



The Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon

Platonism in Late Byzantium, between
Hellenism and Orthodoxy

VOJTĚCH HLADKÝ

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Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

ASHGATE

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Introduction

George Gemistos Plethon is certainly one of the most important, but at the same time also one of the more mysterious figures of Byzantine and Renaissance philosophy. The lectures on Plato he gave to the Florentine humanists during his stay in Italy – directly or indirectly – helped to promote the renewal of Platonic philosophy in the West. However his own version of Platonism has arguably not yet been sufficiently explored and his religious beliefs and their relation to his philosophical thought have not received a satisfactory treatment either. Both topics, his Platonism and his religious beliefs, will be the focus of the present study.

The Man and his Work

George Gemistos, later also surnamed Plethon, was born in Constantinople presumably to a *pronotarios* of St Sophia, Demetrios Gemistos,¹ some time before 1360.² He might have studied under the famous philosopher Demetrios Kydones, who played an important role in introducing Latin scholasticism into Byzantine thought,³ and a mysterious Jew Elissaeus,⁴ but we cannot be entirely sure in either of these two cases. Gemistos appeared in Constantinople around 1405, but shortly afterwards moved to Mistra, the capital of the Despotate of Morea (the present Peloponnese) where he was active at the court of the Despot as one of his officials⁵ and at the same time as a distinguished humanist and teacher of

¹ Bessarion, *De nat.* 93.10 (Latin version): *Plethon Constantinopolitanus*, Alexandre 1858, p. v, n.1. For George Gemistos' father Demetrios see Woodhouse 1986, p. 17.

² This date can be deduced from the statement of George of Trebizond, according to which Gemistos died almost one hundred years old (*centum enim pene misera aetate annos complevit*), *Comp.* III, penultimate chapter = LEGRAND III, p. 289; cf. Woodhouse 1986, p. 5.

³ From the passage in which Gemistos mentions his discussion with Kydones about Plato, *Ad Bess.* II 467.18–22, it is clear that he at least knew him. Nonetheless whether he was really his pupil remains far from certain – see Woodhouse 1986, p. 22, *pace* Demetracopoulos 2004, pp. 29–31, Demetracopoulos 2006, p. 279; see below, p. 184, n.95.

⁴ See below, pp. 191–204.

⁵ See Filelfo's letter from 1441, *Ad Sax.*: [*Gemistus*] *est enim iam admodum senex, quique magistratum gerit nescio quem.*

ancient Greek thought and culture.⁶ He must have soon become well known as a statesman, philosopher and an authority on the ancient Greek world. In spite of being a layman, he travelled as a counsellor with the Byzantine delegation to Italy to participate in the Council at Ferrara and Florence in 1438–1439 where the Church union was to be concluded. There he met Italian humanists and gave his famous lectures on Plato's philosophy.⁷ After the Council whose result, namely, the union of the Eastern and Western Churches, he rejected, Gemistos returned to the Peloponnese and spent the rest of his life in Mistra.⁸ He died most probably in 1454, although the year 1452 is usually accepted as the date of his death.⁹ A few years afterwards, he was accused of paganism and ancient Greek polytheism by his main personal as well as philosophical opponent, Scholarios, who finally managed to seize and burn Gemistos' most important work, the *Laws*, discovered after his death.¹⁰ His alleged polytheism, inspired by Plato, subsequently began to provoke condemnation and censure but also fascination among Byzantine and Renaissance thinkers, and his remains were even transferred to Italy in 1464 by his admirer Sigismondo Malatesta, who buried Gemistos in his neo-pagan Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini.¹¹ Writing around 1490, Ficino famously claims that Gemistos' lectures on Plato during the time of the Council were an impulse which 20 years later inspired Cosimo de' Medici to found the Platonic Academy in Florence and to charge him with

⁶ Woodhouse 1986, pp. 33–47, 79–118.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 118–88.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 215–39, 267–82, 308–21.

