

HARPOCRATION OF ARGOS: ETYMOLOGY AND METAPHYSICS IN THE PLATONIST REVIVAL

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Abstract: This paper shows that our principal ancient source for the metaphysical views of the second-century Platonist Harpocraton of Argos drew on his interpretation of Plato's *Cratylus*. This is important because there is no other evidence of the *Cratylus* being read for its metaphysical content until Proclus, 300 years later. It also changes our understanding of Harpocraton: he is generally supposed to share the metaphysical views of Numenius, but his exegesis of the *Cratylus* reveals him to be a faithful student of Atticus.

Keywords: Harpocraton, Atticus, Numenius, *Cratylus*, metaphysics

This paper seeks to add to the little we know about the late second-century Platonist philosopher Harpocraton of Argos by showing, first of all, that he was a faithful pupil of Atticus in his metaphysics (and not seriously influenced by Numenius as is commonly assumed) and, secondly, that he read the *Cratylus* in support of his metaphysical views.¹ Both of these points have some significance for our understanding of Platonism in the century before Plotinus: the first, in helping us to understand and better appreciate Atticus' metaphysics, and redressing in some measure the tendency to exaggerate the dominance of Numenius in his own time; the second, in showing that the *Cratylus* was already being read in the second century for more than its discussion of etymology – something we would not have guessed from other evidence for the period.

The principal testimonium for Harpocraton's metaphysical views comes from Proclus' commentary on *Timaeus* 28c, where Plato refers to the 'father and maker' of the cosmos (τὸν μὲν οὖν ποιητὴν καὶ πατέρα τοῦδε τοῦ παντὸς εὐρεῖν τε ἔργον καὶ εὐρόντα εἰς ἅπαντας ἀδύνατον λέγειν). Proclus himself thinks that these designations ('father' and 'maker') refer to one and the same god, namely the creator-god, or demiurge. But he is aware of earlier Platonists who think that they refer to two different gods, one of whom is 'father', the other of whom is 'maker'. In effect, says Proclus, this amounts to positing a *double* creator. Numenius is the worst – or anyway the most prominent – offender (Proclus *On the Timaeus* 1.303.27–304.5 Diehl = Numenius *fr.* 21 des Places):

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¹ The meagre testimonia for Harpocraton are collected at A. Gioè, *Filosofi Medioplatonici del II Secolo D.C.* (Naples 2002) 435–85. An earlier edition of those related to his exegesis of particular Platonic dialogues is J. Dillon, 'Harpocraton's commentary on Plato: fragments of a Middle Platonic commentary', *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* 4 (1971) 125–46. Harpocraton's age is inferred from his being a pupil of Atticus (whose floruit was located by Eusebius in the 238th Olympiad, i.e. AD 176–180: see *Chronicon* 207 Helm): Proclus *On the Timaeus* 1.305.6 Diehl = 2T

Gioè (quoted below in the text). Two works are attested for him: a 24-book 'commentary' (ὑπόμνημα) on Plato and a two-book Platonic lexicon (*Suda* s.v. = 1T Gioè). References in later Platonic commentators testify to his engagement with a variety of topics from dialogues including the *Alcibiades I*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Republic* and *Timaeus*. See further, J. von Arnim, 'Harpokration [2]', *RE* 7 (1912) col. 2411; J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (London 1977) 258–62; J. Whittaker, 'Harpocraton d'Argos [H9]', in R. Goulet (ed.), *Dictionnaire des Philosophes Antiques* 3 (Paris 2000) 503–04.

Numenius raises a hymn to three gods. He calls the first ‘father’, the second ‘maker’ and the third ‘artefact’ – for according to him the cosmos is the third god.² According to him, then, the creator is double, the first god and the second, while what is created is the third. (It is better to put it like this than to use his own rather dramatic language: *ancestor, offspring, descendant*.)

