Thomas Taylor as an Interpreter of Plato:
An Epigone of Marsilio Ficino?

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Thomas Taylor (1758-1835) published *The works of Plato* in 1804. This publication contained his own and Floyer Sydenham’s (1710-1787) English translations of Plato’s dialogues and letters, as well as Sydenham’s and Taylor’s introductions and notes to these texts and Taylor’s ‘General introduction’ to the entire publication.¹ Taylor’s *Works of Plato* was reviewed in 1804 in *The literary journal* and in 1809 in *The Edinburgh review* by an anonymous reviewer, criticising Taylor’s hermeneutic approach to Plato as being indebted to Neoplatonism—or Alexandrian eclecticism, as it was also dubbed—Proclus in particular.² Over the last decades, the two scholars John Glucker and Myles Burnyeat have argued that James Mill (1773-1836) was the author of both reviews.³ James Mill is now known for his dissemination of Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism and as the father of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), the philosopher who advanced empiricist and liberal ideas, that was considerably influential in the 19th century.

¹) This 1804 publication has been reprinted by the Prometheus Trust, 1995-96. In this recent publication we find orthographic changes, corrections of grammatical errors and spelling, and some re-arrangement of the notes. Below I refer to the original 1804 publication and to this reprint; I refer to the latter in square brackets. This applies to the texts of Plato and to the texts of Taylor in these two publications. For Taylor’s life and work, see Raine 1969 and Louth 2004. For his influence upon the English romantic movement, see Raine 1968.
³) Glucker 1996: 395-397, holds that James Mill was the author of both reviews. Burnyeat 2001a: 65 n. 41 and 2001b agrees.
Burnyeat edited Mill's two reviews in 2001, adding his own assessment of the Taylor-Mill controversy, and he summed up the two approaches to Plato. According to Burnyeat, Mill, the anonymous reviewer, was an original and singular thinker, whereas Taylor was a mere epigone of Ficino:

Because he [James Mill] was on his own, he had the luck to fall in love with a Plato unencumbered by the Neoplatonic interpretation which had prevailed since Ficino and the Renaissance. He read Plato and he read Cicero, and found the second an attractive guide to the first. Later he read Taylor, a mere epigone of Ficino.4

These are strong contentions, which I should like to consider over the following pages.

Let me begin with the first claim. Was James Mill really “on his own” in his interpretation of Plato, using Cicero as his guide? It depends on what is meant by “on his own”, but there are some circumstances that suggest something else. As is made clear in Burnyeat’s own edition of Mill’s 1809 review, Mill cited Johann Jacob Brucker’s Historia critica philosophiae extensively in his attacks on the Neoplatonists on whom Taylor was said to rely. This work of Brucker came out in five volumes in 1742-44, to which an appendix was added in 1767. In 1791, William Enfield’s abbreviated English translation of this work appeared. Mill cited three “grunts”, as he called them, from Brucker’s Latin opus, vilifying the interpretation of Plato advanced by Proclus and other Neoplatonists.5 In addition to these, Mill cited a series of “squeaks” targeting the morality of the Neoplatonists favoured by Taylor: Plotinus, Porphyry, Appollonius, Proclus, and Hierocles.6 In this respect, Mill was not “on his own”; he was clearly accompanied by Brucker. Mill may still have been “on his own” in his use of Cicero as a key to understand Plato’s thoughts.

It turns out, however, that Brucker had also made use of Cicero in the work cited extensively by Mill. Here Brucker had used Cicero as a pivotal figure in his interpretation of Plato: Cicero, according to Brucker, predated Neoplatonism and its interpretation of Plato. For this reason Cicero could be used as a pure and uncontaminated source to Plato’s philosophy:

4) Burnyeat 2001b: 105.
Let us look back, however, to those among the Ancients, who were less infected by detestable syncretism, as the school of Plotinus, and who must therefore be considered to have reported Plato’s doctrines in a somewhat purer form. Among those one should, without discussion, mention Cicero in the first place. In the *Academica*, an elegant and brief treatise, he reported, in a very eloquent form, Plato’s doctrines, which were taught in the Academy.\(^7\)

