First Day: Early Modern Platonism // Finding Women in the History of Philosophy
Christia Mercer

Gerson, "What is Platonism"
"It was fairly widely believed in antiquity that Plato was not the first Platonist, as we might put it. Aristotle tells us that Plato ‘followed the Italians (i.e., the Pythagoreans) in most things.’ (Ms A6, 987a30). Plotinus tells us that Plato was not the first to say the things that in fact we today widely identify as elements of “Platonism,” but he said them best. Since Plato was not the first and therefore not the only champion of Platonism, there was generally held to be nothing in principle untoward in arguing that Plato meant what he did not happen to say explicitly” (256).

Leibniz to Thomas Burnet, 1697:
“My views in philosophy approach somewhat closely those of the late Countess of Conway, and hold a middle position between Plato and Democritus, since I believe that everything mechanically as Democritus and Descartes maintain, against the opinion of More and his like, and I believe that nevertheless everything also happens vitally and according to final causes; everything replete with life and perceptions contrary to the opinion of the followers of Democritus” (G 3 217).

Gerson, "What is Platonism"
“The feature common to virtually all varieties of Platonism is a commitment to what I would characterize as a top-down metaphysical approach to the entire budget of philosophical problems extant in any particular period. What is most distinctive about Platonism is that it is resolutely and irreducibly top-down rather than bottom-up. A top-down approach to philosophical problems rejects and a bottom-up approach accepts the claim that the most important and puzzling phenomena we encounter in this world can be explained by seeking the simplest elements out of which these are composed” (259-60).

(1) The universe has a systematic unity. The practice of systematizing Platonism may be compared with the formulation of a theology based upon Scriptures as well as other canonical evidentiary sources. The hypothesis that a true systematic philosophy is possible at all rests upon an assumption of cosmic unity. This is Platonism’s most profound legacy from the Pre-Socratics philosophers. These philosophers held that the world is a unity in the sense that its constituents and the laws according to which it operates are really and intelligibly interrelated. Because the world is a unity, a systematic understanding of it is possible. Thus, particular doctrines in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and so on are ultimately relatable within the system. More than this, they are inseparable because the principles that enable us to formulate doctrine in one area are identical with those that enable us to formulate doctrine in another. Many scholars have pointed out the unsystematic nature of Platonism understood as consisting of the raw data of the dialogues. This fact is not necessarily inconsistent with the amenability of claims made in the dialogues to systematization.29

(2) The systematic unity is an explanatory hierarchy. The Platonic view of the world—the key to the system—is that the universe is to be seen in hierarchical manner. It is to be understood uncompromisingly from the top-down. The hierarchy is ordered basically
according to two criteria. First, the simple precedes the complex and second, 
the intelligible precedes the sensible. The precedence in both cases is not temporal, 
but ontological and conceptual. That is, understanding the complex and the sensible 
depends on understanding the simple and the intelligible because the latter 
are explanatory of the former. The ultimate explanatory principle in the universe, 
therefore, must be unqualifiedly simple. For this reason, Platonism is in a sense 
reductivist, though not in the way that a bottom-up philosophy is. It is conceptually 
reductivist, not materially reductivist. The simplicity of the first principle is contrasted 
with the simplicity of elements out of which things are composed according to a 
bottom-up approach. Whether or to what extent the unqualifiedly simple can also 
be intelligible or in some sense transcends intelligibility is a deep question within 
Platonism. (261)

(3) The divine constitutes an irreducible explanatory category. An essential part of the 
systematic hierarchy is a god adduced first and foremost to explain the order of the 
sensible world or the world of becoming. Platonism converges on the notion that 
the divine has complete explanatory “reach.” That is, there is nothing that it cannot 
explain. Thus, ontology and theology are inseparable. The Platonic notion of divinity 
includes an irremovable personal element, though this is frequently highly attenuated. 
This attenuation in part follows along the diverse efforts to employ both 
the intelligible and the simple, as well as the divine, to explain everything else. The 
residual personhood of the divine agent of transient order is retained in part owing 
to the fundamental Platonic exhortation to person to “become like god” (see 5) 
below). Additionally, benevolence and providence are viewed as essential features of 
the divine, equally in an attenuated sense corresponding to the “depersonalization” 
of the divine.” Gerson, 261, what is…”

(4) The psychological constitutes an irreducible explanatory category. For Platonism, the 
universe is itself alive and filled with living things. Soul is the principle of life. Life is 
not viewed as epiphenomenal or supervenient on what is non-living. On the contrary, 
soul has a unique explanatory role in the systematic hierarchy. Though soul is 
fundamentally an explanatory principle, individual souls are fitted into the overall 
hierarchy in a subordinate manner. One of the central issues facing the Platonists 
was the relation between intellect, intellection, and the intelligibles, on the one hand, 
and soul on the other. Just as the psychical was thought to be irreducible to the 
material, so the intelligible was thought to be irreducible to the psychical. All striving 
by anything capable of striving is to be understood as in a way the reverse of the 
derivation of the complex from the simple, the sensible from the intelligible. Thus, 
the intellectual was not an aspect of or derived from the psychic, but prior to that.