⁹ Monfasani 1976, pp. 163–70, 2005a, pp. 118, 119–20, 2006 *contra* e.g. Alexandre 1858, p. xliii, with n.2, Woodhouse 1986, pp. 3, 5, who accept the earlier date on the basis of a manuscript note: Μην. ἰουν. Κς' Νιε' ἐτελεύτησεν ὁ διδάσκαλος ὁ Γόμοστος [sic] ἡμέρα δευτέρα, ὥρα α' τῆς ἡμέρας [= 26 June 1452]. One may note the corruption of Gemistos' name to 'Gomostos' which may be explained by the fact that the note stems from Demetrios Raoul Kabakes, notorious for his bad spelling of Greek; see Monfasani 2006, p. 459. In contrast, Monfasani concludes for 1454 on the basis of his overall reconstruction of the chronology of Trebizond's works, travels of Bessarion and his associates, as well as a treatise by Gemistos opponent Matthew Kamariotes. Moreover, there is one fact that may further support the later date of his death. When Scholarios is writing about the events in the late 1440s and the early 1450s, he says that although Gemistos replied to his *Defence of Aristotle*, he himself could not do the same because of 'the fate of our country'. "Ὁ μὲν οὖν αὐθις ἀντέγραφε, τὸν αὐτὸν πρὸς τε Ἀριστοτέλη καὶ ἡμᾶς, ἐκείνῳ δῆθεν συνηγοροῦντας, ἀγῶνα πεποιημένος. Ἡμᾶς δὲ ἡ τῆς πατρίδος ἀντιγράφειν αὐτῷ ἐκώλυε συμφορά ... *Ad Jos.* 156.14–16. It is thus the fall of Constantinople, and not the death of Gemistos, which is mentioned as the obstacle that prevented Scholarios from answering properly. This would certainly fit better with the sequence of events in which Gemistos died a year after 1453 and not the year before.

¹⁰ See below, pp. 223–4.

¹¹ Woodhouse 1986, pp. 159–60, 374–5.

making a Latin translation of Plato.¹² His (posthumous) portraits have been identified in a painting by Cristofano dell'Altissimo kept in Uffizi and in a famous fresco, the Procession of the Magi by Benozzo Gozzoli, in the Palazzo Medici Riccardi, both in Florence.¹³ In the later tradition he was regarded either as a scholar and Platonic philosopher – although not always as a reviver of ancient paganism – or as a prominent anti-Unionist.¹⁴

Gemistos left behind numerous texts covering such diverse disciplines as grammar, rhetoric, literature, music, geography, astronomy, ancient history, politics, religion, philosophy and theology.¹⁵ Although some of them are only excerpts and summaries from ancient authors, most probably made in his school for teaching purposes, the wide range of his interests definitely shows that he was not only an excellent scholar, but, in fact, a kind of polymath.¹⁶ For practical reasons, the present study will have to concentrate only on the texts that are in some way relevant for his philosophy, although those political, religious and theological treatises that contribute to the understanding of his philosophical thought will be discussed here too.

¹² Ficino, *Enn.*, *prohemium*. There is a scholarly dispute how faithfully Ficino's account describes the real events and in what way it should be in fact understood; cf. recently Monfasani 2011c, esp. 65–6, 68, with further literature.

¹³ Neri 2001, pp. 12–14, Ronchey 2006, pp. 115, 464, tab. 40, 42.

¹⁴ Knös 1950, Woodhouse 1986, pp. 375–8, Monfasani 1994, 2005b.

¹⁵ For an overview of Gemistos' works see Woodhouse 1986, pp. xvi–xviii. Unfortunately Woodhouse fails to note that later Masai 1963 found out that an unpublished treatise *On Fortune* (Περὶ τύχης) is in fact a text by Alexander of Aphrodisias and not by Gemistos as he claimed in his previous works. Similarly, *On the Procession of the Holy Spirit* (Περὶ τῆς ἐκπορεύσεως τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος) is a later forgery published under the name of Gemistos: see Monfasani 1994. For other Gemistos' unpublished texts and the survey of manuscripts see also Masai–Masai 1954, Dedes 1981. See also Tambrun 2006, pp. 35–50, and Neri 2010, pp. 196–225.

¹⁶ Woodhouse 1986, pp. 27–8.

Gemistos and Scholarship

The secondary literature on Gemistos is surprisingly rich.¹⁷ Modern Plethonic scholarship begins with the works of Wilhelm Gass,¹⁸ and especially Charles Alexandre,¹⁹ who around the middle of the nineteenth century published some of Gemistos' key texts, along with studies on them. Alexandre's edition of Plethon's *Laws*, accompanied by other shorter texts related to it, has not been superseded, although in the meantime some more of the text of the *Laws* has been discovered by Renée and François Masai. Alexandre's book is also a turning point in the overall interpretation of Gemistos' religious beliefs, because while Gass was not still sure about his paganism,²⁰ Alexandre's extensive edition of the *Laws* is widely accepted by modern scholars as the decisive proof of it. In the second half of the same century, Fritz Schultze made the first important attempt to reconstruct Gemistos' metaphysical system as a whole.²¹ He was followed by a Greek scholar Ioannes P. Mamalakis who published important works on Gemistos in the late 1930s,²² as well as Milton V. Anastos who wrote detailed and very interesting studies on diverse aspects of his thought and learning shortly after World War II.²³ Nevertheless, arguably the most important works on Gemistos' philosophy still remain those by François Masai from the 1950s, who has also re-examined the tradition of the transmission of his texts and discovered some important manuscripts.²⁴ On the basis of Gemistos' autographs discovered by Masai, Bernadette Lagarde wrote an excellent PhD thesis, unfortunately so far unpublished, in which she edited, translated and commented on his *On the Differences of Aristotle from Plato*.²⁵ Furthermore, she later also published the *Reply to Scholarios' Defence of Aristotle*.²⁶ Of the many Greek scholars who contributed

