

## *Book Reviews*



**S. Weisser and N. Thaler (eds.)**

*Strategies of Polemics in Greek and Roman Philosophy*, Leiden: Brill 2016, Pp. ix + 248.

This volume, based on a conference held in Jerusalem in 2014, contains an editor's introduction, followed by eleven papers from an international array of scholars. Its topic is an interesting one, rarely covered in such a broad fashion, that makes for a lively and engaging collection. The editors disavow rigidity about what constitutes 'polemics'; they have been, they tell us, 'intentionally lax' in their use of the term, avoiding a 'single paradigm', so as to allow 'a varied and heterogeneous field of phenomena' to be investigated' (8).

That notwithstanding, André Laks's paper 'The Continuation of Philosophy by Other Means?', which follows the editors' introduction, serves a somewhat programmatic role in the volume, firstly because it sets out, drawing on the work of Stefan Straub, some candidate criteria for a piece of discourse to count as polemical; and secondly, because it asks the question whether there can be a coherent notion of *philosophical* polemic, given, one might think, that philosophy and polemics are, properly speaking, inimical to one another. Laks argues that a well-formed notion of philosophical polemic is possible if one distinguishes polemic as *attack* from polemic as *critique*, the latter allowing for a distinct conception of philosophical polemics. Laks emphasises the centrality of the person here, and this in two rather different directions. First is the technique whereby the author of a philosophical critique deliberately does not name an opponent (even though their identity is often unmistakable), as a way of making it clear that it is the opponent's doctrines, not them as individuals, that are under attack. But secondly, given that, as philosophy was conceived in the ancient world, what is stake are often questions of the highest importance in relation to the best form of life, it may follow that, as Laks puts it, 'the kind of person [philosophers] are and how they ... behave, far from being indifferent, represents an integral constituent of their philosophy.' (22). By the same token, a certain vehemence in attacking one's opponent, where that opponent

is perceived to be seriously off track, may be legitimate: 'There are topics where dispassionate critical argumentation reaches its limits' (26).

Christopher Shields, in the paper that follows Laks's ('The Young Dogs of Eristic: Dialectic and Eristic in the Early Academy'), offers an instructive account of Plato's and Aristotle's efforts to distinguish eristic from dialectic, and of how there may be more affinity between the two philosophers' approaches in this regard than meets the eye. Shields does not explicitly reflect on how (if at all) the notion of polemics may fit with the conceptions that he discusses, though his paper does nicely bring out the difficulties in attempting to mark off, in a fully non question begging way, the proper from the improper when it comes to what counts as philosophical discourse.

A number of Laks's programmatic suggestions are taken up and developed or modified in various ways by the remaining papers. To work back from the end, Robert Lamberton ('The Invisible Adversary: Anti-Christian Polemic in Proclus's *Commentary on the Republic of Plato*') discusses Proclus' way of referring only in coded form to his Christian opponents, not out of any desire to focus on position rather than person, but to avoid being noticed by those very opponents 'who might well have responded by silencing him' (238). By contrast, Daniel Marković ('Polemics in Translation: Lucretius') sees Lucretius' habit of not referring directly to contemporary opponents as part of a strategy of *marginalisation* of the opposition, the better to showcase Epicurus as the sole triumphant victor in the campaign for truth. It is to be wondered whether, on this view, Lucretius passes Laks's test of employing a distinctively philosophical polemics—Marković himself speaks of Lucretius' 'rhetorical strategy of refutation' and his use of 'exaggeration ... simplification and misrepresentation of the teaching of the opponents' (159). Sharon Weisser ('The Art of Quotation: Plutarch and Galen against Chrysippus'), in her discussion of the strategy deployed by Plutarch and Galen of quoting opponents verbatim in order to show their (purported) inconsistencies, notes that 'the polemicist creates the impression ... that he engages in a dialectical controversy, whereas he is in fact often misrepresenting his opponent's position. Quotations are decontextualized and inserted into another discourse, which rests on different assumptions, and whose terminology refers to different concepts.' (224) Here too it looks as if polemical and properly dialectical discourse may exclude each other.

Several other papers in the collection flesh out how, in particular contexts, the limits of dispassionate argument may be a reflection of the magnitude of the issues at stake. Voula Tsouna's carefully worked discussion of the at times fractious disputes between the hedonistic schools ('Cyrenaics and Epicureans on Pleasure and the Good Life: The Original Debate and its Later Revivals')