Course Summary C.6.5: Elements of Platonism

1. Context, Reception and Objective of the Course

The course *Elements of Platonism* forms part of a broader philosophical curriculum covering the theory of thought, harmology, logic and methodology. Its central focus is the work and thought of the Athenian philosopher Plato (-427/-347), the first ancient Greek thinker whose extensive body of work has survived.

As the English philosopher Whitehead aptly observed, the entire Western philosophical tradition can be regarded as a series of footnotes to Plato's work. Plato situates human beings at the intersection of the divine and nature: the human spirit bears witness to the divine, while the senses connect human beings to the material world.

According to the course, the influence of Platonism is multifaceted and far from dead. In French existentialism, Maine de Biran saw Platonism as the foundation for humanity's transcendence towards a higher spiritual capacity. Platonic conceptual realism also lived on among the founders of modern formalized logic and mathematical philosophy, such as Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Jan Łukasiewicz and Heinrich Scholz.

At the same time, Platonism offers a response to contemporary cultural crises and nihilistic tendencies, as Allan Bloom argued in his critique of the loss of classical education among young people.

The course has a dual objective. On the one hand, it seeks an understanding of meaning: a precise historical reconstruction of Plato's texts and of how they are understood by specialists. On the other hand, it aims to establish meaning: to update and re-establish Plato's ideas in order to clarify contemporary social and philosophical questions, without lapsing into an excessive focus on the past or a mere restoration of old ideas.

This approach aligns with the age-old sophiology, or doctrine of wisdom, which has a fourfold basic structure:

1. A pre-existential divine *archè* or primordial source12.
2. Nature as the realized, constitutive divine structure of wisdom.
3. Cognitive or informative wisdom, through which the human mind becomes aware of this structure of nature.
4. Deontic, ethical-political practice, in which human beings act in accordance with the insights they have acquired.

2. Platonic Theoria (Insight) and Historical Predecessors

The foundation of the Platonic method is the Palaeo-Pythagorean concept of *theoria*, best translated as "insight". *Theoria* does not mean a casual flight of fancy, but rather close attention to factual data through the senses, in order to gain penetrating insight into both the rationally ordered elements and the sacred backgrounds of reality. Plato applies the genetic method here: he understands phenomena and views in terms of their historical origins.

Plato develops his *theoria* by synthesizing the insights of his philosophical predecessors and raising them to a higher level:

The Milesian natural philosophers (Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes):

They established empirical-rational investigation of nature (*fusiologia*). From them, the tradition derives the distinction between direct observation (*opsis*) and investigative inquiry (*historiè*). Xenophanes of Colophon developed this into reliable knowledge of the invisible universe.

The Palaeo-Pythagoreans (Pythagoras, Philolaus):

They introduced the concept of the soul (*psuche*) and spatial or numerical configurations (*arithmos*) into the study of nature. This is expressed in the four classical foundational disciplines: music, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy. For them, *theoria* meant the contemplative understanding (*speculatio*) of the order and harmony in phenomena.

The younger natural philosophers (Anaxagoras, Democritus):

They used the maxim *opsis adèlon ta fainomena* — visible and experimentally observable phenomena serve as the gateway to the invisible essence.

The Eleatic school (Parmenides, Zeno):

Parmenides introduced strictly logical thinking about immutable, genuine Being (*aletheia*), attained through intellectual apprehension (*noèsis*), as opposed to changeable and error-prone opinions (*doxai*). Zeno developed eristic and dialectic as logically fair dialogue based on presuppositions.

Heraclitus of Ephesus:

He emphasized that nature is governed by the divine law of opposites (*sullapsies*) and the all-encompassing *Logos*. His follower Cratylus drew radically skeptical and mobilist conclusions from this about the perpetual changeability of things.

The Sophists (Protagoras, Gorgias, Callicles):

During a period of political crisis and the deconstruction of Athenian democracy, the Sophists introduced anthropocentric relativism about truth ("man is the measure of all things"), secularization and rhetorical techniques of persuasion (*psuchagogia*) intended to enchant the soul.

Socrates:

Socrates opposed the Sophists' nihilistic relativism using their own logical means. Driven by conscientiousness and civic responsibility, he sought general, universal definitions in the ethical-political sphere through inductive reasoning (summative and amplificative).

Plato calls the encounter between our human capacity for knowledge and the objective knowability of reality the Noble Yoke (*Kalon Zugon*). Just as the physical eye can see things only thanks to sunlight, the human soul and the forms of reality can meet only through the spiritual light of the highest Idea: the Good.

3. The Theory of Order (Harmology) and Factor Analysis

Platonic dialectic rests on an ontological harmology, or theory of order. Its starting premise is that reality is essentially an ordered and beautiful whole (*kosmos*). Disorder is not an independent principle, but merely a disturbance of an order that is already given and all-encompassing.

Platonic thought is radically holistic: an individual datum can be understood only when situated within a collection ("all") on the basis of similarity, or within a system ("whole") on the basis of coherence and participation (*methexis*).

To make a complex totality manageable, Plato uses *stoicheiosis*, or factor analysis67. A whole is divided into its basic elements or factors (*stoicheia*). A *stoicheion* plays a dual role: it is both a holistic component of the totality and a hypothetical presupposition (*archè*) that makes the whole and the relationships within it intelligible and explainable. In the dialogue *Philebus*, Plato illustrates this with grammar: the infinite variety of human sounds becomes intelligible only when analyzed into a well-defined system of vowels, semivowels and consonants. In his later period, Plato applied this factor analysis to mathematical ideal numbers (*arithmoi*), such as the "determinate one" and the "indeterminate dyad".