But it is not only Numenius. Proclus goes on to say that Harpocraton is guilty of something similar (*On the Timaeus* 1.304.22–305.6 Diehl = Harpocraton 22T Gioè = *fr.* 14 Dillon):

I would be amazed if Harpocraton can have been pleased with himself for constructing theories like this about the Demiurge. For he follows this man [i.e. Numenius]³ in handing down three gods, and insofar as he makes the creator double: but he calls the first god Ouranos and Kronos, the second Dia and Zen,⁴ the third ‘heaven’ [*ouranos*] and cosmos (ἀποκαλεῖ δὲ τὸν μὲν πρῶτον θεὸν Οὐρανὸν καὶ Κρόνον, τὸν δὲ δεύτερον Δία καὶ Ζήνα, τὸν δὲ τρίτον οὐρανὸν καὶ κόσμον). But then he changes and calls the first Zeus, and ‘king of what is intelligible’ (βασιλέα τοῦ νοητοῦ), and the second ‘ruler’ (ἄρχοντα). Zeus, Kronos and Ouranos thus become the same as each other, for all of these are the first principle, the thing to which Parmenides denies all predicates, every name, every attribute, every description. We ourselves cannot tolerate calling the first principle even ‘father’, but he declares the same thing to be father, son and grandson.

The juxtaposition of Numenius and Harpocraton – indeed, the explicit comparison and connection drawn by Proclus between the two – concerns, strictly speaking, only the bare facts (a) that Harpocraton thought that there were three gods and (b) that his demiurge is in *some* way ‘double’. Proclus’ cautious phrasing suggests that the grounds for comparison went no further than this. (Note, for example, the careful qualification in the phrase ‘*insofar as* [καθόσον] he makes the demiurge double’.) Nevertheless, commentators have universally assumed that Harpocraton and Numenius agreed about much more: about *why* there needed to be three gods, for example; and *in what sense*, exactly, the demiurge is ‘double’. They have, in fact, taken this passage as straightforward evidence that Harpocraton, like Numenius, departed from the earlier Platonist view that there was a single creator intellect and posited two intellects, one prior to the other.⁵

But there is another way in which one could think of the creator being made ‘double’ so as to produce three nameable divine entities, and it is the way associated especially in antiquity with Harpocraton’s own teacher, Atticus. Atticus, according to our evidence, ‘doubled’ the creator not as it were by multiplication, but rather by division. He maintained, namely, that there was a single intellect, but disagreed with the assumption that this intellect was identical with the realm of forms. Instead, he claimed that divine intellect was one thing, while the forms constituted something else, a divine ‘soul’, which is strictly extrinsic to intellect. One of the reasons we know all this (including the fact that Atticus taught Harpocraton) is that Proclus himself goes on to tell us – directly after the account of Harpocraton I have just quoted (*On the Timaeus* 1.305.6–16 Diehl = Atticus *fr.* 12 des Places):

² This need not contradict other evidence that Numenius’ third god is the ordering principle immanent in the cosmos, namely the good world soul (see Numenius *fr.* 11 with *fr.* 52.64–67 des Places). Plato himself calls both the cosmos (*Timaeus* 92c) and the world soul (*Timaeus* 41a; cf. *Laws* 10.899bc) ‘god’: the idea is presumably that the cosmos is ‘god’ in virtue of being ensouled. See further, M. Frede, ‘Numenius’, *ANRW* 2.36.2 (Berlin 1987) 1034–75 at 1068–69.

³ A.-E. Chaignet argues that the reference might be to Plato: *Histoire de la Psychologie des Grecs* 3 (Paris 1890) 189, n.3; but see against this, Gioè (n.1) 481. (And in fact Chaignet himself elsewhere assumes that

Harpocraton followed Numenius, as at 309.)

⁴ ‘Dia’ is the normal accusative of ‘Zeus’, but I do not translate it as such in this instance (as I do, for example, in the very next sentence) because the pairing with ‘Zen’ (itself a variant of the name Zeus) suggests that Harpocraton had in mind *Cratylus* 396a, where the form of these two words is precisely what is important. See discussion below in the text.

⁵ For Numenius’ views, see especially *fr.* 11, 12 des Places (quotations from his lost work *On the Good* preserved by Eusebius). For the assumption that Harpocraton followed Numenius, see the literature on Harpocraton cited in n.1; Chaignet (n.3) 309; Frede (n.2) 1069.

