from the introductory works like the *Categories* to more advanced Aristotelian works and ultimately to the ‘higher mysteries’ of Plato’s dialogues. The specification of the *skopos* for Aristotle’s works also plays a role in the project of harmonising Plato and Aristotle. After all, if the *Categories* is about

\[\text{---27\ On the gradations of the virtues, see Baltzly 2006, Brisson 2006. On the correlation of the works in the Iamblichean canon with the gradations of virtue, see Tarrant 2014.}\]
\[\text{28\ Hoffmann 1998. See also Hadot 1987.}\]
\[\text{29\ Hoffmann 1998, 226-7.}\]
words in as much as they signify things, and is not a work of ontology, it is much easier to reconcile its contents with Platonism.\textsuperscript{30} This simplifies matters for the student.

The considerations that Hoffman raises about the student’s progression through the works in the Neoplatonic syllabus can also be applied to his progress through the course of a single work. Each dialogue will also have its own internal complexity that is revealed as the course of lectures on it continues. The establishment of a single skopos—which all the subsequently revealed complexity subserves—is another way in which one can adhere to Hoffman’s rule. Let us consider some illustrations of its role in pedagogy.

Olympiodorus’ \textit{Gorgias Commentary} is \textit{apo phonēs}, so it bears very clearly the marks of its origins in a lecturing context.\textsuperscript{31} As with most Plato commentaries, Olympiodorus begins the exegesis of the text with preliminary questions of the sort dealt with in the \textit{Prolegomena}. As noted above, the skopos that Olympiodorus identifies is the knowledge of what constitutional or political happiness consists in. Olympiodorus reminds his auditors of this several times (4.1.9; 15.1.2; 32.2.24) throughout the work and we can see that this is good teaching practice. The commentary records fifty lectures on the \textit{Gorgias}. The repetition of the skopos reminds the listeners what the overall point of the extended study that they are undertaking is.

Moreover, the skopos determines the textual divisions. According to Olympiodorus, the conversation with Gorgias teaches us about the efficient cause of constitutional eudaimonia—the philosophical life. The conversation with Polus marks another natural division of the text since here we find out about the formal cause of constitutional eudaimonia. The conversation with Callicles reveals the final cause, while the myth presents to us the paradigmatic cause of this sort of happiness.\textsuperscript{32} Thus the skopos, together with the students’ understanding of the various kinds of causation, is supposed to yield an appreciation of how the different conversations constitute a continuous whole.

Teachers today will easily recognise the pedagogic merits of Olympiodorus’ aim—to integrate concepts introduced earlier in the course to the understanding of subsequent topics—even if we find it unlikely that the division of Plato’s

\textsuperscript{30} So, according to Porphyry, with respect to our \textit{linguistic expressions}, sensibles are primary substance, while with respect to \textit{nature}, intelligibles are primary (in Cat. 91.19-27).

\textsuperscript{31} Cf. Watts 1988, 140-44 for detailed examination of the traces that this work’s origins have left in the text.

\textsuperscript{32} Cf. Olympiodorus, in Grg. pr. 6.1-3; §46.7. The paradigmatic cause is, of course, one of the two additional causes with which the Neoplatonists supplement Aristotle’s four causes. See Proclus, in Tim. 1 263.19-22.
texts corresponds so neatly with the Platonists’ adaptation of Aristotle’s theory of causes.

Finally, Olympiodorus uses the *skopos* to contextualise the Platonic syllabus to his students. Since we have learnt from the *Alcibiades* that we are souls—and rational souls at that—we must now understand what constitutional arrangements or relations among the parts of our souls are best for us. This is the point of the lectures on the *Gorgias*. Next we will turn to the question of the virtues that purify the soul of the body and its irrational accretions. These will be the kathartic virtues dealt with in the *Phaedo* (*in Grg.* pr. 6.12-17). Once again, teachers today will recognise the pedagogic merits of relating the *skopos* of the dialogue under discussion with those that have been discussed previously and those that will be discussed in the future.