4. Theory of Concepts, Theory of Ideas and Degrees of Knowledge

In the famous *Seventh Letter*, Plato distinguishes five necessary aspects for attaining full knowledge of a reality:

1. The Name (*onoma*): the spoken or written word that refers to the thing.
2. The Definition (determination of essence): the verbal description of the characteristics of the form.
3. The Example or Image: the perceptible, material instance subject to coming into being (*genesis*) and passing away (*fthora*), and therefore only a time-bound sample.
4. Science, insight or true opinion: the intellectual knowledge and understanding residing in the immortal human soul.
5. The Idea (*eidos* or *idea*): the eternal, independent, objective form of essence in itself, which constitutes the intellectual original of all phenomena.

Plato's theory of Ideas is built in opposition to two alternative theories of knowledge:

Nominalism (the Sophists, Warnock), which reduces general concepts to arbitrary names or collections of sounds (*flatus vocis*).

Abstractionism or Conceptualism (Aristotle, Locke), which regards concepts as intellectual abstractions derived by our minds from sensory experiences.

In opposition to these views, Plato defends *conceptual realism* or ideationism. For Plato, an Idea is not a mental product of the human mind, but an objective, normative and informative structure in reality.

In modern science, the genetic DNA code can be regarded as an analogue of a Platonic Idea: a pre-existing pattern that supplies active information to physical cell divisions.

To move from provisional assumptions towards the true essence of a thing, Plato uses the lemmatic-analytical method. The sought-after essence is first posited as a provisional hypothesis (*lemma*), after which patient testing and analysis (*analusis*) enable a considered transition from a nominal (verbal) definition to a real (substantive and scientific) definition.

In medieval Scholasticism, this continued in the threefold realism: *forma ante rem* (the Idea in God before creation), *forma in re* (the form in the material thing) and *forma post rem* (the derived concept in the human mind).

5. Theory of Language, Judgement, Definition and Classification

In the dialogue *Cratylus*, Plato develops a nuanced philosophy of language. He rejects both Cratylus's natural iconicism (the claim that words perfectly express the nature of things through an original language) and Hermogenes's pure conventionalism (the view that language is an entirely arbitrary agreement). Words are valuable instruments and models of reality, but direct knowledge of the thing itself (*pragma*) always takes precedence over language.

In his theory of judgement, Plato emphasizes that a judgement (*logos*) is always ontologically directed towards a reality (*pragma*). He sharply distinguishes complete identity ("white is white") from partial identity or analogy (*methexis* / participation, as in "this wall is white").

Because human judgements about earthly life are often one-sided, Plato introduces the restrictive judgement: every statement must be moderated and supplemented by an opposing, corrective insight. Thus play and seriousness, body and soul, or joy and sorrow are always considered in a balanced mixture.

For the orderly structuring of concepts, Plato uses two complementary methods:

The Synoptic method (*sunopsis* / *sunagogè*): bringing together and summarizing a multitude of separate samples under one universal concept.

The Diairetic method (*diairesis* / dichotomy): systematically dividing a general genus into two, separating all its specific species.

In the dialogue *Meno*, Plato shows that logical rigor in defining must go hand in hand with ethical awareness. Mere professional competence or technical expertise (*aretè*) without conscientiousness and justice is fundamentally inadequate and degenerates into cynical exercise of power.

6. Theory of Reasoning and Hypothetical Method

According to Plato, every argument seeks an *archè*: the posited principle or factor that governs, explains and makes a series of phenomena intelligible.

Plato derives his model of reasoning from the Greek mathematics of his time and distinguishes two movements:

The Synthetic or Deductive method (forward):

One starts from accepted presuppositions or axioms and derives logically necessary conclusions from them.

The Analytic or Reductive method (backward / dialectic): This is the actual philosophical investigation of foundations. One returns from propositions and

hypotheses to increasingly deeper presuppositions in order to give an account (*logon didonai*).

The ultimate aim of this backward analytical movement of thought is to reach the *anhupotheton*: the ultimate, hypothesis-free foundation that requires no further grounding and coincides with the Idea of the Good.

7. Conception of Philosophy, Aporetics and Esotericism

Plato understands philosophy as human awareness of humanity's place in the cosmos, in the light of the absolute Good. He recognizes that reality is a mixture of two forces: intellectual purposiveness (*nous*) and unavoidable, irreducible necessity or meaninglessness (*anankè*).

Because pure reason sometimes reaches an impasse in human conversations, Plato wrote aporetic dialogues (such as the *Theaetetus*). A dialogue that ends in an *aporia* (impasse) is not a failure, but a methodological move that forces the reader to examine their own unconscious presuppositions and starting points thoroughly. Plato deliberately casts his philosophy in dramatic dialogues in which the process of insight maturing is made visible as it unfolds.

Finally, the course discusses Platonic esotericism, as presented by the *Tübingen School* (Krämer, Gaiser). This school defends the thesis that the written dialogues were primarily intended to attract and prepare readers (*protreptic*), while the deepest core of Plato's philosophy was transmitted orally within closed learning communities (*sunousiai*) at the Academy.

Although the exact reconstruction of this unwritten doctrine remains controversial, the discussion underscores that for Plato philosophizing is above all a living, oral and communal search for truth.