Atticus, teacher of Harpocraton, identifies the demiurge with the good – although he is called ‘good’ by Plato not ‘the good’, and is also called intellect, and the good is the cause of every substance and is itself beyond substance, as we are taught in the *Republic*. And what could Atticus say about the paradigm? For either it is prior to the demiurge, in which case there will be something superior to the good, or it is in the demiurge, and the first principle will be many; or it is after the demiurge, in which case the good is turned towards things posterior to it and contemplates them.

Later on in the same work, Proclus tells us that Atticus in fact placed the paradigm (i.e. the forms) ‘below’ the demiurge (1.431.14–20 Diehl = Atticus *fr.* 34 des Places). Syrianus completes the picture by supplying the information that he located them ‘in the substance of soul’ (ἐν οὐσίᾳ τῆ ψυχικῆ).⁶

It is possible to exaggerate the distance Atticus can have meant to open up between intellect and the divine soul containing the forms – and Proclus for one does not miss the chance to do so. Elsewhere again in the *Timaeus* commentary, he talks as if Atticus left the forms ‘lying around’ on their own outside intellect, like lifeless clay models (1.394.6–8 Diehl = Atticus *fr.* 28 des Places). In fact, Atticus probably assumed an intimate, unifying connection between the two things – comparable, for example, to the connection that Plutarch makes between intellect and soul in his analysis of what it is to be a human being.⁷ Nevertheless, it is important that divine intellect and soul are numerically distinct in this system and have discrete identities. The result is that, like Numenius, albeit by a different route, Atticus ends up with a ‘doubled’ creator (intellect and soul) and three divine entities (intellect, soul and cosmos). As far as this goes, Proclus’ cautious remarks about Harpocraton would be perfectly consistent with his sharing the views of either.

What creates a presumption in favour of Numenius is, of course, the fact that Harpocraton undoubtedly shares at least one thing with Numenius which distinguishes both of them from Atticus: both Harpocraton and Numenius name and count their divine entities *as gods*; Atticus, as far as we can tell, reserved the term ‘god’ for the demiurgic intellect. But there is a very simple reason why we should not infer any deeper connection between Harpocraton and Numenius from this circumstance. It is true that Harpocraton names three gods, as Numenius does: *but only Atticus’ metaphysical scheme can explain the names he gives them.*

As far as I am aware, it has not been noticed before, but all of the names and titles used by Harpocraton are derived from a single passage of Plato’s *Cratylus* (395e–96c):⁸

⁶ See Syrianus *On the Metaphysics* 105.36–38 Kroll = Atticus *fr.* 40 des Places, with M. Baltes, ‘Zur Philosophie des Platonikers Attikos’, in F. Blume and F. Mann (eds), *Platonismus und Christentum. Festschrift für Heinrich Dörrie* (Münster 1983) 38–57 at 47–56. Syrianus here ascribes the very same position to Plutarch and a little-known Platonist called Democritus. Not all scholars think that he can be quite right about Plutarch, at least: Dillon, for example, takes it that Plutarch maintained the ‘standard’ view that equates the forms with intellect (as, for example, in Alcinoüs *Didaskalikos* 10.3, especially 164.29–31 Hermann): see Dillon (n.1) 201; cf. Gioè, ‘Il Plutarco di Ferrari’, *Elenchos* 19 (1998) 113–31 at 127–29 (the latter is a review of F. Ferrari, *Dio, idee e materia. La struttura del cosmo in Plutarco di Cheronea* (Naples 1995) – see especially chapter 9). It is true that there is no straightforward description of the forms as divine ‘soul’ in Plutarch’s surviving works – although the thought would explain his ready identification of

the forms with the ‘soul of Osiris’ at *Isis and Osiris* 373A. But neither do we have anything that offers a serious challenge to Syrianus’ insight that there is a structural identity between the metaphysics of Plutarch and Atticus. See C. Schoppe, *Plutarch’s Interpretation der Ideenlehre Platons* (Münster and Hamburg 1994); M. Baltes, ‘La dottrina dell’anima in Plutarco’, *Elenchos* 21 (2000) 245–70; G.E. Karamanolis, *Plato and Aristotle in Agreement? Platonists on Aristotle from Antiochus to Porphyry* (Oxford 2006) especially 102.

⁷ Cf. Plutarch *On the Face in the Moon* 943AB. (In the case of the human being, of course, there is also a third component: body.)

