Corrigan, Kevin and Turner, John D. (eds), *Platonisms: Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern* (Ancient Mediterranean And Medieval Texts and Contexts: Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition, Volume 4), Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007, 278 pp., ISBN 978 90 04 15841 2.

This important and challenging work draws together papers from a small conference on “Platonisms Ancient and Modern” held at Emory University in 2003, and contains articles from a host of expert scholars considering the Platonic tradition from Classical Antiquity through to the postmodern world.

The editors, Kevin Corrigan and John D. Turner, explain the underlying ethos of this collection in their introduction, which I found to be extremely promising while simultaneously unsettling. The editors claim that “the present volume wants to suggest that the narrow, purist attitude of some modern scholarship that seeks to exclude the subsequent history of thought (and especially its apparent irrational excesses) from the search for an originary “Plato” is misguided, since there is so much in the later history of thought that casts useful light on what it means to read Plato” (p. 4). Such an inclusive attitude should be highly commended by all scholars and students of the Platonic tradition. In particular, the reference to the scholarly exclusion of the “apparent irrational excesses” is especially astute, since the category “irrational excesses” often depends upon post-Enlightenment assumptions, which at the very least demonstrate a lack of self reflection and, more frequently, depend upon the scholar’s own metaphysical preferences. The editors’ endorsement of Whitehead’s view of “Plato as a reservoir of possibilities or as a living, organic idea full of the always as yet unsaid” (p.4) also restores a sense of vivaciousness and relevance to the study of Plato, which unfortunately has often been lacking from modern scholarship.

Section I, “Platonisms of Classical Antiquity,” begins with two essays focusing on the dialogues of Plato themselves. Thomas Szlezák’s contribution, which considers the nature of Platonic dialectic, is deep ranging, insightful and highly relevant for all scholars and students of the Platonic tradition. Szlezák reminds us that dialectic is a complex process of philosophical communication that cannot be contained in a series of formulae or simply found in Plato’s dialogues. One of the highlights of this essay is Szlezák’s emphasis on Plato’s hints that the full process of dialectic cannot be written down, but is a living conversation. From hints scattered throughout the dialogues, Szlezák draws together a picture that reminds us of the tasks and the ultimate goal of dialectic: it is a comprehensive science that involves the soul seeing Forms and principles which are themselves divine. Thus the ultimate transcendent goal is to gain vision of the relationships and proportions in the intelligible entities, and so to become like the “divine.” Szlezák shows how Plato makes it clear that

the success of dialectical philosophy lies neither in the hand of the pupil or the teacher alone—it depends in a decisive way on the “divine.” This essay has far-reaching and highly significant implications for all scholars of the Platonic tradition, and thus is essential reading. Following on from this, Luc Brisson’s essay raises the intriguing question of what a god actually is according to Plato, a largely underinvestigated yet vitally important research area. This is a profoundly significant question, since one’s assumptions regarding Plato’s definition of the “divine” and the importance (or lack thereof) which one attributes more generally towards Plato’s references to the divine, greatly influence one’s interpretation of Platonism. Brisson argues that Plato defines a god as an immortal, living being with an indestructible body and a soul that possesses a perfect intellect, situated at the summit of a vast hierarchical structure categorised according to intellectual activity.

Section II, “Platonisms of Late Antiquity,” contains three essays examining important issues relating to the Platonic tradition within the Late Antique period. The first two essays both raise issues pertinent to the controversial question of the authorship of the anonymous Turin *Commentary on the Parmenides*, attributed to Porphyry by Pierre Hadot, an attribution which has recently been questioned by some scholars. In the first, John Turner examines the metaphysical and cosmological schemes of four Sethian Gnostic treatises from the Nag Hammadi Codices. He argues that certain metaphysical features most likely precede the thought of Plotinus and Porphyry and suggest that the supposedly Neoplatonic doctrine of a supreme unity-in-trinity already played a role in Sethian Gnostic and Middle Platonic interpretations of Plato’s *Parmenides*. Such a view challenges the orthodox interpretation of the historical evolution of the Platonic tradition, which claims that the many varieties of Middle Platonism were superseded by the “creation” of Neoplatonism by Plotinus. Overall, Turner’s essay represents an impressively detailed discussion of the relationship between various philosophical, metaphysical and theological systems of thought, which will be particularly useful for those interested in Sethian Gnosticism, the Platonic commentary tradition and the anonymous Turin *Commentary*.