(5) Persons belong to the systematic hierarchy and personal happiness consists in achieving a lost 
position within the hierarchy. All Platonists accepted the view that in some sense the person was the 
soul and the soul was immortal. Since perhaps the most important feature of the divine was 
immortality, the goal or telos of embodied personal existence was viewed as “becoming like god.” 
But obviously one does not have to strive to become what one already is. The task of “becoming 
like god” is typically situated within the fundamental polarity in the general Greek concept of nature 
or φύσις [physics], between “what is” and “what ought to be.” Thus, normativity is woven into the
account of what is objectively real. We are exhorted to become what we really or truly or ideally are. One might say that the first principle of Platonic ethics is that one must “become like god.”

(6) The epistemological order is included within the metaphysical order. Modes of cognition are hierarchically gradable according to the hierarchical levels of objective reality. The highest mode of cognition corresponds to the first explanatory principles. All modes of cognition including sense-perception and requiring sense-perception as a condition for their operation are inferior to the highest mode. That persons can be the subject both of the highest mode of cognition and of the lower modes indicates an ambiguity or conflict in personhood between the desires of the embodied human being and those of the ideal disembodied cognitive agent. The conflict is reflected, for example in the differing attractions of the contemplative and the practical. (262)

My Platonist doctrines cheat-sheet:

**Supreme being assumption:** For many ancient thinkers, ontological priority was to be explained mainly in terms of self-sufficiency. For many Platonists, there was a hierarchy of self-sufficiency and being such that each of the lower strata in the hierarchy was supposed to depend on and be caused by the higher. Many Christian and non-Christian Platonists assumed that there is a supremely perfect, wholly simple, and unified being on which all else depends. Only the highest being was wholly perfect, self-sufficient, simple, and real. The beings in the lower strata had diminishing degrees of these features. Modern philosophers have tended to think of being as an all or nothing affair, but there is a long line of Platonists who endorse a hierarchy of being. The assumption is that the strata in the hierarchy differ according to their unity, self-sufficiency, and perfection. What is more self-sufficient is more unified and therefore more fully what it is. What has less self-sufficiency and unity is less independent and therefore less fully what it is. For many in this tradition, self-sufficiency required activity and awareness. Medical doctors and other committed to the study of nature in the mid-17th century endorse main parts of the supreme being assumption: they all seem to accept that the supreme being shares its self-sufficient vitality with its creatures so that the latter have a lesser kind of self-sufficiency. Each creature is itself relatively unified and each contributes to the unity of the whole. For many, the unity of the world is grounded in the fact that each active thing has a degree of “feeling” and “relatedness” with all the others.

**Emanative causation:** There are two closely related kinds of emanative causation. By far the more significant in the history of philosophy is hierarchical emanation, where the cause is taken to be more perfect than its effect. The assumption here is that, for a being A that is more perfect than a being B, A emanates its attribute f-ness to B in such a way that neither A nor A’s f-ness is depleted in any way, with the result that B has f-ness, though in a manner inferior to the way it exists in A. The emanative process is continual so that B will have f-ness if and only if A emanates f-ness to it. For many theists, for example, God conceives triangularity or has it as “an idea,” which is the emanative cause for created triangles. The divine idea is perfect; its effect is not. The latter is often said “to participate in” or be an “image of” the former. For theists, one of the great benefits of hierarchical emanation is that it allows God to be both transcendent from and immanent in creatures. In his Philosophical Lexicon of 1613, Goclenius says he is following Plato and Augustine in claiming that God “contains all things” in the best and “most excellent way” while creatures contain them with “a certain limitation.” Although “creatures are not the being [esse] of God himself, nonetheless they are in him ... [because] whatever is in creatures proceeds from God.” For those philosophers who endorse more than one stratum in a hierarchy of being, each of the strata has its attributes independently of its emanated effect and yet those attributes are immanent in the effect. As Conway puts it, God is “in a real sense an essence or substance distinct from his creatures”
and yet “is not divided or separate from them but present in everything most closely and intimately in the highest degree.” God “gives to them form and figure but also essence, life, body, and whatever good they have.”

The non-hierarchical sense of emanative causation is modeled on the hierarchical, but does not require that the effect be inferior to its cause. As the fifth century Platonist, Proclus, writes in his influential, The Elements of Theology: “Every productive cause produces ... while itself remaining steadfast. For if it imitates the One, and if the One brings its consequents into existence without movement, then every productive cause has a like law of production.” For us, the important point is that certain sorts of active things produce their effect without being diminished. Like the hierarchical notion, the f-ness of B is assumed to be co-existent with the emanative activity of A. And like the hierarchical notion, the effect is often understood to follow with necessity in the sense that A’s action constitutes the necessary and sufficient conditions of B. In the Immortality of the Soul of 1659, the English philosopher, Henry More, writes: “An Emanative Effect is coexistent with the very substance of that which is said to be the Cause thereof. This must needs be true, because that very Substance which is said to be the Cause, is the adequate and immediate Cause, and wants nothing to be adjoined to its bare essence for the production of the Effect.”

