Historical Approaches to Epistemic Authority: The Case of Neoplatonism

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"Authority" is a term widely used by scholars in fields ranging from sociology to political studies, the humanities, and philosophy. In the study of ancient philosophy, the concept of epistemic authority refers often to the philosophical authority granted to certain figures, particularly the school founders of the respective traditions, such as Plato for Platonism and Epicurus for Epicureanism. Although application of the term "authority" is certainly justified in this context, what it is intended to mean often remains obscure. Moreover, in the history of philosophy there is hardly any reflection on the phenomenon of epistemic authority and what it actually implies.

This article aims to show how a philosophical reflection on the structure of epistemic authority can shed light on this phenomenon and facilitate better understanding of its meaning in historical research. It will become clear that epistemic authority is a real social phenomenon that ultimately can be traced back to single acts of attribution. Therefore, it can be analyzed as a relation between different elements, most importantly between the attributor and the bearer of the authority, with reference to a specific

domain. The dynamic relation between these elements will be specified by means of an analytical model that serves as a tool for better grasping authority relations in historical research. In this respect, the present case study on the question of authority in Neoplatonism not only provides some critical observations on this issue, but it also shows the positive results of the developed methodology in historical-philosophical research.

In the first part of the article, I provide an analysis of the concept of authority and discuss the model that has been developed by our research group at KU Leuven for examining epistemic authority relations in historical research.[1] Then I focus on the social, communicative dimension of epistemic authority that plays a crucial role in the authority relations found in textual communities and in textual traditions. Most importantly, I emphasize and demonstrate the importance of this dimension for the construal and shaping of authority throughout history. This is illustrated by an analysis of the authority of Plato and Aristotle in Neoplatonism, with some textual examples taken from the work of the Neoplatonist Syrianus.

THE CONCEPT OF AUTHORITY

In order to get a better grasp on the concept of authority, I will first discuss the ordinary uses of the term "authority" and make some semantic distinctions and preliminary clarifications.[2] First of all, we can say that someone has or possesses authority, or, alternatively, that someone is an authority. Thus, the term "authority" may refer to (1) a certain quality attributed to someone or something, or to (2) the person, the group, or the thing that possesses that quality. It is clear that the second use of the word—that is, calling someone or something an authority—is simply a derivative of the first, in the sense that the bearer of the quality can be addressed by the quality itself. Moreover, the term "authority" is commonly used to refer to

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[1] This research group, based at the Institute of Philosophy of KU Leuven (Belgium), works on epistemic authority in the Neoplatonic commentary tradition and consists of Jan Opsomer, Pieter d'Hoine, Irini Fotini Viltanioti, and myself.

[2] The first part of this paper draws on ideas discussed in Saskia Aerts and Jan Opsomer, "Teksten bekleed met autoriteit: Een model voor de analyse van epistemische autoriteit in commentaartradities," *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 79 (2017): 277–94. Both that article and the present paper outline and further develop the model of epistemic authority that our research group has been working on, first published in Jan Opsomer and Angela Ulacco, "Epistemic Authority in Textual Traditions: A Model and Some Examples from Ancient Philosophy," in *Shaping Authority: How Did a Person Become an Authority in Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance?*, ed. Shari Boodts, Johan Leemans, Brigitte Meijns (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 21–46.

the governmental entities which have executive or legislative powers over other people.[3] This use brings us to the first type of authority, the so-called executive authority: the bearer of this type of authority may be said to have the power or right to command others to act in a certain way. Most of the literature on the concept of authority is concerned with this specific type, but for my purpose this short characterization will suffice, as I will focus on non-executive authority, of which the primary type is epistemic authority—that is, the authority in a field of knowledge.[4] Although this type of authority does not involve any right or power to regulate other people's actions and behavior, it indirectly influences the actions and behavior of the one attributing it, namely through the beliefs it corroborates.

Despite the fact that epistemic authority is closely connected to concepts such as knowledge or expertise, it is important to clearly distinguish epistemic authority from those related, though essentially different phenomena. An analysis of the concept of authority shows that it is always relational, not absolute: some person B becomes a de facto authority for some person A only if A considers B to be an authority in a certain realm of knowledge, under certain conditions, and to a certain extent.[5] For instance, to say that Einstein is an authority in theoretical physics does not merely come down to saying that he has a great deal of knowledge or expertise in the field of physics, but rather that he is acknowledged as an expert in this field by others. Whereas the status of expert is objective, based on certain requirements that have been met, the person who enjoys this status might not be an authority in a relational social context in the sense that she is not acknowledged as an authority by others—for instance, when nobody knows about the expertise that she possesses.

Besides, someone with the same objective expertise might be an authority in one case—that is, in relation to a certain person or group of people—but not in another. For instance, a native speaker of English might be considered an authority in English by a second-language learner, whereas other native speakers of the language would not consider her an authority in this respect. So, epistemic authority should be carefully distinguished as a social phenomenon that exists as such only because it is attributed and

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[3] For the semantics of authority, see Richard T. De George, *The Nature and Limits of Authority* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985), 12–14.
[4] For the different types of authority, see De George, *The Nature and Limits of Authority*, 21–25; cf. Joseph M. Bochenski, "An Analysis of Authority," in *Authority*, ed. Frederick J. Adelmann (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), 71.
[5] Opsomer and Ulacco, "Epistemic Authority in Textual Traditions," 26; see also De George, *The Nature and Limits of Authority*, 27.

acknowledged by the persons involved from related concepts such as expertise or knowledge as objectively justifiable properties. These latter phenomena might indeed be wrongly attributed when the conditions are not met (we might say that someone was wrongly regarded as an expert in a certain field, for instance, because she never finished her specialization in university), whereas epistemic authority is constituted by the attribution as such. It is the very act of attribution that generates the authority relation and grants existence to the phenomenon.