In the second essay, Steven Strange considers Proclus’ sources in his *Parmenides Commentary*, asking who exactly Proclus means when he refers to “the Ancients.” Strange argues that “the Ancients” clearly refers chronologically to a group of commentators ranging from the Middle Platonists through to Iamblichus, but Proclus’ schematization of the views of the “Ancients” is also topical, relying on the classification of Aristotle’s *Topics* I.2; thus, the earlier chronological groups can sometimes refer to later thinkers. Strange also argues that Proclus offers support for the attribution of the anonymous Turin *Commentary* to the Plotinian period. One of the major strengths of Strange’s essay is the way in

which it highlights the patchy nature of our knowledge of the lengthy period from Plato's death to the so-called advent of Neoplatonism.

In the final essay of this section, Gretchen Reydam-Schils examines two important areas, Neoplatonic commentary and Stoic ethics, and compares Neoplatonic and Stoic views of virtue, marriage, parenthood and human relationships, particularly focusing on the connections made between theoretical and practical philosophy. Reydam-Schils' exposition is clear and engaging, particularly her lively and erudite discussion of Stoic attitudes towards friendship and marriage, although she seems to underestimate the close connection between theoretical and practical wisdom within Neoplatonism.

Section III considers "Platonisms of the Renaissance and the Modern World." In the first essay, Gerald Bechtle provides an analysis of the late Renaissance/early Modern notions of *mathesis universalis* and *scientia universalis*, which imply two different concepts of *universal mathematic* and *universal science* respectively. Bechtle examines the application of these concepts in Descartes, Aristotle, Gilbert of Poitiers, Plato and the Old Academy.

This is followed by Douglas Hedley's consideration of the seventeenth century Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth's attacks upon atheism, given that it is commonly held that atheism in the present-day sense (i.e. the assertion that there is no god) only began in the eighteenth century and gained force a century or so later. Hedley argues that Cudworth had a sophisticated view of different types of atheism, and uses Plato's and Plotinus' notions of providence, causality, freedom and nature in order to overcome overt atheism (i.e. the rejection of "theism," or the denial of a transcendent, benevolent and personal deity), as well as the weaker kind of theisms (such as Spinoza's conflation of God and the world, and Descartes' denial of divine immanence) which open the door to atheistic views.

The third essay, by Robert Berchman, comprises a study of the language of ancient and modern metaphysics which "provides a much needed corrective to an unconscious tendency to assume that ancient and modern metaphysics are simply the same field" (p. 11). Berchman argues that the assumption of a shared language of metaphysical terms and concepts obscures two completely different realities: for Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, truths are certain because of their causes rather than because of the arguments given for them (i.e. the accumulation of human mental activity). By contrast, modern metaphysics from Descartes to Husserl tends to equate truth as "certainty" with conclusive argument, rather than in relation to an object known. Berchman concludes that our uncritical assumption of a shared form of thought and language from Plato to Hegel disguises two very different approaches to thinking: the ancient approach sees rationality and self-consciousness as part of *theōria* or living contemplation, involving the Intellect 'touching' or 'seeing' *ousia*, while the

modern approach sees rationality as involving a split between subjectivity and objectivity and views the world as a construction dominated by self-consciousness. This is an excellent and perceptive study, demonstrating the value of self reflection for the scholar, with significant implications for scholars of ancient and modern metaphysics.

In the fourth essay, John Dillon uses the work of the Neo-Kantian Paul Natorp in order to challenge the orthodox interpretation of Platonic Forms (that they are purely independent, immutable and eternal objects of knowledge) and “to reopen the possibility that ... [they] need not after all be regarded as ‘things’ ... and may be seen rather as something more like ‘laws,’ structuring principles of knowledge, still immutable and eternal, and possessing objective reality, but nonetheless only acquiring their full realization through the activity of the human mind” (p. 191-192). In this engaging and intriguing contribution, Dillon explores a familiar theme from an unfamiliar angle and thus provides us with an opportunity to clarify our thoughts and possibly to refine our understanding of Platonic Forms.