¹⁷ See the list of the secondary literature at the end of this study, including the systematic bibliographies cited there, pp. 341–59. In this study of his philosophical thought only the most important contributions that have significantly influenced the discussion of his work may be taken fully into account. There are thus many occasional informative or, in contrast, very specialized writings on some aspects of his thought and legacy, interesting as they sometimes may be, that must be necessarily left aside.

¹⁸ Gass 1844.

¹⁹ Alexandre 1858.

²⁰ Gass 1844, pp. 35–7.

²¹ Schultze 1874.

²² Mamalakis 1939, 1955; for other works on Gemistos by this and following authors see the systematic bibliographies, below, p. 341.

²³ Anastos 1948.

²⁴ Especially Masai–Masai 1954 and Masai 1956, 1963, 1976.

²⁵ Lagarde 1976, the Greek text was published as *De diff.* in 1973.

²⁶ *Contra Schol.*

significantly to Plethonic scholarship we should mention especially Theodoros S. Nikolaou,²⁷ Leonidas Bargeliotes²⁸ and Christos P. Baloglou,²⁹ the last one being especially interested in political and economic aspects of Gemistos' writings. John Monfasani³⁰ and James Hankins,³¹ both writing about topics related to Gemistos, made very important contributions to understanding his work in the context of contemporary Renaissance thought. Brigitte Tambrun-Krasker, specializing on Gemistos, prepared several important editions of his texts and, as well as many articles, wrote an PhD thesis and monograph on him.³² In Italian Moreno Neri published several translations of Gemistos' works and studies on him, recently followed by a general overview of his life and thought published jointly with an extensive commentary on his treatise *On virtues*.³³ Fabio Pagani made an important discovery of Gemistos' radical alterations of Plato's text in manuscripts.³⁴ In English Niketas Siniosoglou recently published a significant monograph on Gemistos whom he considers to be an outcome of the previous tradition of Byzantine humanistic and pagan thought and influential in the rise of modern secularism.³⁵ Last, in 1986 Christopher M. Woodhouse published a complex and detailed study of Gemistos' life, the events in which he took part, and his writings, whose most important parts he translated or summarized in English.³⁶ Even if Gemistos' philosophy and religious beliefs will be treated from a significantly different perspective here, the present work is much indebted to this exceptional book, which provides an ideal starting point for anybody interested in the remarkable thinker of Mistra. Thus, although the present study can hopefully be understood on its own as far as Gemistos' philosophy is concerned, for his life as well as historical context the reader is referred to Woodhouse's book.³⁷

²⁷ All his papers on Gemistos were collected in Nikolaou 2005.

²⁸ e.g. Bargeliotes 1973, 1975, 1976, 1979, 1980, 1989, 1990–1993.

²⁹ e.g. Baloglou 2002.

³⁰ Monfasani 1976, 1992, 1994, 2002b, 2005a–b, 2006, 2008, 2011a–c, 2012a–d, (forthcoming).

³¹ Hankins 1991.

³² Especially *De virt., Or. mag.*, Tambrun-Krasker 1992, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2006. For a critical account of the last work see Hladký 2009.

³³ Neri 2010; see also Neri 2001.

³⁴ Pagani 2008, 2009; see also below, pp. 263–7.

³⁵ Siniosoglou 2011.

³⁶ Woodhouse 1986. In his review, Monfasani 1988 discusses some shortcomings of Woodhouse's book. Cf. also n.15.

³⁷ For the history of the Despotate of Mistra and the general cultural context there see Zakythinos 1932, 1953, Runciman 1980.