Nevertheless, one still might ask whether or not the attribution of epistemic authority under consideration is legitimate. It is this normative question that has received some noticeable attention from epistemologists in recent years. It has been debated whether it is rational to rely on the epistemic authority of others, and if so, under what conditions and to what extent.[6] This discussion shows that authority is considered a normative concept that can be legitimate or not. However, the approach of historians of philosophy differs from the approach of epistemologists in the sense that historians try to describe the role of epistemic authority in a certain historical context in which it had a normative value for the historical agents. It is not the historian's job to determine whether or not an attribution of authority found in historical texts is truly legitimate; rather, historians set out to understand why it was considered to be legitimate by the historical agents involved. So, even if the historian cannot find any good reasons to regard Aristotle as an authority in physics, she tries to understand what good reasons historical agents may have had to regard him as such. This difference may be considered in light of the distinction between normative (or justifying) reasons on the one hand, and explanatory reasons on the other: the historian of philosophy tries to find reasons that explain the views of the historical agents but does not attempt to justify them. With all these preliminary distinctions and clarifications in place, I now turn to the analytical model that provides a clearer picture of the phenomenon of epistemic authority as such.

EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY: A MODEL

Epistemic authority is a complex social phenomenon. People possess both the natural competence of attributing it to others and the ability to recognize it in social interactions. The phenomenon's existence is not contingent

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[6] The main example of this approach is the defense of epistemic authority by Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

on conscious reflection, in the sense of a conceptualization or an explicit theory. The term "authority" derives from the Latin *auctoritas*, a concept inexpressible in ancient Greek, the dominant language in most ancient philosophical schools. As David Sedley points out in an important paper on Plato's *auctoritas*, it is this Latin word bearing the connotations of leadership, ownership, prestige, and validation that informatively expresses the status that a founding figure (*auctor*) of a Greek philosophical system held in the eyes of its later followers.[7] Since the term "authority" (or *auctoritas*) serves to express an existing social phenomenon, it does not follow—from the lack of an appropriate word or any other kind of reflection—that the phenomenon as such or even the concept was absent from these contexts.

In historical research, the historian of ideas encounters epistemic authority as an evidently social phenomenon, which in most cases can be observed primarily and often exclusively through written texts. For this reason, one may be tempted to think that authority exists by virtue of its being communicated to others, whether in oral or written form. However, since authority is often attributed without communicating it to others, we can conclude that ontologically authority is independent from its communication. Therefore, what underlies this complex social phenomenon are single acts of attribution that give rise to the authority relation as such. The structure of this relation can be expressed and logically analyzed by the model that will be discussed shortly. This model describes the core of the authority relation as comprising different elements and makes apparent that the phenomenon of authority is constituted by single acts of attribution. The model gives us a clearer understanding of the different elements that one should account for in studying authority and the epistemological issues that one needs to address. When one studies authority as a social phenomenon, or more particularly, in this case, as a feature of textual traditions, all these attributions of authority are embedded in a broader network, in which the communication of authority plays a crucial role. However, this communicative dimension falls outside the model that maps the authority relation. It will be the focus of the next section.

Epistemic authority is a relation constituted by an implicit structure that may be logically analyzed as consisting of three relata (see figure 1):

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[7] David Sedley, "Plato's *Auctoritas* and the Rebirth of the Commentary Tradition," in *Philosophia Togata II: Plato and Aristotle at Rome*, ed. Jonathan Barnes and Miriam Griffin (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 111. See also Jenny Bryan, Robert Wardy, and James Warren, eds., "Introduction: Authorship and Authority in Ancient Philosophy," in *Authors and Authorities in Ancient Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 2–3.
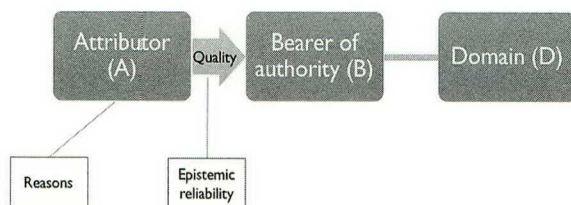
FIGURE 1. Model of epistemic authority.

some person attributes a certain quality (A: attributor) to the person in whom the authority is invested (B: bearer of authority) with respect to a certain epistemic domain (D: domain).[8] As already noted, this grid clearly shows that authority is not an absolute concept: it always relates to other people and to a certain domain. If B is an authority for A with respect to some domain D, A is inclined to believe B's claims regarding D, under certain conditions and to some extent.[9] These claims may be oral or written, explicit or implicit. Since the ascription of epistemic authority is subject dependent, A could ascribe authority to B with regard to a certain view of B, which is not really B's view. It might be only an interpretation from A's perspective of an ambiguous claim made by B.