In the final essay of this section, Anthony Cuda examines Yeats’ negotiation of the Platonic tension between inspiration and philosophical knowledge, demonstrating that Yeats’ theory of the Daemon helps him to understand and reconcile this tension. According to Cuda, Yeats reinterprets the Platonic Daemon is, “an entirely internal psychological figure” (p. 210) which represents the apotheosis or expression of the unconscious elements of the soul, from which poetic inspiration is derived. Generally, this essay is a fascinating consideration of Yeats’ meditations on his own poetic talent and its origin, although Cuda’s conclusion that Yeats’ Daemon is “a conceptual metaphor” showing that, “Yeats was interested primarily in a literary problem” (p. 214) seems too tentative and hesitant, given that this “literary problem” seems for Yeats to have been deeply connected with far more profound ontological and epistemological issues regarding the nature of reality and the origins of and human experience of inspiration and truth.

Section IV, entitled “Platonisms of the Postmodern World,” contains two essays, the first on Levinas and the second on Derrida. In the first essay, Kevin Corrigan compares the thought of Levinas with some key strands of Platonism. Levinas was concerned to promote the demands of ethics over those of ontology and criticised the Western philosophical tradition for giving ontology primacy. Corrigan argues that within the Platonist tradition, particularly within the thought of Plotinus, one can see elements of a view which does not give being primacy but instead is concerned with ethics and their relationship with the infinite. These are concerns which Levinas has brought to the forefront in his writings. Corrigan makes an interesting case but admits that some points of the argument may seem overstretched. Nevertheless the comparison is

intriguing. However, readers will find it pays to have some familiarity with the works of Levinas before reading this article. Similarly, readers may find the second essay difficult to engage with unless they are thoroughly familiar with Derrida's writings. In this contribution, Stephen Gersh examines the theme of, "deconstructing the text of philosophy or alternatively that of Derrida reading (Neo-)Platonism" (p. 237). One of the strengths of this essay is Gersh's hermeneutical challenge to, and deconstruction of, the orthodox distinctions between Plato and the Platonic tradition and between ancient and medieval traditions which, as he points out, are usually treated "as completely discrete units" (p. 243). Both essays may be difficult for readers unfamiliar with (or "uninitiated" into) postmodernism to engage with, given their highly specialised vocabulary and their sheer density.

One of the most extraordinary feats of the Platonic tradition, it seems to me, is its inclusive juxtaposition of the unitive, single-minded search for philosophical truth with the diverse and wide-ranging expression of that philosophy in a variety of genres, texts and other modes of expression. However, what I find unsettling and difficult to understand is the apparent editorial endorsement of "Postmodern Platos" (the title of a recent book by Catherine Zuchert). While the editors are surely correct to view Plato and Platonism as "an inexhaustible mine of possible trajectories" (p. 5), to view Platonism as an appropriate subject for postmodern readings seems to set aside Plato's vision of the philosophical search for truth and relativizes readings of Plato, which involves challenging the possibility of interpreting a *tradition*. Postmodernism, in all of its variety of expression, generally denies any overarching principle of Unity or Absolute Truth, making it very difficult to imagine how it could be harmonised with or considered a trajectory of Platonism. However, Corrigan and Gersh are very helpful guides through this challenging topic.

This volume of highly specialised and detailed essays will be useful for specialists, scholars and graduate students of Platonism and the Platonic Tradition. The volume's wide scope and remit mean that many essays will interest scholars in a diverse range of subject areas, including ancient and modern philosophy, history, classics and literary theory. However, the highly specialised nature of the volume means that it will probably be too advanced for undergraduates. Overall this is an admirable collection of essays displaying a high standard of research and expertise and offering many provocative and fresh approaches towards the Platonic tradition.

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