Mill returned to Cicero for much the same reason, and he even returned to the same work of Cicero as Brucker, namely the *Academica*. This is fundamental to Brucker’s interpretation of Plato, and Mill obviously followed Brucker on this point. Hence, Mill cannot have been “on his own” in this respect. Admittedly, Brucker and Mill used Cicero in different ways: Brucker used Cicero and some Middle Platonists—primarily Alcinous and Apuleius—to present Plato as a system builder, interpreting the *archai* (God, matter, ideas) reported by Alcinous as three general theories, so-called principles of Plato’s system, from which he allegedly deduced his doctrines;\(^8\) Mill, on the other hand, used Cicero’s account to present Plato as an undogmatic sceptic.\(^9\) It may well be true that Mill influenced Grote’s interpretation of Plato on this point, as argued by Burnyeat, but it still remains a fact that Mill’s historical outlook was conditioned by Brucker. To this should be added that Mill accepted Brucker’s divide between what we now call Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism, including Brucker’s characterisation of the latter as eclectic or syncretistic philosophy. Seen in this perspective, it becomes questionable whether Mill was entirely “on his own” as a Plato interpreter, even though his interpretation entailed a sceptic twist.

It should be noticed that Burnyeat is not blind to the fact that Mill gave Taylor a rough and unfair treatment. He nevertheless praises Mill for his courage to break with the Neoplatonic tradition that had been in


\(^{8)}\) For Brucker’s reconstruction of Plato’s system of philosophy, see Catana 2008: 73-94.

control since the Renaissance: “Mill’s account of Proclus and other NeoPlatonists is grossly unfair. But I admit that I would not want to read Plato solely through their eyes. They miss so much that Cicero appreciates. Like Taylor, they completely lack his (and Mill’s) esteem for the Socratic spirit of questioning. And they are much too solemn.”

Let me move on to the second claim contained in Burnyeat’s assessment cited on page 304 above. Is it historically correct to speak of a “NeoPlatonic interpretation [of Plato] which had prevailed since Ficino and the Renaissance”? Neoplatonic interpretations of Plato had been rejected vehemently in Northern Europe by several German thinkers in an anti-Platonic campaign in the first part of the 18th century: Christoph August Heumann, ‘Das Leben Plotini vom Porphyrio beschrieben’ (Halle, 1715); Michael Gottlieb Hansch, Diatriba de enthusiasm Platonico (Leipzig 1716); Johann Lorenz Mosheim, De turbata per recentiores Platonicos ecclesia (Helmstadt, 1725). This campaign was absorbed into Brucker’s Historia critica philosophiae, which was largely written out of the conviction that Platonism was a threat to the Christian church. Brucker was a Lutheran, just like the compatriots just mentioned, and he intended to use history of philosophy as a means to combat this threat posed by Platonism.

This anti-Platonic campaign had been put into circulation in England through Enfield’s translation of 1791. It had also been echoed in William Warburton’s (1698-1779) Divine legation of Moses, demonstrated on the principles of a religious deist (1737-1741) to which Taylor refers. Here Warburton had flustered against the “Platonic fanaticism”, a typical invective used against Neoplatonists among these 18th-century German historians of philosophy. In the 1767 appendix to Brucker’s Historia critica philosophiae, Warburton was praised as one with whom Brucker sided in central philosophical and theological matters. Taylor may have sensed this alliance in the scholarly community, since he ties Warburton and Brucker

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10) Burnyeat 2001b: 106.
11) Unfortunately, this German campaign has not yet been studied properly. For the criticism of Platonic enthusiasm in Northern Europe, see Heyd 1995. For the reception of Neoplatonic thought in Northern Europe from the 15th to the 19th century, see also Matton 1992.
14) Brucker 1742-67, VI: 202-205, agrees with Warburton (relying on a Latin translation
(the “heavy German critics”) together in his ‘General introduction’.\textsuperscript{15} Mill’s 1809 criticism conformed with these trends in the second half of 18th-century scholarship. It seems as if it was Taylor, not Mill, who was “on his own”: Platonism, especially Neoplatonism, was certainly not a movement in vogue in that period in Northern Europe. Taylor was working against the current.