When we apply this insight to the historical context of Neoplatonism, it immediately becomes clear that interpretations might play a key role in authority relations. Platonism as a systematic construct is built on a specific interpretation of Plato's philosophy: it is the attempt to bridge the gap between what Plato says in the dialogues and what Plato actually means. A great deal of authority is attributed to Plato on the basis of views that are not always literally expressed in the Platonic dialogues, but rather are interpretations of these literal elements. The historian of philosophy may judge the legitimacy of the interpretation by comparing it to what Plato actually says—as indeed a fair number of scholars do. However, from a historical point of view it is more interesting to ask what reasons our commentators may have had for proposing such an interpretation in the first place.

The ontology of the authority relation as described above always consists of the same relata: attributor (A), bearer of authority (B), and the

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[8] The following analytical model is based on the study of the concept by De George, *The Nature and Limits of Authority*, who himself describes it as a basic working model to handle "the more obvious cases" (p. 14). For an elaborate account of the described model with a grid, see Opsomer and Ulacco, "Epistemic Authority in Textual Traditions," 25–32.

[9] Opsomer and Ulacco, "Epistemic Authority in Textual Traditions," 26; see also De George, *The Nature and Limits of Authority*, 27.

domain (D). What differs in every relation is the attributed quality (Q) in the form of different degrees of epistemic reliability. The epistemic reliability may vary from minimal acceptance on one side of the spectrum to blind acceptance in an infallible source on the other side. In this respect, the views of B can be considered to be true, infallibly true, probable, plausible, and so forth. In theory, the assertions only have to be "credible enough for A to think *prima facie* that she ought to accept them."[10] Whereas we might say that, for the Neoplatonists, Plato is in almost all of the cases right—that is, the epistemic reliability on Plato is extremely high on the scale in every domain—the epistemic reliability attributed to Aristotle is far more difficult to pinpoint and depends highly on the domain.[11]

As shown in the case study later in this article, Syrianus questions Aristotle's epistemic reliability in the domain of metaphysics, because in books M and N of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle attacks the views of Plato and the Pythagoreans. This case shows that the authority relation of secondary authoritative figures is highly dependent on other authority relations present in the same context, specifically on authoritative figures that stand on a higher level in the hierarchy of authorities. Although Aristotle's views might in general be regarded as true or, at least, plausible, the degree of acceptance drops drastically when some statement of Aristotle is seen as conflicting with the Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato. Because of the actual variety of epistemic reliance, it is possible to make a hierarchy of authorities, and the intensity of actual reliance may differ greatly among authorities.

When A considers B an authority, there are of course *reasons* for this belief. These reasons explain and ground the authority relation as such, whether they are implicit or explicit, good reasons or not. Generally, they amount to certain qualities or characteristics that the attributor recognizes in the bearer of authority: epistemic virtues such as knowledge, learning, experience, honesty, and truthfulness, and also communicative virtues such as clarity, accuracy, argumentative competence, and didactic qualities. In the cases when contact with the authority is only indirect, by means of texts, the epistemic and communicative virtues of the texts might be seen as analogous to those of the author, since the texts get these qualities from their author.[12] The virtues that historical agents recognize in their authorities can also differ from what we would consider a virtue nowadays. A

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[10] Opsomer and Ulacco, "Epistemic Authority in Textual Traditions," 26.

[11] On the high authority of Plato in *every* domain, see Opsomer, "Proclus and the Authority of Plato," in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Plato in Antiquity*, ed. Harold Tarrant, Danielle A. Layne, Dirk Baltzly, and François Renaud (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 499–514.

[12] Opsomer and Ulacco, "Epistemic Authority in Textual Traditions," 30.

good example is obscurity, which is highly valued by Neoplatonists as a way of concealing certain important texts from people for whom they were not intended, such as the uninitiated or less intelligent. For instance, Aristotle's obscurity is understood to be intentional: to challenge the minds of the intelligent, while preventing the "empty minds" from continuing their study any further.[13]

When we consider someone an epistemic authority in a certain domain, we assume that this person, and by extension the texts that this person has written, have a certain amount of knowledge in this specific domain. Her knowledge or expertise might be established by certain reasons, but these do not necessarily have to be the same reasons as those we have for ascribing authority to her. For instance, we might have good reasons to think of Peter W. Higgs and François Englert as authorities in physics (perhaps because they won the Nobel Prize in physics 2013), but this does not necessarily imply that we understand why the Higgs particle would contribute to our understanding of the origin of the mass of subatomic particles. So, transmission of reasons, as we might call it, is not necessary, though possible: if a commentator explains the reasons that his authority had for his views, we might adopt these reasons also as our own justifying reasons for holding the same views. The reasons for someone to accept certain views as true and thereby for ascribing authority to their source may remain implicit, although in textual traditions the commentators typically make an effort to justify their authorities. It is a specific characteristic of the commentary tradition that the commentators try to provide the reasons why the view is true (or false), so that the audience might follow the commentator in his attributions of authority.