When we consider how it functions in the classroom setting, the assumption that there is a single *skopos* for the *Gorgias* might seem to be justified by its *pedagogical utility*. Given the centrality of teaching to the practice of commentary writing, it might have seemed to the authors of those commentaries that it was an assumption in need of very little argument. But this cannot be whole story. These observations about the pedagogical utility of the *skopos* relate to its role in getting an audience to understand the texts being lectured on. But as I. Hadot has observed, the simple explication of the texts of Aristotle or Plato was not the primary objective of the commentary tradition. Rather, the commentaries—and the teaching settings from which they evolved—were spiritual exercises. So the manner in which the *skopos* assumption might make it easier to *teach the content* of the works of Plato and Aristotle is not sufficient to fully explain the value of that assumption to the Neoplatonists. We must ask how the *skopos* assumption might have enhanced the spiritual exercises involved in composing and consuming the commentaries.

Hadot’s account of the way in which the commentaries functioned as spiritual exercises does not seem to me to be entirely complete. For her, the obscurity of the target texts—and in particular, the allegedly deliberate obscurity of Aristotle’s style—served as a testing ground to separate the determined, intelligent and virtuous reader from those who readers who were unqualified to receive the wisdom of the great philosophers.

Les gens dépourvus de vertu ne peuvent pas, selon les néoplatoniciens, tirer profit de la lecture des œuvres aristotéliciennes et platoniciennes,

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33 ‘Cette citation rend évident le rôle secondaire de la pure explication de textes, mais n’explique pas encore, dans quelle mesure le commentaire lui-même peut être un exercice spirituel.’ Hadot 1997, 174.
parce qu’ils n’ont pas la volonté de s’améliorer moralement et ne sont pas capables de développer l’amour nécessaire de la sagesse, élément essentiel de la philosophie antique, qui ne veut pas être une gymnastique de l’intelligence, mais un exercice spirituel.

_HADOT 1997, 175_

Crucially, she seems to think that the acquisition of the lowest gradations of the virtues is a pre-requisite to the capacity to follow the difficult texts of Aristotle and Plato and that these lower grades are cultivated through texts such as the _Golden Verses_ or Epictetus. But it is in fact the texts of Plato that are correlated with the civic, kathartic and theoretical virtues. The natural virtues are the product of nature and not education. So it is unclear how Hadot’s claim can be quite correct. All the virtues that arise from education are correlated with the reading order of Plato’s dialogues. Their possession is not a pre-requisite satisfied by reading Aristotle. What Hadot lacks, I think, is an account of what these virtues are and how they are acquired _not before_ the reading of Plato, but _in_ the act of reading Plato with the master.

Another possible explanation of the confidence that the Neoplatonists have in the _skopos_ assumption is the fact that the teaching of Aristotle’s works came before those of Plato. Unlike dialogues such as the _Phaedrus_ or the _Statesman_, an Aristotelian works like the _Categories_ or the _Physics_ have reasonably tight thematic unity and do not overlap significantly. The book about nature is about moving things, while the latter books of the _Metaphysics_ are about substances that do not move. These works come much closer to conforming to the _skopos_ assumption than do Plato’s works. Perhaps the Neoplatonists simply carried forward an interpretive presupposition that is pretty clearly met in the case of Aristotle’s works to works later in their curriculum, i.e. to Plato’s dialogues.

This is an intriguing idea and—given the necessarily speculative nature of our explanatory enterprise—one that cannot be entirely ruled out. But it sits oddly with our ample evidence that the Neoplatonists were acutely aware of the differences between the way in which Plato and Aristotle philosophised. They are aware that the dialogue form and the use of myth sets the former apart from the latter. They were keenly aware that Plato communicates his

34  Cf. Ammonius, _in Cat._ 7.7-14.
35  I am grateful to an anonymous referee for the journal for this interesting suggestion.
36  The Neoplatonists were at least aware of the existence of Aristotelian dialogues, though they declined to study them as part of the official course of study; Simplicius, _in Cat._ 4.23-5.
philosophy in a variety of different modes. It is certainly possible that, in spite of this evidence of their awareness of the important differences between Aristotelian treatises and Platonic dialogues, they carried an interpretive principle that fits reasonably well with the first over to the second. But it seems to me to be worth looking for an alternative explanation.