Renaissance interpretations of Plato make up a heterogeneous group of interpretations, as explained by James Hankins.\textsuperscript{16} They do have one thing in common, however, and that is the absence of Brucker’s historiographical concept, ‘system of philosophy’, and the corresponding absence of a specific mode of interpretation and exposition in which the system concept is vital. Renaissance interpretations of Plato were typically organised as commentaries on Plato’s dialogues and letters. Brucker’s hermeneutic precepts meant that this hermeneutic technique was abandoned. Instead, the interpreter would have to identify the principles, i.e. the general theories, in the past philosopher’s system of philosophy, from which the doctrines within the various compartments of philosophy were deduced. Brucker thus identified Plato’s doctrine of ideas as the unique and privileged principle in Plato’s system from which various doctrines could be deduced and accounted for in a systematic manner.\textsuperscript{17} This hermeneutic procedure was anachronistic, since the corresponding methodological ideal was unknown among philosophers active before the seventeenth century. It caught on, however, in 18th- and 19th-century general histories of philosophy and became a truism.\textsuperscript{18}

Ancient Neoplatonists did not adhere to such hermeneutic precepts (but to other precepts) and were generally seen as incompetent interpreters among post-Bruckerian historians of philosophy. Renaissance Neoplatonists, to whom these precepts were also unknown, fared no better. This meant that Renaissance commentaries on Plato were scorned as philosophically incompetent and therefore ignored. According to Brucker and his followers, the philosophers composing such commentaries did not possess

\textsuperscript{15} Taylor 1804: xci [Taylor 1995: 63].
\textsuperscript{16} For Renaissance readings of Plato, see Hankins 1991.
\textsuperscript{17} Brucker 1742-67, I: 695. See also Catana 2008: 85.
\textsuperscript{18} Catana 2008: 193-282.
an independent mind, but were “betaken” and “ensnared” by the “prejudices” of their subject matter; they were deprived a sound “power of judgement” enabling them to identify the “principles” in the past thinker, and they were therefore also unable to reconstruct the edifice of an internally coherent system of philosophy based on principles. Such commentators were therefore ignored and openly ridiculed by Brucker and his followers. They were “only” commentators. After Brucker, such commentaries are often perceived, in some cases falsely, as philosophically sterile or unoriginal, or as purely philological. His precepts degraded the originality and viability of a very long tradition of pre-seventeenth century commentaries. Neoplatonic commentators suffered from this blow, and so did other commentary traditions, including the Arabic tradition.

It is therefore somewhat misleading to claim, as Burnyeat does, that some Renaissance Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato had prevailed from the Renaissance onwards. Taylor does pick up the term ‘system’ in his ‘General introduction’, but he does not adhere to the hermeneutic precepts grafted upon Brucker’s system concept: Taylor does not identify general theories, so-called principles, from which deductions can take place and produce an internally coherent complex of philosophical theories. Instead, he returns to the Hellenic and Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato’s philosophy as an ethical and metaphysical enterprise.

Let me turn to my third and last comment on Burnyeat’s contention. Did Taylor return to Ficino’s interpretation of Plato? Was Taylor “a mere epigonous of Ficino”? Let me begin with a few simple questions: Which edition(s) of Plato’s Greek text did Taylor rely on for his translations? And did Taylor follow Ficino’s commentaries on Plato’s works?

The Plato publication of 1804 was the outcome of an early collaboration between Thomas Taylor and Flyer Sydenham, and they probably used different texts for their English translations. Sydenham had died in 1787. Nine of his translations of Plato were included in the 1804 publication: The First and Second Alcibiades, the Greater and Lesser Hippias, the Symposium (except the speech of Alcibiades), the Philebus, the Meno, the Io and the Rivals. In the notes to these translations we find Sydenham’s references to Ficino’s editions of Plato’s Greek text and to his Latin translations. Sydenham also compares Ficino’s editions of Plato with various other editions of the Greek texts, and he discusses different Latin translations, among which we find those of Ficino. Sydenham is clearly a conscientious and thorough translator, reporting the various amendments of the Greek
text, as laid down by various editors, and spelling out interpretative consequences of different readings of the Greek text. Sydenham also makes one single reference to Ficino’s commentary to Plato’s works, namely to the Io.