Regarding the model, I would like to emphasize that the elements that it describes are not those of a psychological process and cannot be interpreted as such. What the model actually captures are logical moments that are not immediately discernible but can only be distinguished retrospectively. So, there is no need for the attributor to recognize or acknowledge the act of attribution as such—the act should only have the capacity to be recognized by the researcher as an attribution of authority. For example, the Neoplatonic commentator Proclus does not have to be reflectively conscious of attributing authority to Plato for the modern scholar to recognize the phenomenon and logically analyze its elements.

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[13] For this view, see, for instance, Ammonius, *In Aristotelis categorias commentarius*, ed. Adolf Busse (Berlin: Reimer, 1895), 7, 7–14.

The model's benefit lies in its analysis of the different constituents involved in the authority relation. The model invites one to specify these different elements, thus serving the important heuristic function of making explicit what is implicit in the authority relation. While it could be possible even without the model to identify the different issues at stake in research on authority, scholars working on authority in a specific historical context apparently do not always specify the type of authority that is at play in that particular case or the parameters involved. To be fair, the textual sources are generally imprecise or even vague about their attributions of authority, but the researcher is not justified in keeping the concept deliberately vague and indeterminate. The model is meant to address these issues and encourage researchers to be more precise when possible or to specify in which aspects the sources remain vague. For instance, scholars often refrain from delineating the domain of someone's epistemic authority or from defining clearly the quality of the authority. A good example from Neoplatonic studies is the question whether or not, for a specific author and in a specific context, Plato's epistemic authority is defeasible—a question that will be addressed in the last section of this article.

Before moving on to the next section, I will note some examples from scholarly literature and my own research in which the model shows its usefulness in providing a more precise account of the authority relation. First, the model has shown that authority is not a univocal concept but can take on different forms, depending on the parameters involved. However, many scholars speak about authority without specifying how they define it in each specific case, which might lead to apparent conflicts between scholars based on conceptual differences. For instance, Han Baltussen has argued that the Neoplatonist Simplicius "subverts authority" because he develops his own positions despite his insistence that this position is already present in the authoritative texts. However, Baltussen can only define this practice as a *subversion* of authority because of his narrow definition of authority as "the assumed importance of philosophical views (and by proxy, the holders of these views or the books in which these are laid down) as sources of truth to be accepted without testing or disputing these."[14] The model has made explicit that this definition only holds for absolute authority, namely when the epistemic reliability (Q) comes down to blind acceptance of the source. By contrast, in light of the variety of epistemic authority as captured

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[14] Han Baltussen, "Simplicius and the Subversion of Authority," *Antiquorum philosophia* 3 (2009): 121–36, at 121.

by the model, one could argue against Baltussen that Simplicius does not subvert authority simply because he does rely epistemically on his authorities. However, this conflict would only be conceptual because of our completely different definitions of authority—an issue that the model intends to make explicit.[15]

Second, the model is extremely useful in describing complex situations of multiple authority relations—when different authorities are confronted with one other. For instance, by means of specifying the elements provided by the model, it immediately becomes clear that two authorities in confrontation with one another can be considered equally epistemically reliable by the attributor simply because their authorities range over different *domains*. For example, I find my doctor and lawyer equally reliable since each is the authority with regard to a different epistemic domain. More interesting are the complex cases in which multiple authorities are considered to be compatible with regard to the same domain—for instance, when Neoplatonists consider both Plato and Aristotle authorities in the case of unmoved causes. The model shows that this does not mean that Plato and Aristotle are authorities at the same level: their epistemic reliability (Q) could still differ enormously. The model, in its turn, is capable of specifying in each case the senses in which both Plato and Aristotle are considered authorities so that one can clarify what kind of "agreement" the commentators endorse between them. These examples thus confirm what I have claimed above, namely that the particular benefit of the model lies in its ability to determine the indeterminate variables that make up the authority relation, which makes it possible for researchers to speak more univocally about authority across different case studies. In addition, it makes us attentive to aspects that we may otherwise overlook.

THE COMMUNICATIVE AND SOCIAL DIMENSION: TEXTUAL COMMUNITIES AND TRADITIONS

As explained above, for the authority relation to exist it suffices that some agent (A) attributes authority in the form of different degrees of epistemic reliability (Q) to another person or thing (B), with regard to a certain domain (D). For this reason, the analytical model captures the different elements (A, B, D, Q) that constitute the authority relation as such, which

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[15] For more examples from existing literature on ancient philosophy in which the model could have facilitated the debate, including the example from Baltussen, see Opsomer and Ulacco, "Epistemic Authority in Textual Traditions," 37–40.

we might call its ontology and epistemology, independent of any specific social context. However, when we encounter authority as an existing phenomenon, whether in everyday life or in historical texts, it is evidently embedded in a complex social context, in which multiple attributions of authority are confronted. In this social dimension, people not only constantly attribute authority to others but they also communicate their attributions of authority to the like-minded, in the hope of convincing them to acknowledge the same authorities. In this section, I will focus on this social, communicative dimension and make the analytical model operational so that we can track the different dynamic authority relations at play in a complex social whole, such as a textual community or tradition.

