Neopythagoreanism and ‘Plato’s’ second letter

JOHN M. RIST

The discussion of the διάνυσμα of the world in Sextus Empiricus 10, 248-284 is very confused. Doctrines appear to be attributed now to the Pythagoreans, now to Plato. It seems probable that either Sextus or his source or both were unaware of the precise origin of many of the ideas they were dealing with. It is certain that in the last century B.C. and the early centuries A.D. there was a mass of writings in circulation which purported to be of early Pythagorean origin and which attempted to bring the Pythagoreans into close relationship with Plato. One can recall the treatise which has come down as the work of Ocellus Lucanus,¹ but which probably dates from the early first century B.C. According to a letter preserved by Diogenes Laertius (8.80) and attributed by him to Archytas, it was Archytas himself who found the writings of Ocellus Lucanus and sent them to Plato.² The reply which Plato is supposed to have made to this letter is also preserved — it is Epistle Twelve in our collection. It is of interest therefore to examine the credentials of this letter in more detail. On doing so, we find that our earliest knowledge of it comes from Diogenes’ report of the grouping of Plato’s writings in tetralogies by Thrasyllus. Thrasyllus’ ninth tetralogy apparently included the thirteen supposedly Platonic Epistles (D.L.3.61). Diogenes mentions the grouping of the Platonic works by the grammarian Aristophanes and alludes to the letters in this connection, but he does not tell us how many there were. We cannot be sure therefore that our Epistle Twelve was in Aristophanes’ collection. Indeed, if it is to be connected, as seems likely, with the appearance of the supposed writings of Ocellus Lucanus in the first century B.C., then Aristophanes could not have known it.

¹ See the text and commentary of R. Harder, Neue Philologische Untersuchungen 1 (Berlin 1926).
² This letter (as well as Plato’s reply) is said by H. Thesleff, “Okkelos, Archytas and Plato”, Eranos 60 (1962) 34 to be designed for a Roman audience. This is probably correct, and if so, Thesleff’s date for the letters (early second century B.C.) is too early. A more satisfactory date would be some time shortly after or contemporary with the activity of Nigidius Figulus at Rome. It is significant that Varro is the first author to know Ocellus’ treatise (ap. Censorin., 4.3, D.-K. i, 440.5).
It is probable therefore that 'Plato's' Twelfth Letter appeared at the earliest about 80 B.C. and at the very latest in the time of Thrasyllus, the astrologer of the Emperor Tiberius. Since the supposed writings of Ocellus are certainly of Neopythagorean origin, we may assume that the Twelfth Letter is from a similar source. Now in three of our manuscripts (Burnet's A, O and Z) there is a note after Epistle Twelve saying that some people deny that it is from Plato's hand. It has often been supposed that this note goes back to Thrasyllus himself. Thrasyllus' own philosophic penchant was for Pythagoreanism, and if pseudepigrapha relating to the writings of Ocellus Lucanus were in circulation he is most likely to have known of them. The letter probably dates back to well before Thrasyllus' lifetime, though he himself may have been aware that its genuineness was denied. At any rate, it seems certain that although it is in fact spurious, Thrasyllus included it in his collection. Even if the sentence containing the doubts about its authenticity was written by Thrasyllus himself, it seems from Diogenes' account that he nevertheless included this letter with the genuine (3.57) works of Plato.

If Thrasyllus then could either deliberately and disingenuously insert, what he knew to be a non-Platonic letter into the Platonic corpus, or if, as is more likely, he could be deceived by his Pythagorean acquaintances (some of whom may have known something of the provenance of the letter and of the work of 'Ocellus' himself) into regarding the Twelfth Letter as genuine, we may be permitted to entertain doubts about his ability to discern true from false in the case of the other letters also – particularly in the case of any which might have Pythagorean content. He might come across such a spurious letter among the philosophers of his own acquaintance.

In such a doubting frame of mind we may turn to the notorious Epistle Two. After showing that many of the arguments against the Platonic authorship of this letter are not particularly strong, Bluck\(^3\) has recently concluded that it is spurious. It is not possible to re-examine here all the arguments for and against Platonic authorship, but a little may perhaps be said about the famous passage on the Three Principles (312D-313A) in the light of our present opinion of Thrasyllus' acumen as a critic. The question is: Could these mysterious words of the Second Epistle about the Three Principles be of Neopythagorean origin? Could Epistle Two come from the same source as