Taylor does not disclose which editions of Plato he used for his translations and revisions of Sydenham’s translations and notes. If we look at the notes to those dialogues not translated by Sydenham, we do find a few philological references to Ficino, but they do not provide detailed information about specific editions, and they do not make comparisons between different editions and translations. Sydenham seems to have been much more thorough than Taylor on this point. Taylor explains that his translation had “assistance” from Ficino’s Latin translations: Partly because of Ficino’s knowledge of Platonism, partly because Ficino had access to “a very valuable manuscript in the Medicean library, which is now no longer to be found.”


Mill objected—not completely unfairly—that Taylor did not provide a philologically satisfying edition of Plato’s Greek text, and Mill contended that Taylor sometimes translated Plato into English from Ficino’s or Serranus’ Latin translations, rather than from Plato’s Greek texts.20 All this does not bring us closer to an answer to the question about editions used in Taylor’s translations, and I doubt that it can be settled with any certainty. Moreover, Taylor may have consulted various editions at the Bodley Library at Oxford and the British Library in London. In his auctioned library we find several editions of Plato, which he may also have consulted.

21) See, for instance, Catalogue 1836: nn. 341, 427-442, 608, 669, 707. It is one thing to use Ficino’s Latin translations of Plato and quite another to use and adhere to Ficino’s philosophical interpretation of Plato. The former does not necessarily imply the latter, although there are overlaps between the two from time to time; translation presupposes interpretation. Taylor evidently used Ficino’s translation of Plato, as admitted in his ‘General introduction’, but he rarely referred to Ficino’s commentaries on Plato’s dialogues and letters. He typically chose to ignore them. This is a striking omission to any Platonist said to rely on Ficino’s philosophical, allegedly Neoplatonic, interpretation of Plato. It does leave one wondering what Burnyeat means when he claims that Taylor was an epigone of Ficino’s interpretation of Plato.


Taylor’s unwillingness to use Ficino’s Plato commentaries is consistent with his announcement in the ‘General introduction’, where he presents his guides to Plato: Damascius, Hierocles, Proclus.\textsuperscript{22} As admitted by Burnyeat himself, Taylor explicitly rejected the Neoplatonism of Pico and Ficino in his ‘General introduction’, because it sought to fuse what cannot be fused, according to Taylor, namely Platonism and Christianity.\textsuperscript{23} This difference between Ficino’s and Taylor’s forms of Platonism becomes evident in the different views on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and its compatibility with Platonism: Ficino sought to harmonise the two, whereas Taylor himself wanted to keep the two separate. This difference can be exemplified in their uses of pseudo-Dionysius. Ficino had stated: “Dionysios the Areopagite is the height of Platonic doctrine, and the pillar of Christian theology.”\textsuperscript{24} Taylor, on the other hand, did not mention pseudo-Dionysius at all in his ‘General introduction’, nor other Christian Neoplatonists such as Marius Victorinus and Augustine. The strain of Neoplatonism which Taylor favoured was stripped of these Christian interpretations, but goes back to those non-Christian, or Hellenic, Neoplatonists who were either neutral towards Christianity or turned away from it: Hierocles, Plotinus, Porphyry, Damascius and Proclus. This difference has implications for the interpretation of fundamental Neoplatonic concepts, such as unity and multiplicity, and it underlines the difference between the two strains of Neoplatonism favoured by these Renaissance thinkers and Taylor. So this third contention of Burnyeat also seems to be in need of qualification.

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\textsuperscript{22} Taylor 1804: lxxxvii [Taylor 1995: 61].

\textsuperscript{23} Taylor 1804: xc [Taylor 1995: 63].

\textsuperscript{24} Ficino 1576: 1013: “Dionysius Areopagita platonicae disciplinae culmen, et christianae theologiae column”.

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Catalogue of the singularly curious library of the late Thomas Taylor, Esq., the celebrated Platonist. Produced by Mr. Sotherby and son, London, in relation to the auction held on February 2, 1836 and the following day. I cite this as “Catalogue 1836”.


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