

The Perfidious Strategy; or, the Platonists against Stoicism

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All his usual formalities of perfidy were observed with scrupulous technique.

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Polemics are part of many people's everyday life; sometimes they are even necessary or useful. They were, for instance, necessary for ancient philosophers who, in the absence of any institutional acknowledgment, always needed to prove their authority and attract students. From the very beginning (think of Heraclitus or Isocrates, Plato, and Aristotle), to attack or discredit the credentials of the adversaries was an incisive way to claim one's own authority. Polemics were even more useful for philosophers who were trying to fight their way into an already organized context. This was precisely the problem of the Platonists at the beginning of the early imperial age. For at least two and a half centuries, the Hellenistic centuries, it had been clear who were the major figures and the protagonists. In the Hellenistic age philosophy was the affair of Stoics, Academics, and Epicureans; the major philosophical debates turned around them, whereas other thinkers (the Cynics for instance) or schools (the Peripatos) were relegated to the fringe. In the first century BCE, the panorama was enriched by the arrival of, among others, the Platonists. Seen from the perspective of later centuries, one can describe the Platonists' attempt to conquer the center of the scene as the "chronicle of a triumph foretold": in a few decades, and for many centuries, the main problem of philosophy became Plato's metaphysics. There was no more room for skeptical doubts or for Stoic and Epicurean empiricism.

But at the beginning of the early imperial age, the situation for Platonists was not so simple, for several reasons. For centuries the agenda of problems to be investigated and discussed was fixed: there was the problem of the criterion,

which is the foundation of knowledge; there was the debate on the *telos* or the *summum bonum*; there was the problem of reconciling determinism and human responsibility, and so on. It is what Tony Long once described as “professionalism,” a “community of concepts, standard questions and answers, common argumentative methods and objections.”¹ The two major Hellenistic schools, the Stoics and the Epicureans, had been able to build a coherent system of thought in order to account for all these problems.

These points raised substantial problems for Platonists. Their basis was Plato, but in the dialogues the topics of the Hellenistic debates were not clearly discussed; at best there were only scanty traces. Besides, and even more problematic, it was very difficult to organize the dialogues in a coherent and perfect system, which was the pride of the Epicureans and, above all, the Stoics.² By the way, that the Hellenistic tradition of Platonism—that is, the Academy of Arcesilaus and Carneades—was in essence antisystematic must not be neglected.

So for Platonists the problems were how to be accepted by this already organized community and, hopefully, how to obtain high visibility and become protagonists in the philosophical debates. Undoubtedly, the task was not easy. Given this difficult situation, the strategic importance of polemics becomes clear: to attack the adversaries is a good strategy if you want to discredit their presumed authority and attract attention. But how can one obtain this result? To put it more clearly, how should one polemicize?

Until now I have spoken of polemics as if it were evident what polemics consist of.³ In fact there are several kinds of polemics, and the problem is to find the most effective one for one's purposes. In antiquity, and not only among philosophers, (biographical) calumny was, for instance, very popular. It is not a kind of polemics that we nowadays appreciate, but at that time it was widespread, and the reason is clear: for the ancients the connection between doctrines and life was stronger and more important than it is for us. In consequence, to attack the life and behavior of a philosopher was a way to attack his philosophical views. Another possibility was to directly attack the philosophical ideas of the adversary by claiming that they were completely mistaken. Needless to say this possibility too was very popular; it was probably the most popular, especially when the divergencies between two schools were too radical to be reconciled. If we consider early imperial Platonism, the best example of these two strategies was the polemic against Epicurus and Epicureanism.

1 Long, “Ptolemy *On the Criterion*,” 182.

2 Cf. Cic. *Fin.* 3.74.

3 See also André Laks's remarks in this volume.