Let us take seriously the thought that the Neoplatonic schools of late antiquity were textual communities in the specific sense of that term introduced by Brian Stock. Stock used this concept as a means of thinking about religious dissenters, heretics and reformers in western Europe in the eleventh century. In his usage of the term, it involves 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 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. Crucially for our purposes, members of textual communities (3) understand themselves, their salvation, and the surrounding culture in terms of beliefs and concepts drawn from their authoritative texts. Stock says that in the monastic communities he was concerned with:

... [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. (op. cit. 90, n. 12)

I claim that the pagan Neoplatonic schools at Athens and Alexandria share these features. With respect to (1), the Neoplatonist philosophers think that the use made of Plato’s texts in the standard rhetorical education is at best superficial and that, in fact, many people may be harmed by their misunderstanding of the inspired works of Plato. With respect to (2), Damascius’

38 Stock 1983.
39 In Stock’s explanation of his central concept, there are also concerns about literacy and orality. Since the Neoplatonic schools already exist within the context of late antique paideia, with its characteristic contrast between the elite, educated population and the rest, I will ignore these additional complications.
Philosophical History makes it pretty clear that he supposed the decline of the Athenian school to correlate with the appointment of a successor who lacked Proclus’ philosophical insight into the texts of Plato.\(^\text{41}\) It is however (3), the role of the authoritative text in the community’s self-understanding, that holds out hope of explaining the skopos assumption.

What paradigms for the leadership of a textual community do the Neoplatonists derive from their reading of the dialogues? One obvious answer is the figure of Socrates. In many Neoplatonic commentaries Socrates is interpreted as soul who invariably rests secure between beneficent and creative procession or proödos and the untroubled contemplation of reversion or epistrophē. Thus the first line of Hermias’ Phaedrus Commentary asserts that Socrates’ soul was sent down into the realm of Becoming as a service to human-kind. In the Phaedrus Hermias supposes that he “descends” far enough to talk about visible beauty and the base kind of eros that Lysias has for Phaedrus in order to elevate Phaedrus’ soul to the realms of intelligible beauty. At no point, however, does Socrates lose his grasp of intelligible reality or really descend to the level of matter. Thus Hermias thinks that the fact that Socrates wets only his feet in crossing the Ilissus before settling under the plane tree for his discussion with Phaedrus signifies that ‘rising above generation, to contact generation [only] with the last or ground-level (peripezios) faculties of the soul (as ‘feet’ shows), that is, with the rational soul contemplating generation from above.’\(^\text{42}\) It is characteristic of divine beings in Neoplatonism that they providentially administer to that which lies below them, without departing from their causes. In the Phaedrus Commentary, Hermias explicitly likens Socrates in this regard to the Demiurge of the Timaeus and to the divine helmsman of Statesman. Here is how Hermias reads the episode at Phaedrus 242c where Socrates prepares to leave but is prevented by his daimon.

So what is said of the Demiurge in the Timaeus, [namely, ] ‘after saying these words to the young gods, he retired to his watching-place,’ Socrates also [does] now: having spent time\(^\text{43}\) on the middle-level concepts of the soul and having censured licentious love and left it to Phaedrus to advance (proballein) the concepts concerned with chaste love from within

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\(^{41}\) Cf. Damasc. Phil. Hist. §38.A with the implicit appraisal of Marinus’ insight into the text of Plato’s Philebus.

\(^{42}\) In Phdr. 29.29-30.1 (Lucarini & Moreschini). The translation is from the first of two volumes of Hermias On Plato’s Phaedrus for Sorabji’s Ancient Commentators series by Baltzly and Share.