When we direct our attention to authority as a social phenomenon, the first thing that comes to light is that the everyday experience of authority relations differs radically from the model's logical structure. One might rightly ask: do we make a professor an authority by believing what she says, or do we believe what she says simply because we consider a professor an authority?[16] In a structured social context most authorities are already established, so our encounter with these established authorities presupposes already existing authority relations, resulting from past acts of attribution, which subsequently interact (for instance, as "grounds") with new attributions. As noted above, the attributor's act of ascribing authority constitutes the authority relation and is thus independent of any of the derivative factors that can influence the authority process but are not part of its ontology. Nevertheless, when trying to give an accurate description of epistemic authority as a social phenomenon, one must attend to the fact that in a social context most authorities are already grounded and have a great impact on the attributors.

Especially in textual traditions, most philosophical authorities are already established, often as the result of a complex process extended throughout the ages. The commentators that are part of this textual tradition actively engage with the different authorities, and the way in which they approach an authoritative text is often radically influenced by their prior relationship to the authority. So, while the established authority may predetermine the authoritative behavior of the attributors, the latter in their turn influence the established authority by means of accepting or rejecting the authority's views—and shape the authority as such. In fact, as I will argue in the next section, in Neoplatonism the legitimacy of the established authorities is assumed from the outset. By dealing with them in a sophisticated way, the commentators can maintain them, reinforce them, transform

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[16] See on this issue also De George, *The Nature and Limits of Authority*, 29–30.

them, shape them, or break them down. Similar to the case of the professor above, one might say that the Neoplatonists both make Plato an authority by regarding his claims as true and regard Plato's claims as true because he is an authority.

For authorities to become established, communication is key. Authority is communicated in a social context in which there are two sides. On the one side, there is the communication of the acknowledged authority and the transmission of reasons to convince others to recognize the authority as well. On the other side, there is the decision whether or not to accept and internalize the authority. This process of social acknowledgement of authority can of course be consciously manipulated by the agents involved. However, in most cases establishment of authority comes down to a more or less spontaneous act of different agents influencing one another. If there are good reasons for the attribution, the authority is grounded and maintained by the convinced agents.

This communication of authority can create an epistemic community, a group of people who all acknowledge the same epistemic authority or a common set of authorities, such as the Neoplatonists who all recognize the authority of Plato. Note that my use of the term "epistemic community" has a broader, literal sense. It differs greatly from the technical meaning employed in the context of international relations, in which it refers to "a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area."[17] One might avoid this confusion by resorting to a more appropriate term specifically created for the use in historical scholarship, which also perfectly captures the way in which the Neoplatonists formed an epistemic community: namely "textual community."

The term "textual community" has been introduced and developed by Brian Stock to refer to particular eleventh- and twelfth-century religious groups that dissented from the religious mainstream and justified their own positions on the basis of authoritative texts.[18] The similarities between these textual communities and the Neoplatonic schools has already been indicated by other scholars, most importantly by Dirk Baltzly.[19] While the paradigm that the term "textual community" offers is very useful and

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[17] Peter M. Haas, "Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination," *International Organization* 46, no. 1 (1992): 3.
[18] Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).
[19] Baltzly, "Plato's Authority and the Formation of Textual Communities," *The Classical Quarterly* 64 (2014): 793–807.

compelling, the concept of authority it presupposes is still insufficiently clarified. For the purpose of this article, I will only briefly discuss how the characteristics of such a community could apply to the Neoplatonic community and in what ways the model could help to clarify the authority relations at stake. According to Baltzly, a textual community has the following characteristics: (1) it is a group that defines itself in opposition to the religious or cultural mainstream by means of appealing to texts that they regard as authoritative; (2) it is centered around leaders whose authority derives from their insight in the correct reading of these authoritative texts; (3) it understands itself in the light of the beliefs and concepts drawn from the authoritative texts; and (4) it even believes in a progressive salvation via the reading of these texts.

With reference to (1), we might say that it is clear that the Neoplatonists identified themselves in strict distinction from other groups by appealing to their specific reading of authoritative texts, most importantly the texts of Plato, but also those of Aristotle and other source texts of ancient wisdom, such as the Chaldean Oracles and Orphic writings. However, despite the fact that all these texts were considered authoritative in one way or another, the model could help to more precisely determine how these different attributions of authority hang together. When it comes to the Neoplatonic reading of Plato's texts, Maren Niehoff has argued that one aspect of Neoplatonic commentaries on the *Timaeus* was to demarcate the correct Platonic reading of this text from Christian and Jewish readings that served as an attempt to appropriate Plato's text into these traditions.[20] Even more, the Neoplatonic commentaries show that the Neoplatonists distinguished their own "correct" philosophical reading of the authoritative texts that captured the true meaning, from all other distorted readings. This distorted reading could have been proposed by Christians, but just as well by another philosophical school, or even by rhetoricians and grammarians. This "correct" reading of the authoritative texts, of which the meaning is neither straightforward nor easily grasped, should be guided by someone (2) with a greater insight in the truth that is hidden behind the literal surface: the school head or leader (*hēgemōn*) of the Neoplatonic community, Plato's successor (*diadochos*) on earth.

Considering the final two characteristics of a textual community, we might first note that the Neoplatonists clearly understood themselves on the basis of Plato's authoritative texts (3), as the biographies of some eminent

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[20] Maren R. Niehoff, "Did the *Timaeus* Create a Textual Community?," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 47 (2007): 161–91.