⁸ Dillon (n.1) at 260 and Gioè (n.1) 483–84 both compare *Cratylus* 396a–c for ‘Zen’ and ‘Dia’ (and, implicitly, Ouranos and Kronos). But neither explores the significance of the meanings given to them by Plato and both miss the reference to ‘ruler and king’, for which they struggle to find sources elsewhere.

The name of Zeus is just like a sentence. People divide it up: some use one part, some the other. For some people call him *Zen* and others call him *Dia*. But if you put the two together, it reveals the nature of the god, which is just what we are saying a name ought to accomplish. For no-one is more the cause of *life* (ζῆν) for us and everything else than the ruler and king of all (ὁ ἄρχων τε καὶ βασιλεὺς τῶν πάντων). So this god turns out to be correctly named: *through him live* (δι' ὃν ζῆν) all animals. But this designation is divided in two, as I say: *Dia* is made one name and *Zen* another. He is the son of Kronos, which might seem offensive at first blush,⁹ but actually it makes sense: Zeus is the offspring of a great intelligence. For *κόρος* does not signify a 'child', but the *purity* and *unmixed* quality of *intellect* (τὸ καθαρὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀκίρατον τοῦ νοῦ). Kronos is the son of Ouranos, as the story goes, and looking upwards is well called by this name, *ourania* i.e. *seeing what is above* (ὁρῶσα τὰ ἄνω). That, Hermogenes, is how astronomers say that a pure intellect comes about: so Ouranos is rightly named.

If I am right to suggest that Harpocratio shared Atticus' metaphysics, then the three entities he was naming as 'gods' are: intellect (named as Ouranos and Kronos); the divine soul with the forms it contains (named as *Dia* and *Zen*); and the cosmos (named again as *cosmos* and *ouranos*). There is no mystery in the last of these on any account: *ouranos* is in one sense just the Greek word for the 'heavens', which can be used metonymically for the universe as a whole. The appropriate Platonic reference here (if one is needed) must be *Timaeus* 92c, where the universe is designated in quick succession as *kosmos*, *theos* and *ouranos*. What the *Cratylus* shows us is how perfectly the two pairs of names which Harpocratio chose for the other two parts of his system fit Atticus' model in particular.

Ouranos and Kronos first. Proclus is surely right that it looks strange to name the same entity both Ouranos and Kronos: and indeed, Plato reminds us that Kronos is, *theologically speaking*, the son of Ouranos (Οὐρανοῦ υἱός). But at the same time, Plato denies that Kronos, *etymologically speaking*, is a child at all: κόρον γὰρ σημαίνει οὐ παῖδα. Furthermore, the focal meaning that Plato gives *both* to Kronos *and* to Ouranos is 'intellect'. If Numenius were commenting on this passage, one could imagine that he might be tempted to find confirmation here of *two* divine intellects – as Proclus was to do later on.¹⁰ The fact that Harpocratio applies both names to a *single* intellect might, if anything, be read as a move *against* him. In any case, it clearly fits much more readily a system such as that of Atticus in which there *is* only one such intellect.

Next: *Dia* and *Zen*. It is hard to see why either of these designations, as Plato explains them, would be especially well suited to Numenius' second intellect. But if Harpocratio is following the pattern of Atticus, they would denominate the forms, or divine soul – and they do both with compelling transparency. Soul has a special association with life, and *Zen*, as Plato points out, is a homonym of the Greek word meaning 'to live' (ζῆν). And since it is 'through' (διά) the forms that constitute this soul that the divine intellect does his creating, it is natural that it should be called 'Dia' as well.¹¹

⁹ Viz. because Kronos was a by-word for childish folly.

¹⁰ It is possible, in fact, that Numenius *did* appeal to the passage in this way. In any case, when he talks of his first intellect as the 'ancestor' of the second, from whom the third in turn descended (Proclus *On the Timaeus* 1.304.3–5 Diehl = *fr.* 21 des Places, as quoted above in the text), Ouranos, Kronos and Zeus naturally come to mind. For Proclus (who disagreed with Numenius only over the 'doubling of the demiurge', *not* over the need for multiple intellects), see *On the Cratylus* 108.1–5 Pasquali. (Plato, to be precise, identifies Kronos as intellect, but Ouranos only as the *means* to it, and David

Sedley makes the plausible suggestion that he in fact intended the idea that 'astronomy' – 'looking up' – is a route towards acquiring intellect: *Plato's Cratylus* (Cambridge 2003) 91.)