\(^{43}\) Or perhaps, ‘having squandered time’.
himself, he wants to retire ‘to his own watching-place’ and to intellec-
tive activities. [However], his appointed daemon keeps him longer in the
sphere of generation to complete his speech and present his arguments
on the subject of divine and elevating love.44

The reference is to the Timaeus 42e5-6, but the phrase ‘to his own watching-
place’ is taken from the similar passage at Statesman 272e5. In each case, the
parallel establishes Socrates, the philosopher-educator, as a microcosm of a
Demiurge-like figure who orders and administers the cosmos, whilst never de-
parting from this contemplation of the paradigm of that which he administers.
The parallel between the beneficent philosopher-educator and the provi-
dential gods also comes across clearly in Olympiodorus’ Phaedo Commentary:

If there are two kinds of powers that belong to god—that of ascending
(anagôgous) and that of exercising providence—and if those by which
he exercises providence over secondary things do not impede his power
to ascend and to revert upon himself, but rather he exercises both at the
same time, then there is nothing to prevent the philosopher as imitator
of god (for philosophy is assimilation to god) being active in a manner
that brings things about (genesiourgôs) and in a manner that is provi-
dent, whilst simultaneously also being active in a manner that is pure
and undefiled (kathartikôs). §2.145

In Proclus’ Alcibiades Commentary, Socrates’ daemon and his natural philan-
thrôpeia combine to yield activity that conforms with the double action de-
scribed above. Thanks to the latter, Socrates was always willing to make himself
available to people for the purpose of associating in the best way of life—an
elementary exercising providence. But some people are hopeless: associating
with them would be a waste of time. Socrates’ daemon restrained him from
such pointless associations and this would have the effect of allowing him to
exercise his providential care for secondary beings whilst remaining secure in
his reversion upon himself and the higher causes whose traces he finds within
himself.46 Like the Demiurge, Socrates can bring order to the souls of those apt

44 In Phdr. 66.30-67.3 (Lucarini & Moreschini).
45 Cf. Proclus, Elements of Theology, prop. 122 Πᾶν τὸ θεῖον καὶ προνοεῖ τῶν δευτέρων καὶ
ἐξηρτιά τῶν προνουμένων.
46 In Alc. 80.21-83.16. For the effect of the daemon in preserving Socrates’ power of ascent
in particular, see 83.12-14 ὁ Σωκράτους δαίμων περιάγει μὲν αὐτὸν εἰς τὴν νυερᾶν περιωπῆν,
ἐπέχειν δὲ τῶν πρὸς τοὺς πολλῶς συνουσίων.
for philosophy without ever wavering in his contemplation of higher realities. He sits finely balanced between productive overflow to lower orders of being and undisturbed reversion upon higher causes thanks to the double action of philanthropeia and the daemon.

So if the Neoplatonic schools are textual communities, then in accordance with (3) above they understand themselves and their activities in terms borrowed from the texts around which the community is convened. When it comes to the role of leadership of the school, the model is Socrates. But the Neoplatonic Socrates is frequently a Socrates modelled on the Demiurge of the Timaeus.47 The divine Demiurge in the Timaeus exercises providence over a cosmos and its contents. But the Neoplatonists think that each Platonic dialogue is a kind of cosmos. We saw this above in the Prolegomena with respect to the analogy between the components of the dialogue (persons, time, setting, style, etc) and the constituents of the cosmos (matter, form, nature, soul, etc). The Prolegomena examines this analogy from a variety of perspectives. The second one is important for our purposes. The cosmos is like a dialogue because

... just as in the world there are superior and inferior beings and when the soul remains here it now casts its lot with the superior, now with the inferior, so too in the dialogue there are characters, some of whom ask questions and some of whom answer them. Our souls [as readers], play the role of the judge, siding now with the one asking the questions, now with the person questioned.48

One of the primary blessings the Demiurge bestows upon the cosmos he (timelessly) creates and exercises providence over is unifying it and making it one (henopoiein).49 So just as the demiurge providentially governs an ordered and unified cosmos drawn from seemingly disparate kinds of bodies, so too the Platonic diadochus brings unity and coherence to his auditors’ experience of Platonic texts—texts whose richness and complexity mean that they always seem to be in danger of overflowing with meaning and heading off in many directions at once.

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47 This is perhaps unsurprising given the manner in which the Neoplatonists read the ideal human polis of the Republic in relation to the cosmic politeia of the Timaeus. The role of the guardians is analogous to that of the Demiurge, since the ideal city is a microcosm of the celestial politeia.