Platonists show. In the biography of Proclus, for instance, his student Marinus describes his teacher's life with reference to different kinds of Platonic virtue, and Proclus is depicted as having lived a blessed philosophical life based on the teachings of Plato.[21] How other authoritative texts of Aristotle, for instance, contributed to the manner in which the Neoplatonists understood themselves is less obvious, and the model could be helpful in investigating this issue further. The Neoplatonists shared a communal way of living that was centered around the reading of texts under the guidance of the teacher, since it was by means of getting insight in the divine doctrines that the students could progressively ascend the hierarchy of virtues (4). For this reason, Baltzly rightly emphasizes that Plato's authority in the Neoplatonic community is "not merely epistemic but moral" in the sense that his philosophy does not merely tell the truth but serves as the pathway to salvation.[22] Although I completely agree with this, I wonder how useful it is to emphasize the distinction between epistemic and moral authority in the case of Neoplatonism. In Neoplatonism it seems that the highest authority is attributed to Plato because Plato had access to the divine truth, knowledge of which may lead us to the divine. The epistemic and moral aspects are completely intertwined: in the end, the one who knows what is good will act in accordance with it.

It is clear that these textual communities functioned on the basis of authority relations: first, on the authority of the texts that are read in the community, and second, on the authoritative figures inside the community, such as the teacher, who initiates the students into the right interpretation of the authoritative texts. However, as noted above, these texts were not "made authoritative" by the textual community at one exact moment, but rather by means of a dynamic and multifaceted process that transcends a specific time and place. Secondary texts based on the authoritative texts (in the form of commentaries, paraphrases, and summaries) had communicated the authority of Plato for centuries before the rise of the Neoplatonic schools of late antiquity.

Philosophy, in this case Platonism, developed over time through these commentaries, and also the authority of central figures has been built in the context of these textual traditions. In his article on Plato's authority, Sedley shows how the revival of the Platonic commentary in late first century BC was used for the task of rebuilding Plato's authority, following the skeptical

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[21] For the biographies of Proclus and Plotinus by their students, see Mark Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints: The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by their Students* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000).
[22] Baltzly, "Plato's Authority and the Formation of Textual Communities," 793.

period of the Academy during which this authority virtually disappeared. It is important to realize that attributing authority cannot be something that one simply decides to do, since that would imply that we can simply decide to have reasons or evidence to regard any range of propositions in D as true.[23] Nevertheless, one can influence the process of authority relations, both consciously and unconsciously. No matter when and how this process of attributing authority to Plato started, it is clear that, at the time of Neoplatonism, the tradition had already firmly grounded Plato's authority. By means of writing commentaries in a textual tradition, the authority of Plato and other key figures was established, grounded, preserved, shaped, and, as in the case of Aristotle, also contested. The commentary might be called a vehicle for authority in the historical path called tradition.

AUTHORITY OF ARISTOTLE IN NEOPLATONISM AND SOME EXAMPLES FROM SYRIANUS

Before turning to the authority of Aristotle within the Neoplatonic tradition, let me first reiterate what I have suggested above, namely that the authority of secondary figures in Neoplatonism largely depends on the authority of primary figures. The authority of the most prominent figure of Neoplatonism, Plato, had become so firmly grounded in late antiquity that there was almost no need for the commentators to argue for the correctness of his statements—they were simply assumed to be true. Rather, what they were actually arguing for was the correctness of their own interpretations.

In his study on authority, De George argues that if some A believes some proposition p because B gave a proof, B is not an epistemic authority in that very instance, since a crucial aspect of the authority relation is a hierarchy of which the lower-standing attributor (A) accepts statements of the higher-standing authority (B) on his say-so.[24] The reason for this seems to be that persuasion presupposes a relation of parity between the partners, of which the one needs to convince the other by means of proof or debate. Only after a proof has been given for the truth of p will A believe that p is the case. By contrast, if B is an epistemic authority for A, the fact that B holds p to be true suffices for A to follow B in this conviction.[25] Nevertheless, the acceptance of views on authority does not necessarily imply that

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[23] I thank Cameron Boult for this important observation.
[24] De George, *The Nature and Limits of Authority*, 33–34.
[25] As the pre-emption thesis of epistemic authority implies: Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 107.

these views are considered to be indefeasible. In most cases, the views of the authority can be potentially defeated by new evidence or additional information without thereby invalidating the authority relation. As we have seen above, the epistemic reliability (Q) attributed to the bearer of authority may take various forms, and it is the form of this reliance that strongly defines the type of authority relation.

For this reason, it is crucial to carefully distinguish the different types of authority relation and to specify the type for each specific case. From the Neoplatonic commentaries it becomes clear that the commentators ascribe an extremely high authoritative status to Plato, and they generally conceive Plato's views as indefeasible. Their usual methodological procedure is to believe a statement on the basis of Plato's authority and only then argue for it. The truth of p is assumed beforehand, and the proof that is given serves to confirm that p or the interpretation of p is right.[26] This reveals the specific position of the commentators: although they regard the views communicated by the Platonic text as unquestionable and thus indefeasible, they still provide arguments in favor of these views in order to give a rational justification of why Plato is right. The high authoritative status of the source text also possibly explains the dominance of allegorical interpretations of the Platonic dialogues in late antiquity. Committed to the idea that the source text conveys some divine truth, the commentators sought multiple layers of meaning that communicate this truth in different manifestations.