¹¹ For forms (or *logos*) as that 'through which' the cosmos was created by a demiurgic intellect, see Philo *On the Cherubim* 127; *Sacrifices* 8; *Allegories of the Laws* 3.96; *Special Laws* 1.81, 329. There are no exact surviving parallels for this locution in later Platonism, but one does not have to posit the intrusion of an ultimately Stoic notion of 'instrumental' cause to explain it in Philo (*cf.*, for example, W. Theiler, *Die Vorbereitung des Neuplatonismus* (Berlin 1930) 26–35;

The *Cratylus* completes the picture by supplying the only credible source for Harpocraton’s description of Zeus as at once ‘king’ and ‘ruler’.¹² And again, one can understand his use of this pairing if one thinks of Harpocraton in the light of Atticus rather than Numenius. The single name with a double characterization allows him to show in what sense he ‘doubles’ the demiurge (to put it in Proclus’ prejudicial terms): it emphasizes the difference between intellect (‘king’) and soul (‘ruler’), but at the same times insists that they represent a unified composite (‘Zeus’) when it comes to explaining the creation and sustenance of the cosmos. The terms fit the case perfectly: it is standard Platonism to think that intellect *as such* is remote from mundane details (Zeus as king), as it is to think that the soul sets the order followed by the cosmic realm (Zeus as ruler). Now, it so happens that Numenius too has a pair of gods in his system who are, in some sense, the same god, and who would be ideal candidates for designation as Zeus the king and Zeus the ruler according to the very same logic.¹³ But they are the *second* and *third* gods in his line-up of three: Proclus is clear that Harpocraton applies the names to his own *first* and *second* gods. So, once again, while Harpocraton’s choice of nomenclature fits the metaphysical system of Atticus like a glove, it turns out to be ruinously uncongenial to Numenius.

On the basis of our explicit evidence, we already knew that Harpocraton commented on the *Alcibiades I*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Republic* and *Timaeus* (see n.1). We can now add the *Cratylus* to that list. Specifically, it looks as if Harpocraton teased out of 395e–96c two distinct, though compatible, ways of looking at the divine realm, both rooted in the exegesis of traditional theological language and iconography. I suggest that he might have seen the first as a more metaphysical way of looking at things: it describes a divine *intellect* (equally well designated as ‘Ouranos’ or ‘Kronos’) operating *through* (‘Dia’) his ‘soul’ (*cf.* ‘Zen’), namely the forms, to create ‘the heavens’ (‘ouranos’), that is, cosmic order (‘kosmos’). The second way of looking at the divine realm might be thought of as more ‘religious’, in the sense that it expresses this metaphysics in terms of our relationship to the principle involved (variously as king and ruler).

Atticus’ metaphysics	Harpocraton’s reading of <i>Cratylus</i> 395e–96c		<i>cf.</i> Plutarch <i>Isis and Osiris</i> 372E–73E
divine intellect	Ouranos / Kronos	Zeus as King	Osiris
divine soul = forms	Zen = Dia	Zeus as Ruler	soul of Osiris = Elder Horus
cosmos	cosmos		(limbs of Osiris + Isis = Horus)

Table 1. Harpocraton and Atticus compared. I have added, for comparison, Plutarch’s parallel discovery of what I take to be the same metaphysics in a different mythological system.¹⁴

‘Philo von Alexandria und der Beginn des kaiserzeitlichen Platonismus’, in K. Flasch (ed.), *Parusia. Studien zur Philosophie Platons und zur Problemgeschichte des Platonismus* (Frankfurt 1965) 199–218 at 214–16). The formula can be derived from Plato easily enough: see, for example, *Timaeus* 29d7 with H. Dörrie, ‘Die Erneuerung des Platonismus im ersten Jahrhundert vor Christus’, in *Le Néoplatonisme* (Paris 1971) 17–23.

¹² *Cf.* discussion in Proclus *On the Cratylus* 101.26–35 Pasquali.