**Plenitude**: In order to understand the role of sympathy in early modern philosophy, we need to be clear about what was supposed to follow from God’s nature. The principle of plenitude assumes that God fills the world with as many beings as possible. For Plotinus, the supreme being emanates the fullness of its being continually so that every possibility exists. He writes: “it is not possible for anything else to come into being; all things have come into being and there is nothing left.” The common assumption is that God’s nature implies not only that the world is filled with creatures, but also that they stand in harmony with one another. As the influential Jewish Platonist, Philo of Alexandria (ca.20 BCE – 50 CE), makes the point: “And being superior to, and being also external to the world that he has made, he nevertheless fills the whole world with himself; for, having by his own power extended it to its utmost limits, he has connected every portion with another portion according to the principles of harmony.” Generations of theists insist that divine goodness and unity apply to the organization of created things and that God adds to the goodness of the world by making the world appropriately harmonious. As Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) succinctly makes the point about order: “each thing in its nature is good, but all things together are very good, by reason of the order of the universe, which is the ultimate and noblest perfection in things.” Philosophers in the Platonist tradition take universal sympathy to add significantly to the goodness of worldly order.

**Universal sympathy**: The conjunction of the supreme being assumption, emanative causation, and plenitude implies a good deal about the order of the world. It was common in the seventeenth century to relate vitality or self-sufficiency to perception or sense and affinity. As we have seen, Van Helmont assumes that active things have active spirits and that active spirits feel and sense one another. Gangloff describes the harmony formed by mutually sympathetic creatures as one of “friendly affect or secret love.” The underlying assumption for such thinkers is that God causes creatures to have vitality, from which it is supposed to follow that each creature responds sympathetically to the states all the others. For the purposes of this paper, it will be helpful to think of the sympathetic relation as follows: two creatures bear a sympathetic relation to one another, when each perceives and responds to each of the states of the other. When every created thing bears a sympathetic relation to every other, there is universal sympathy. For thinkers like Conway, the sympathetic relation helps explain antipathy in that a creature cannot be repelled by another (or otherwise antipathetic to it) unless it bears a sympathetic relation to it.
Enhanced universal sympathy. As we have seen, many philosophers took the divine nature to entail an order among creatures and many conceived that order in terms of universal sympathy. For those interested in theological questions about divine justice and the problem of evil, universal sympathy was taken to contribute significantly to the goodness of the world. The sympathetic relation among creatures not only seemed to constitute an additional good, it was also believed to increase worldly goodness over time because creatures could enhance one another’s progress. As an introduction to the metaphysics of Leibniz and Conway, it will be helpful to explicate what I will call enhanced universal sympathy. When two creatures bear a sympathetic relation to one another, each responds to the other. When two creatures bear an enhanced sympathetic relation to one another, an increase in the goodness of one will cause an increase in the goodness of another, although the relation is non-reciprocal (that is, the increase in the second will not then promote an increase in the first).

Since enhanced sympathy means that an increase in the goodness of one creature will promote an increase in the goodness of those creatures with which it has this enhanced relation, it follows that an increase in the goodness of any creature will cause an increase in the goodness of every other. In a world in which enhanced sympathy holds among all creatures, each is capable of contributing much more to the goodness of the world than merely its present state of goodness: with every increase in its goodness, it contributes to the goodness of every other creature with which bears the relation. There is enhanced universal sympathy when all creatures bear an enhanced sympathetic relation with all others. The supreme being assumption can be taken to suggest that an increase in goodness involves an increase in vitality or self-sufficiency, which itself is related to moral perfection.

As we will see, Leibniz seems to think that human beings bear an enhanced sympathetic relation to one another. Although he is not committed to enhanced universal sympathy, Conway is.

“Plotinus’s conception of priority by nature is largely inspired by Plato’s, as reported by Aristotle and as suggested in some passages in Plato’s dialogues. Plotinus develops Plato’s conception in such a ways as to bring out the following relational patters that span every area of the structure of reality as he sees it. Reality is a structure of dependence, the posterior depending on the prior, being constituted by the prior, incapable of existing ‘without’ the prior which can exist without it. The prior is thus part of, or in, the posterior (as constitutive of it), just as the posterior is potentially in the prior (as coming from it): causes are “in” their effects and effects are “in” their causes. But while a part of the posterior, the prior is also apart from it as independent of it. Thus the prior is both immanent in the posterior and transcends it: the One is “everywhere” and “nowhere.” As independent and as prior, the cause is different from the posterior, its effect, superior in perfection and more powerful: causes (in the special sense of cause implied by the notion of priority “by Nature”) are superior to their effects” (D. O’Meara, “The hierarchical ordering of reality,” in the Cambridge Companion to Plotinus, 79).