From our modern viewpoint, this kind of supreme authority seems to lead to nothing more than blind submission. However, the Neoplatonists' self-assessment could not be further removed from this picture. In fact, Neoplatonists argue against believing Plato's statements without any inquiry—as, for example, the followers of Pythagoras allegedly believed anything on the basis of their master's authority, simply because "he said so" (*autos epha*). Olympiodorus, for instance, emphasizes that Plato himself urged his students not to believe him indiscriminately but to inquire for themselves, after which the commentator quotes his own teacher Ammonius as having said that he would not follow Plato without proof.[27] This shows that there is a clear distinction between what the commentators state that they are doing when interpreting Plato and what they are de facto doing. They present it as if Plato's views are open to question and might

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[26] See also George Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy: A Study of Its Development from the Stoics to Origen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 103.
[27] Olympiodorus, *In Platonis Gorgiam commentaria*, ed. L. G. Westerink (Leipzig: Teubner, 1970), 41, 9.

even be rejected, but they will never actually defend a position that is in conflict with Plato's; the outcome of any deliberation about Plato's correctness is predetermined. At the same time, however, the commentators clearly communicate that their readers' acceptance of Plato's authority should be grounded in insight. The student should not just believe, but understand why.

In other words, the Neoplatonic exegesis of highly authoritative texts does not completely undermine a certain form of critical assessment and a genuine urge to discover truth. A good example of this is Proclus's recognition that the order of the planets as proposed by Plato cannot be correct, at least not for the physical universe. Proclus saves Plato's authority by explaining that Plato's order is meant to stress the connection not between the physical planets but rather between their intelligible causes.[28] Nevertheless, as this example reveals, the commentators' notion of critical assessment differs radically from ours today. Most importantly, their critical attitude does not require a skeptical or neutral stance toward what Plato says, as if it would be open to question whether Plato's statements are true or false. Rather, their idea of being critical comes down to rediscovering the truth for oneself by means of letting one's intellect be led by the words of the divinely inspired Plato, instead of simply taking Plato's words for granted. For Platonists, grasping the truth is not really a discovery in the sense of a disclosure of what was before concealed, but rather a recollection or rediscovery of knowledge present in us.

Regarding Aristotle, in the same passage mentioned above, Olympiodorus argues that Aristotle is fundamentally in agreement with Plato, despite appearances to the contrary. Even when he disagrees with Plato, Aristotle is still a good student, who takes seriously Plato's advice to inquire for himself instead of blindly following his teacher. This claim points directly to the so-called harmony thesis—the Neoplatonists' idea that Aristotle is not an original thinker with his own very specific views, but fundamentally a Platonist in most aspects of his philosophy.[29] As the Neoplatonic commentaries show, Aristotle's views can in many cases be interpreted perfectly from a Platonist perspective, whether or not we believe that this interpretation does right by Aristotle's own intentions. When assessing Aristotle's texts, the Neoplatonists follow the same exegetical procedure as for Plato's texts, although the outcome is, in the case of Aristotle, not

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[28] See Aerts and Opsomer, "Teksten bekleed met autoriteit," 291–93.
[29] For a well-known study on this idea, see Lloyd P. Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

predetermined. By contrast, the acceptance of Aristotle's views is contingent on different factors, most importantly on their compatibility with Plato's views, but also on the personal stance of the commentator that in its turn is influenced by the textual community. Problems arise when Aristotle is explicitly critical of Platonic doctrines, as is the case in *Metaphysics* M and N, where Aristotle criticizes the Platonic Forms and denies their separate existence. The commentator Syrianus carefully disarms this attack on the core of Platonism by means of reassessing Aristotle's authority in light of Plato's.

Syrianus starts his commentary to book M and N of the *Metaphysics* with a long praise of Aristotle, of whom he considers himself a disciple not "on merely a few or trivial topics" (80, 4–5).[30] The commentator briefly mentions some domains in which he considers Aristotle an authority, namely in logic, ethics, and physics (80, 5–7). Syrianus also praises Aristotle for certain accomplishments in the highest domain of philosophy, namely metaphysics, since "this most excellent treatise" with "apt remarks, accompanied by demonstrations of the highest quality" gave a good insight in both enmattered forms and definitions, and in the divine and unmoved causes of the cosmos (80, 7–12). Because of all these "excellent aspects of the man's philosophy" (80, 8), Syrianus expresses his belief that we all owe Aristotle the warmest thanks since he is truly a "benefactor of the life of man" (80, 13–4). Thus, within the framework of authority relations, we can say that Syrianus's praise of specific aspects of Aristotle's philosophy reinforces his authority in certain domains (D), namely logic, ethics, and physics, and in certain aspects of one domain, for instance, his discussion of enmattered forms in metaphysics.

In the rest of his prologue (80, 16–81, 6), however, Syrianus sets the ground for his commentary on *Metaphysics* M and N, in which he contests Aristotle's authority in other aspects of the domain of metaphysics due to the latter's criticism of the first Platonic principles. As Syrianus makes clear from the outset, he does not consider himself one of the "controversialists" (80, 4)—that is, one who wants to attack Aristotle for polemic purposes. Rather, Syrianus presents his critical assessment of Aristotle's criticism of Platonism as a necessary evil to prevent his less advanced students from following Aristotle in his contempt for divine realities (80, 22–5). This is

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[30] All references are to the following edition: Syrianus, *In Aristotelis metaphysica commentaria*, ed. Wilhelm Kroll (Berlin: Reimer, 1902). Translations are from *Syrianus: On Aristotle Metaphysics 13–14*, trans. John Dillon and Dominic O'Meara (London: Duckworth, 2006).

necessary exactly because Aristotle has such a "well-deserved reputation" and is such an authority in many respects.

