Review Article

Scripta Antiquitatis Posterioris ad Ethicam Religionemque pertinentia (SAPERE)

Volumes reviewed:


Sapere aude, “dare to use thy reason,” is a motto adopted by Immanuel Kant in his “Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment.” The concept of the book series SAPERE, now published by Mohr Siebeck in Tübingen,1 is bold and innovative. As an acronym (Scripta Antiquitatis Posterioris ad Ethicam REligionemque pertinentia; “Writings of Late Antiquity on Ethics and Religion”), the title of the series may be a bit clunky, but it is clear why the editors chose the name. The Latin verb sapere can refer not only to “being wise,” “using one’s reason,” or “having an understanding,” but also to “tasting something.” When it pertains to antiquity, the notion of “wisdom” entails much more than “knowledge” in the most current contemporary sense: it is not merely a form of knowing that something is or is not the case, but a disposition that ideally is meant to shape one’s mode of life, worldview (often in the literal sense of the view of one’s place in the cosmos), relation to the divine, and to others. In the context of the series title, the sense of “tasting” refers to the selectivity of the approach and to the intention of exposing a broader audience to these texts. The series covers works from the first to the fourth century C.E., both in Latin and Greek, and specifically intends to keep together philosophy and religion in this period, with a focus on ethics. Every volume contains an introduction, the original text itself, a translation with notes, a series of interpretative essays from scholars representing a range of different disciplines, and a bibliography. The working languages of the series are German and English. It is the explicit aim of the series to promote “an active engagement with the classical past.” Hence, it draws attention to the contemporary relevance of ideas that emerge from this corpus. These features of the series taken together constitute a groundbreaking approach that has the potential both to shape academic discourse in circles of specialists and to address broader intellectual interests. In its latter aspect, this approach is much to be preferred to the current avalanche of “handbook” scholarly literature, which tends to be too superficial (though there are always happy exceptions) and risks reducing the legacy of scholarly traditions for future researchers. Whereas most “handbook” publications narrow down the scholarly discourse, these volumes unlock many new venues for future research.

1 To date the series consists of twenty-six volumes. Volumes 1–10 were published by the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft but are now, unfortunately, out of print.