¹³ Not least because, just as in my reconstruction of Harpocraton (albeit that depends on his alignment with Atticus), it involves the distinction between demiurgic intellect and soul. See Numenius *fr.* 11 des Places and discussion in Frede (n.2) 1054–70.

¹⁴ Note that even the double designation of the divine soul is replicated: it is ‘the soul of Osiris’ insofar as it is soul (373A) and ‘the Elder Horus’ insofar as it embodies the forms (at 373C, the Elder Horus represents the image of the world before it was created). On the question of Plutarch’s agreement with Atticus, see n.6.

As I mentioned at the outset, this not only tells us something about Harpocraton, it also provides important new evidence for the history of the *Cratylus* in the Platonic tradition. There is ample testimony to the use of the *Cratylus* as a ‘logical’ work, specifically a work addressing etymology, from at least the time of Thrasyllus in the first century AD (see DL 3.58; cf. Alcinous *Didaskalikos* 6.10). But we no longer have to wait another 400 years to find someone (Proclus) who thought that it had a bearing on theology and metaphysics as well. Harpocraton shows that it was already being read this way by the end of the second century.¹⁵

There is one final lesson to be learnt from all of this – perhaps the most important of all. The fact that scholars could so readily assume, on the basis of a single ambiguous comment, that Harpocraton fell in with Numenius against his own teacher is symptomatic of a susceptibility to what one might call ‘pan-Numenianism’ that sometimes characterizes discussion of second- and third-century Platonism. Part of the cause of this affliction is the headline similarity between Numenius’ metaphysical system and that of Plotinus – a similarity which was not lost on some of Plotinus’ own contemporaries, who accused him of passing off Numenius’ ideas as his own.¹⁶ How far we should use the fact of that accusation as an exegetical guide in reading either Numenius or Plotinus is a matter for debate.¹⁷ (We should certainly take the time to regret the loss of Amelius’ rebuttal.) But in any case, the allegation is not good evidence that Numenius’ metaphysics represented the acknowledged ‘state of the art’ for his age. I have argued elsewhere that the sort of model adopted by Atticus was also extremely important and influential, not least because it provided a way of giving theoretical underpinning to the belief that the cosmos had a temporal origin – a matter of serious debate within first- and second-century Platonism, and later between Platonists and Christian philosophers.¹⁸ Whatever its ultimate fate within the non-Christian tradition, there is no reason at all to suppose that Atticus’ own pupil would have found his system outmoded in the light of Numenius. Indeed, the fact that Harpocraton himself believed in the temporal origin of the cosmos is only further evidence, in my view, that he must have thought something very similar.¹⁹

¹⁵ Proclus is himself often our richest source of knowledge for the earlier tradition but there is a striking lack of historical material in the version that survives of his commentary on the *Cratylus*, as Harold Tarrant notes in *Plato’s First Interpreters* (London 2000) 192 (and see all of 191–94 and 196–97 for discussion of what, apart from Harpocraton, we know of the dialogue’s reception).

¹⁶ Porphyry *Life of Plotinus* 17–18, 21. When it comes to what Plotinus studied in his seminars, Numenius is named as just one among several Platonists of the previous generation, Atticus being another: *Life of Plotinus* 14.

¹⁷ At the extreme, it has been used to justify the direct ascription of quite extensive passages of the *Enneads* to Numenius: see, for example, Freidrich

Thedinga’s three-part study ‘Plotin oder Numenios?’ in *Hermes* 52 (1917) 592–612; 54 (1919) 249–78; 57 (1922) 189–218.

¹⁸ See G. Boys-Stones, ‘Time, creation and the mind of God: the afterlife of a Platonist theory in Origen’, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 40 (2011) 319–37. I argue that a theory involving the unmediated causal influence of the creative intellect on matter (a theory such as that of Numenius, for example) is incompatible with the belief that the cosmos was created in time. It would, however, be compatible with a theory such as that of Atticus, in which the work of the intellect is mediated by forms.

¹⁹ See scholion in Proclus *On the Republic* 2.377.15–78.6 Kroll = Harpocraton 21T Gioè = *fr.* 13 Dillon; Boys-Stones (n.18) especially 326, n.22.