

Critical Notice: *The Devil in the Details*



Eric D. Perl, *Thinking Being. Introduction to Metaphysics in the Classical Tradition*. Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition, volume 17. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014. Pp. 216. ISBN 978-90-0426420-5. €109,00 (\$141.00).

Eric Perl (hereafter EP) offers us a lucid philosophical exposition of five exponents of what he labels “classical tradition”: Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and Thomas Aquinas. Although the inclusion of Aquinas in the classical tradition may at first seem surprising, EP proves satisfactorily enough that he belongs to the same lineage as the other four. The fundamental insight of this lineage, that is, classical metaphysics, is the togetherness of thought and being, the indissoluble and necessary tie that links reality and intelligibility, namely “the law that to be is to be intelligible” (p. 7), first formulated by Parmenides, and reinterpreted by Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and Aquinas.

The ambitious aim of the work is to contribute to a “‘paradigm shift’ in the study of the classical tradition” by providing “revisionist readings” (p. 5) of the selected philosophers and highlighting the continuity of such tradition. “Revisionist” here means a reading that does not follow superficial and stereotyped expositions of the philosophers in question. Examples of such stereotyping include the opposition between Plato and Aristotle, the presentation of Plotinus as an obscure mystic, and that of Aquinas as a mere Aristotelean commentator and thinker. EP prefers to understand Plato’s “two worlds” as one single world differently apprehended by the senses and the intellect; he sees Aristotle as a follower of Plato who identified being and form; he takes Plotinus to be the last and fullest flowering of the classical tradition; and he views Aquinas as being in continuity with Plotinus and Neoplatonism. Although EP modestly acknowledges that others have argued for such interpretations, he has a remarkable, not to say provocative, way of bringing these thinkers into agreement without ever obliterating their disagreements.

In the short chapter on Parmenides, EP identifies the tradition whose continuity he intends to demonstrate throughout his book. He analyses relevant fragments (especially B8), but concentrates mainly on fragment B3—τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι (“for the same is for thinking and for being”) as central to his interpretation: there can be no thinking that is not the thinking of some being, just as there can be no being that is not available to thought. Since Parmenides held that only that which is intelligible is being (and *vice versa*) and that the world of change is therefore neither being nor intelligible, Plato and Aristotle faced the problem of the “unreality” of change and difference. Remaining within the Parmenidean framework, they reacted by establishing grades of reality.

To interpret Plato, in the second chapter, EP adopts a unitarian reading of the dialogues, believing that they intersect and form a network “so that the corpus as a whole . . . has an integral unity and is more than the sum of its parts” (p. 22). Unsurprisingly, the Plato who emerges from EP’s analysis turns out to be very similar to the Plato of the Neoplatonists, who postulates the Good as the first principle above beings, a principle that is not one of them, but the cause of all unity and goodness and in virtue of which “there is any form, truth, or reality in anything”; in sum, a principle “on which all intelligibility, and thus all reality, depends” (p. 60). To support this, EP employs of course mainly the sixth and seventh books of the *Republic*. As to the main theme of the book, EP shows how Plato, while holding that reality is form and form the mainstay of all intelligibility, introduces levels of being to account for the difficulty raised by Parmenides: while the sensible world is less real, or has less being than the intelligible world, it is not entirely unreal. As mentioned earlier, EP rightly insists that the separation between the sensible and the intelligible is but a “spatial metaphor for the radical ontological distinction between identities [*scil.* forms] and the things that display, but are not, these identities” (p. 30).

In his Aristotle chapter, EP argues that there are no strong differences between him and Plato since both describe reality (*ousía*) as form (*eîdos*). Form, being the root of intelligibility, is prior to, and has “more being” than matter as well as the composite of form and matter. So, according to EP, Aristotle’s critique of Plato would actually originate from a misunderstanding of Plato as having actually believed in a spatial separation between the intelligible and the sensible. According to EP, what really sets the two philosophers apart is that Aristotle sees the first principle—unmoved mover, pure form and intelligibility—as also pure being, that is, one of the beings, whereas Plato exalts the Good beyond form, being, and intellect as the source of reality and intelligibility.