

Pauliina Remes and Svetla Slaveva-Griffith (eds.)

The Routledge Handbook of Neoplatonism. London and New York: Routledge 2014.

644 pp, £ 135.

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