What is now, as it seems, most needed for the proper understanding and appreciation of Gemistos' thought, is a kind of global *schizzo*, a systematic overview of his philosophy, concentrating especially on his Platonism. Such an overall reconstruction must be primarily based on his own texts, and it should be collated with the testimonies of other writers and supplemented by them only as second level sources. Plethonic scholarship often relies too much on external information about his personality, certainly extraordinary and fascinating, and thus tends to interpret his works from the perspective of the contemporaries who might have misunderstood or were even overtly hostile to him. Unfortunately, this leads many interpreters to regard some of his texts as hypocritical, purely tactical and not representative of Gemistos' real thought. The best example of this approach is perhaps Siniossoglou's book where, furthermore, Plethon's thought is interpreted against the background of broader intellectual discussions of his day. Unfortunately, there are only few cases when Gemistos explicitly names or reacts to some of his alleged opponents (as, for instance, Palamism which he nowhere seems to discuss). Using indirect philosophical and textual evidence to interpret his works thus remains speculative. Furthermore, Siniossoglou supposes that Plethon is the most important representative of an alleged secret tradition of Byzantine intellectual paganism lasting for centuries. However, as it seems to the present author, for such a tradition we have no straightforward and unambiguous evidence.³⁸

³⁸ Siniossoglou 2011. It is also difficult to accept Siniossoglou's definition of paganism and Christianity. According to him, paganism is represented by both Byzantine humanism and Plethon's Platonism, and equated with rationality, secularism and modernity. In contrast, Christianity, associated by Siniossoglou mainly with Palamism, is supposed to suffer from irrationality and fideism. Because of such an a priori definition of the given terms already at the very beginning the whole book gives a strong impression of being rather written *à la thèse*, however interesting it may be.

There are other objections that can be raised to Siniossoglou's approach too. He repeatedly argues that Byzantine intellectuals frequently hid their real pagan interests behind Christian rhetoric and we thus must read their real beliefs between the lines. Such an interpretative principle is, however, a dangerous one since it may just help us to discover in the texts whatever we have decided to find at the very beginning. Furthermore, Siniossoglou argues for the incompatibility of ancient pagan thought in general, and Platonism in particular, with Byzantine culture, which means that the intellectuals of Byzantium who engaged in its study must have been secret pagans. This goes against the consensus of scholarship according to which Byzantine culture largely absorbed ancient heritage, although used for its own purposes and in a well-delineated framework of general education. One could thus ask if everybody who shows an interest in ancient thought or Platonism is necessarily a pagan. It may hold not only for Byzantium or Renaissance, but also for present-day ancient philosophers and teachers of classics. For further criticism of Siniossoglou's book see

The approach of the present study is thus the reverse – it will attempt to concentrate firstly on Gemistos’ texts, provide a detailed interpretation of them while accepting all as serious, however they may vary in the expression of his philosophical and religious beliefs, and interpret them in their proper context. Subsequently external testimonies may be introduced, which must be, nonetheless, always submitted to a careful examination, which is especially necessary in the case of Gemistos’ real religious views. Only then conclusions can be drawn. Since the present study intentionally keeps as close as possible to Plethon’s original text, some of its parts are indeed very descriptive, the fact of which its author is well aware, being a kind of ‘happy positivist’. One may also object that the present study to some extent suffers from insensitivity to the context and that it does not pay sufficient attention to the different genres and occasions in which Gemistos’ texts were written, using them just as a quarry for his doctrine. As we hope to be able to show, such an approach may be justified by the exceptional inner coherence of Plethon’s Platonism, whose different aspects are scattered throughout his various writings. This study should be thus an attempt to collect all these bits together and to place them into the proper place in general picture of Gemistos’ philosophy.

To discuss Gemistos’ thought properly, it is convenient to divide his writings into three groups that correspond to the most important aspects of his philosophy. The first one is the so-called public philosophy, that means the philosophy Gemistos presented publicly as his own and more or less clearly reflects what he himself held. The second group is the Platonism contained in his commentaries and interpretations of the thought of others, especially of Plato and the *Chaldaean Oracles*. The enigmatic *Laws*, discovered after Gemistos’ death, belong with the latter group of texts, for the reasons that will become apparent later on, subsumed here under a common designation as *philosophia perennis*. Finally, the third part of the present work will treat the problem of Gemistos’ religious beliefs, including his sole treatise dealing with Christian theology, often considered as hypocritical and not representing his real opinions. This part will also discuss at length external testimonies as well as the content and the intentions of the *Laws*, on which the usual conclusion about his paganism is based. For reasons that will be discussed only in the third part of this study, the name ‘Gemistos’ will be used – to some extent in a similar manner as it is in Woodhouse’s book – when his personality or public philosophy is meant, whereas his surname ‘Plethon’ will be restricted solely to the context of the *philosophia perennis*.

Bydén 2013, Zografidis 2013, Kappes 2013; for a presentation of Christian philosophy as a rational enterprise since its very beginnings see Karamanolis (forthcoming).

