Who was Plato and what is Platonism? The few details we know about Plato’s life tell us only of a young man who spent his whole early life growing up in a city embroiled in a disastrous war, who became finally disillusioned with the “right” and “left” wing political parties of his day after the death of Socrates, whom Plato had known to that point practically all his life; they tell us of a middle-aged man who had perhaps completed the majority of his dialogues by the time he was forty and who founded one of the great institutions of civilization, the Academy, apparently in order to bring a concern for mathematics, geometry, and the diverse forms of learning together with a sense of shared responsibility for the polis, all within the broader concern of human philosophical conversation in search of the truth about things; and they tell us of an elderly man who did not demonstrate much political insight in his apparent choice of Sicily for a politico-philosophical experiment and who delivered in his extreme old age one of the most abstruse lectures of all time that concluded with the view that the good is the one.

Apart from these and a few other details—among them Plato’s apparent recognition that he did not have the talent to become a genuine poet, we know very little. Worse still, the dialogues themselves conceal as much as they reveal, for Plato’s hand is everywhere at work, but Plato himself never appears except by oblique reference at best.

How then are we to find a Plato who never appears in his own dialogues and how are we to gauge critically the apparent “Platonism” that is so confidently extracted from history and is so well-known even to casual observers that it requires almost no comment whatsoever? Platonism is apparently “abstract idealism,” dedicated to the reification of transcendent, supersensible forms, indeed, a “theory of Forms.” It is dualistic, privileging soul over body, essence over existence, form over matter (for the most part, terms that Plato never uses himself); it is authoritarian and tyrannical (despite the picture of tyrannical authoritarianism that Socrates deconstructs in the Republic); it is universalist with no real sense of the meaning(s) of individuality (despite the many individuals we find in the dialogues generally), and so on.

Should we, then, only locate Plato’s “Platonism” in some of the “more important” dialogues? Should we develop a chronology and
pin-point “developments” or “repudiations” of earlier views, a “later” repudiation of the theory of Forms, for instance, or an “earlier” anti-immortalist view of the soul? Or should we determine what Platonism is and then illustrate it from passages throughout the dialogues, privileging the clearly “more important bits”, like the body-tomb motif in the *Phaedo* or Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium* or the cave allegory in the *Republic*? Should we determine what is philosophically important and regard, with suitable disclaimers, everything else as ornamentation, myth, or setting? Or do setting and myth have their own place too? Or again, should we suppose, if not extracted doctrines, then some “unwritten doctrines” about whose representation the mature Plato was explicitly skeptical, and in light of these, then read the dialogues with fresh insight? Alternatively, should we attempt—the almost superhuman task—of reading each dialogue as a whole and then somehow also contriving to read them all inter-textually? But, in this case, what will be our criteria for deciding what is “whole” and what foundation might any inter-textual readings have in this context, especially since we can have little assurance that our chronology of the dialogues has any chance of being the “correct” one? Is the *Timaeus*, for instance, written after the *Republic* or is it much later? We simply do not know.

So, in one way or another, the skeptical student of Plato and Platonism is forced into the maelstrom of history, of which this volume is a small and necessarily selective token. In order to understand what Platonism might have been and what it can be, could our best guide perhaps be Plato’s own nephew, Speusippus, or the later Academy? But this turns out to be implausible since Speusippus and the later Academy seem so different from anything we find in the dialogues. Should Platonism then be understood in terms of later “Middle Platonism,” or of the “Neopythagoreanism” of Nicomachus of Gerasa or Moderatus of Gades? Again, this seems even less plausible since most of the testimonies we possess come by the hands of still later thinkers whose reports are necessarily colored by their own perspectives.

This is most of all the case in the best textual evidence for “Platonism” we possess in the whole of late antiquity, namely, the so-called Neoplatonic *Enneads* of Plotinus, preserved *in toto* because of the accident that the Syrian Porphyry came to Rome to be Plotinus’ student and eventually his colleague, encouraged Plotinus to write his thoughts down on papyrus, and then collected and edited the results for posterity. Surely, one of the great ironies of history is that Plato, the enigmatic, always hidden author of the dialogues—who became in Philo and for