

In Memoriam: Holger Thesleff (1924–2023)

Address given at the solemn Opening Session of the International Plato Society XVI Symposium Platonicum, held at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, May 5, 2025, to honour the memory of Professor Holger Thesleff.

Dear colleagues and dear friends,

It is my solemn honour to commemorate the remarkable life and enduring legacy of our esteemed colleague, mentor, and friend, Holger Thesleff, who passed away on October 3rd, 2023, just a few months short of his one hundredth birthday.

Holger Thesleff's scholarship fundamentally reshaped our understanding of Plato's dialogues. He guided Platonic studies away from the rigid dilemmas that had long dominated the field—the so-called “either-or” questions about authenticity and chronology—and championed instead what he himself termed a “both-and” approach, attentive to the complex literary, historical, institutional, and even material dimensions of Plato's philosophical work.

Holger's was a profoundly dialectical vision, one that refused to accept simple dichotomies—not only with regard to questions of authenticity or chronology, but also to ontology itself. He was a critical voice against the so-called “Two-World Model” of Platonic interpretation, arguing persuasively that Plato's world was not constructed around polar opposites. As he wrote, Plato's “view of the world as a whole is not dualistic. His is not a ‘white/black’ world. There is no pointed existential or ontological opposition in it between, say, light and darkness, good and evil, or truth and falsity. Even the prisoners in the Cave at least see reflections of light.” Holger's attention to nuance and gradation urges us all to

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reach a deeper, more generous understanding of Plato's thought.

Thesleff's pioneering research into the process of revision within the Academy brought our attention to the essentially collaborative nature of philosophy. His work on the phenomenon of "school accumulation"—both in Plato's Academy and in Hellenistic Pythagoreanism—remains foundational to our field. Through his research, he illuminated the ways in which philosophical traditions are shaped through ongoing dialogue, transmission, and creative reinterpretation.

To those who had the privilege of working with him, Holger was much more than a scholar of rare insight and formidable erudition; he was a true bridge-builder, always eager to foster connections across countries, disciplines, and generations. As a founding member of both the Nordic Plato Society and the International Plato Society, he played a decisive role in cultivating an international community of Platonic scholarship.

Colleagues remember him as both a brilliant debater and a generous companion. He had an extraordinary capacity to listen, to challenge, and to inspire, nurturing an environment in which intellectual exchange flourished. It has been a great honour to work with Holger in recent years as he finished his final publication, "Afterthoughts on School Accumulation in Plato's Academy,"—now included in the volume *The Making of the Platonic Corpus*, published shortly after his death. It brings some solace to know that, in his final months, Holger was aware that his latest work would continue to reach scholars both old and new, spurring further dialogue in the fields that he so passionately loved.

Many here will also remember that Holger's life, before his academic career, was marked by extraordinary adventure. After World

War II, he embarked on an epic maritime journey, serving aboard a four-masted ship that rounded Cape Horn. Today, as we commemorate Holger Thesleff's legacy, let us honour not only his scholarly achievements but his ever-renewed quest for new horizons, both real-life and philosophical.

Thank you.