Pauliina Remes and Svetla Slaveva-Griffith (eds.)


The Routledge Handbook of Neoplatonism is a very welcome addition to the rank of first rate scholarly works on the Neoplatonists that have been appearing in recent years, as it seems at an increasing rate. The editors have succeeded in gathering many of the best scholars in the field to write on topics on which they are true experts—here I have in mind not only the older well established scholars who contribute to the volume but also a number of younger and less known ones.

The volume has a useful introduction by the two editors and the bulk of it is divided into seven parts: I (Re)sources, instruction and interaction; II Methods and styles of exegesis; III Metaphysics and metaphysical perspectives; IV Language, knowledge, soul and self; V Nature: physics, medicine and biology; VI Ethics, political theory and aesthetics; VII Legacy. At the back there is, naturally, an extensive bibliography and a general index, but also an index of passages cited from the ancient authors. To provide such an index is by no means a standard practice in multi-author surveys of this kind but it is highly useful and welcome.

The volume deals with the pagan Platonic philosophical tradition starting with Plotinus in the 3rd century AD and continuing through figures such as Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus, the late ancient commentators, and Damascius in the 6th century. The title says “Handbook of Neoplatonism”; indeed these are the people who are generally regarded as the Neoplatonists and they do share a number of features that may justify putting one common label on them. On the other hand, there are problems associated with the very label “Neoplatonism”. Do Plotinus and his pagan Platonic successors really deserve a separate label? There are scholars today who refuse to use the term “Neoplatonism” at all, mainly because it is originally pejorative and may to some extent remain so, cf. Gerson, the editor of The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity (Cambridge University Press: 2010). (I recently contributed to a volume, not the one just mentioned, in a series for which the general editor insisted that the word “Neoplatonism” not be used at all.) Setting any possible pejorative sense aside, we may also ask whether the current class of Neoplatonists follows natural boundaries. Has Plotinus, for instance, more in common with Damascius than he has with Numenius, who is not counted as a Neoplatonist? In their introduction, the editors offer a reflected account of these issues. Well aware of the problematic sides of the term, they nevertheless, and reasonably in my opinion, come to the conclusion that the term “Neoplatonism” is not
to be avoided: there is often reason to talk about just these thinkers as a class and there is no other handy term available for them. The editors express the hope that any bad smell that still may linger around the term will wear off with better general information in the future.

Each of the parts of the volume is divided into three to six chapters, each written by a different author. Evidently the editors have worked out a list of topics such that the volume as a whole would provide as complete as possible a survey of the field in the light of up-to-date research. On the whole I would say they have been successful in this. The overall quality of the chapters is very high and as a rule they are very readable. Most of the articles are understandable and informative to the non-expert and in many cases ideal for persons with a background in earlier Greek philosophy, who wish to familiarize themselves with Neoplatonism in some depth. There is no doubt that the volume will be useful to experts on Neoplatonism too. Surely, this is the case if one wishes to go outside one's main habitat within the vast field of Neoplatonism and get a sense of issues and developments in the neighboring territories.

In this review I shall not list and comment on all the contributions: there are 33 of them and my comments would either have to be brief and of limited value or else this review would become excessively long. Instead I shall single out some contributions and make some further general remarks about the volume.

The first two parts are what we might call “paraphilosophical”, i.e. they do not deal with the content of the Neoplatonic doctrines but with various issues relating to them: relations to other schools and traditions, genres and styles of writing, curricula, method, and the like. I found much of interest in these two first parts. Brisson's piece, “Plotinus' style and argument”, gives an insightful account of topics that are generally only addressed in passing. One issue that has been pretty much buried for decades is Plotinus' relation to the orient. A case for a possible influence of Indian thought on Plotinus is reopened by Adluri in “Plotinus and the Orient: aoristos dyas”, who at the same considers and criticizes past scholars' (Bréhier's in particular) understanding of Indian philosophy, arguing that in fact the philosophical cultures of India and the Hellenic world are not so far apart. Hence, the assumption of past scholars that the search for an oriental element is a search for an irrational element that is alien to Greek thought is a false one.

An ideal chapter in a survey volume such as this one should in my view provide an objective overview of its topic and explain controversial issues, if there are such, referring abundantly to relevant primary texts and secondary literature, and in addition the author should argue for his or her particular views making clear where they may be controversial. The two editors' chapters
in the volume, Slaveva-Griffin’s, “Number in the metaphysical landscape”, and Remes’s, “Action, reasoning and the highest good”, follow this model admirably. So do most of the others but not all: “The metaphysics of the One” by Halfwassen gives a clear and concise account of the One in Plotinus, reflecting his take on the topic. There is no shortage of references to Plotinus’ texts but references to secondary literature on the One are largely absent. Halfwassen, however, does something else which I find laudable: he makes illuminating comparative remarks about Plotinus and Kant and the post-Kantian German idealists. There is a very strong tendency based on a long tradition among scholars of Neoplatonism to see their field primarily in relation to previous ancient thought. It is only natural that this is where one mainly looks. I do believe, however, that the time has come for more comparisons with later thinkers.

I do not know which instructions the authors received concerning the length of the chapters. Most of them are around fifteen, fairly large pages. But the chapters differ in scope: several (at least seven) deal exclusively with aspects of Plotinus’ thought, one chapter focuses on Proclus (Martijn’s “Proclus’ geometrical method”), and one on the commentators (Lautner’s “Perceptual awareness in the ancient commentators”). The others deal with general features of Neoplatonism or relate the history and development of particular aspects of it. I found that in some cases, especially those of the latter type, where a long and rich history is being related, fifteen pages barely suffice to do full justice to the topic at hand. The chapters by Chiaradonna, “Substance”, and by Adamson, “Freedom, providence and fate” may be examples of this: both chapters are very fine pieces of work and I doubt that it is possible to do better in the course of fifteen pages; but the topics are huge and I am convinced that both Chiaradonna and Adamson could have continued informatively and interestingly for considerably longer. The same can be said, and more strongly, about the account of the commentators, who receive a somewhat stepmotherly treatment. Baltussen has indeed a chapter on the Aristotelian commentators, which is very fine as far as it goes, but the focus is on the Aristotelian commentaries, it deals with pre-Plotinian, i.e. non-Neoplatonic ones as well as the Neoplatonist commentators, and it is only nine pages in all, including references. That is not very much in the light of the commentators’ immense output. Admittedly, there is also Lautner’s previously mentioned fine piece, “Perceptual awareness in the ancient commentators”, which gives a sense of what the commentators were up to. But this topic is a very limited aspect of the commentators’ thought and activity.

As noted at the outset, this is a large volume. And as I have indicated, I like what I see there and surely most of the most relevant topics are dealt with or at least touched upon. Inevitably, anyone working in this field will
notice something he or she would have liked to be see more fully treated. The final part of the volume is about the legacy of Neoplatonism. What was said earlier about topics that really deserve a more extensive treatment applies also here. Dimitrov's chapter about Neoplatonism and Christianity in the East only discusses the Cappadocians and Synesius but does not touch upon Pseudo-Dionysius and his impact in the East. Dionysius and his Western legacy are, however, well covered in Moran's chapter on Neoplatonism and Christianity in the West. This is a fine article but I found that Augustine and Boethius, so important for subsequent thought in the West, were too cursorily dealt with. What I personally missed most in the volume, however, is that nothing is said about the post-medieval influence of Neoplatonism. I believe that this is a topic of interest to a wide circle of readers a better understanding of which may also be useful for those working on ancient philosophy, including Neoplatonism itself. On the hand, obviously not everything can be covered even in a large volume and we should be grateful for what has been made available in this fine survey.

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