Throughout his commentary, Syrianus carefully refutes Aristotle's criticism by means of different exegetical strategies—for instance, by quoting Aristotle against himself or by claiming that Aristotle misunderstood, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the Platonic position.[31] However, for Syrianus Aristotle is not some random critic of Plato that needs to be refuted, but rather someone who enjoys a significant authoritative status in Platonism. For this reason, Syrianus elaborates on the question of why Aristotle felt the need to contest the "divine truth" set out by Plato and the Pythagoreans. In other words, Syrianus provides reasons why we should find Aristotle epistemically unreliable (Q) in the issue at stake. In doing so, he attempts to explain Aristotle's failure by setting the Stagirite against higher authorities, like Plato and the Pythagoreans. Consider the following example:

> But I would take as an indication of the fact that these divine men have done philosophy in the finest, best and most irrefutable way that you, Aristotle, the most ingenious and productive of those on record, should experience such difficulties in controversy with them, having said nothing that might even be persuasive, not to say conclusive, or indeed anything relevant to them at all, but in most of what you say employing alien hypotheses, in no way appropriate to the doctrines of your elders, while in a number of instances, when proposing to make some point against their true doctrine, you fail to come to grips with them at all.[32]

In this passage, Syrianus claims that the arguments Aristotle puts forward to criticize the Platonic doctrine are neither persuasive nor conclusive and, even more importantly, completely irrelevant to this divine truth. According to Syrianus, one reason for this is that Aristotle uses his own hypotheses to create contradictions in the Platonic or Pythagorean position that are not inherent to it but only follow from misunderstanding the terms. Moreover, Syrianus identifies ways in which Aristotle simply fails to understand the divine doctrine in the way the "divine men" meant it. According

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[31] For a discussion of Syrianus's approach in refuting Aristotle's criticism, see Dillon and O'Meara, *Syrianus, On Aristotle Metaphysics 13–14*, 11–20, and Christoph Helmig, "The Truth Can Never Be Refuted: Syrianus' Views on Aristotle Reconsidered," in *Syrianus et la métaphysique de l'antiquité tardive*, ed. Angela Longo (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 2009), 347–80.
[32] Syrianus, *In Met.* 195, 2–9.

to Syrianus, the fact that Aristotle did not completely master the divine doctrine is reflected in his teachings: although the *Metaphysics* works up to the higher, divine philosophy of Plato, in the end it cannot reach that height because of Aristotle's habitual preoccupation with the material realm (60, 27–34). It is this focus on the material realm that prevented Aristotle from achieving the level of insight that Plato and other divine men did have. Throughout his commentary, Syrianus insinuates that this incapacity made Aristotle become contentious toward Plato (e.g., 192, 16), which resulted in polemic treatises like the one Syrianus comments on. Syrianus aims to show that in *Metaphyiscs* M and N Aristotle uses all kinds of methods to attack the divine truth, such as rhetoric (e.g., 180, 28–30) and mockery (e.g., 158, 34; 174, 18).

Interestingly, in the passage quoted above, Syrianus still presents Aristotle as one of the most ingenious philosophers around; thus it is all the more remarkable that not even Aristotle can contest the Platonic doctrine. According to Syrianus, this is of course because the Platonic doctrine presents an irrefutable divine truth. In the dynamics of authority relations, Syrianus thus intentionally invokes the authority of Aristotle in order to emphasize the superior authority of divine men like Plato and Pythagoras. Overall, Syrianus's exegesis carefully builds up and breaks down Aristotle's authority, reshaping it so that his students will not be misled by Aristotle's critical treatises. Within the context of complex but dynamic authority relations, the Neoplatonists' conception of their authorities and their views influences their exegetical behavior, just as their exegesis builds, breaks down, and shapes their authorities.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates how epistemic authority as a social phenomenon can be logically analyzed as a relation between different elements, most importantly between the attributor (A) and the bearer (B) of the authority in question. The model that serves to analyze this implicit structure proves itself extremely useful in historical research for providing a clearer picture of the various authority relations at play. This is not to say that one cannot do excellent research on authority without this model, but the model does compel researchers to be more precise and explicit, even when the textual sources themselves remain vague. Another important benefit of the model is that it encourages clarity regarding the concept of authority, thus facilitating the scholarly debate and comparative work. In addition to reflecting

on the theoretical aspect of the model, I have also made the model operational in a larger context and have emphasized the importance of the social and communicative dimension. We have seen that this social dimension is crucial in the description of authority relations within a textual community or tradition, in which the most significant authorities are already established. These established authorities greatly influence our attributions of authority, and this influence plays a key role in accounting for the different exegetical attitudes and strategies of the commentators. As the examples from Neoplatonism have shown, it is in a continuous process within a community and throughout history that authority is shaped by its followers, who in their turn base the attributions on their relationship to the authority.

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