48 Proleg. 15.1-16.

49 Cf. in Tim. 1 414.8-16; 11 52.3-4; 111 273.9-13.
Let us consider how this demiurgic function is realised in Proclus’ *Commentary on the Timaeus*. The *skopos* that Proclus identifies for that dialogue helps to see how it constitutes a unity. This is clearly a challenge since even modern interpreters struggle to see the relevance of the recapitulation of the *Republic* as the subject of the previous day’s conversation, and then the narration of the story of Atlantis to the account of the cosmos given by Timaeus starting at 27c. Proclus takes the *skopos* of the *Timaeus* to be *physiologia*—the study of nature. However, this theme is pursued from three different perspectives. It considers the same things in images and in paradigms, as well as in parts and wholes. The first of these perspectives for pursuing the study of nature allows Proclus to show how the recapitulation of the *Republic* and the story of Atlantis connect to the speech of Timaeus that follows. The cosmos which our study of nature seeks to understand is both a unity and a plurality of parts. The constitution recapitulated by Socrates is the image of cosmic unity, while the war between the Athenians and Atlantans is the image of cosmic division and opposition (*in Tim. 1 4.15-20*). Thus we should not see the dialogue as having an introduction that is wholly distinct and unrelated to the inquiry into the nature of the cosmos that starts only at *Timaeus 27d5*. In fact, *Timaeus 17a-27b* pursues the same theme, but in a different manner. As in Olympiodorus’ *Gorgias* commentary, we are reminded of this controlling *skopos* and the role played by the different divisions of the text throughout the commentary.

Proclus’ identification of the *skopos* in his introduction to the dialogue thus unifies the work for his readers in much the way as the Demiurge in the dialogue unifies the ensouled and sensible cosmos. This he does by means of *analogia* or proportions—either in the geometric mean established through the four elements (31b-32c) or through the variety of harmonies in the World Soul (35b-36b). In Proclus’ case, the *analogia* seems to be that the *Republic* is to Atlantis as cosmic unity is to cosmic oppositions.

Now, from our perspective, we may think of the Platonic *diadochus* as *imposing* unity upon a Platonic dialogue by his overly systematic use of the device of the single *skopos*. But of course the Platonists themselves would not think that they are *imposing* any such thing; they are *discovering* the unity that it is there! What the identification of the *skopos* imposes a unity upon is the *shared experience of the students’ reading of the text with the master*. As the *Prolegomena* suggests, the dialogue is a cosmos in which the readers are present. The readers’ souls get sucked into the dialogue by virtue of siding now

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50 *In Tim I 1.17-19* καὶ ὁ σύμπας οὗτος διάλογος καθ’ ὅλου ἑαυτὸν τὴν φυσιολογίαν ἔχει σκοπόν, τά αὐτά καὶ ἐν εἰκόσι καὶ ἐν παραδείγμασιν ὁρῶν, καὶ ἐν τοῖς ὅλοις καὶ ἐν τοῖς μέρεσι.
with the questioner, now with the one who answers. The dialogue form is thus a kind of reader-absorbing cosmos. So strictly speaking, our analogy is like this: as the Demiurge stands to the cosmos, so the Neoplatonic teacher stands to the experience of the shared reading of the dialogue. The skopos assumption is one way in which the Neoplatonic teacher orders and unifies the experience of reading Plato’s dialogues within his community, thus fulfilling a role for them analogous to that which the Demiurge plays in relation to the cosmos. The presupposition that each Platonic dialogue has a skopos is not, I have argued, an assumption that is easily justified either by reference to Plato’s texts even when these texts are read as the Neoplatonists read them. While the skopos assumption admits of a pedagogic justification of sorts, the Neoplatonists’ firm embrace of the assumption is better explained by reference to the notion of textual communities. It is characteristic of such communities, inter alia, to derive their self-understanding from the texts that they regard as authoritative. Through the successful identification of the skopos of a dialogue, the leader of the textual community fulfills his self-conception as Demiurge—one who unifies a dialogue considered as a microcosm for the benefit of his auditors.

Works Cited


