Renaissance philosophy has at times been compared to a barren valley bordered by two lofty
mountains, one summit occupied by the great scholastic philosophers, the other by the grand
system builders of the seventeenth century. This image reflects the opinion that Renaissance
philosophy, as James Hankins describes it in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to
Renaissance Philosophy*, resembles a “swampland inhabited by what seem mere epigones of the
great scholastics, by sententious moralizers and *littérateurs*, by philologists and compilers, by
wiled-eyed magicians and *Naturphilosophen*, as fertile in propagating new ideas as they were
incapable in defending them” (339). The implication of this image is, of course, that the Renais-
sance is a period over which students of philosophy should skip over, for fear that they lose their
way among the lesser thinkers of this shadowy period.

Although scholars have diligently labored to erode this view of the Renaissance, Hankins still
faces enormous challenges in editing a collection of essays that aims to present Renaissance phi-
losophy to both intellectual historians, and non-specialist readers, many of whom may be largely
unfamiliar with philosophy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and who may believe that
the Renaissance is in fact philosophically barren and has little or nothing to contribute to phi-
losophy today. Hankins also faces difficulties that concern the very nature of philosophy itself,
as well as those that stem from detailing the cultural developments that affected Renaissance phi-
losophy and the way it was written. The editor and the contributors certainly prove themselves
up to the challenge, and the result is that they have provided a rich resource on Renaissance
philosophy.

The volume is divided into two parts that reflect a Janus-like structure. The first part, which
consists of eight essays, focus on the revival of ancient philosophical traditions in the Renais-
sance, as well as its philosophical inheritance from Medieval scholasticism. While the first part
looks backward, the ten essays that constitute the second part look forward to modernity, while
at the same time dwelling on some of the original contributions that Renaissance philosophers
made to metaphysics, cosmology, psychology, the philosophy of language, and ethics.

In Part I Hankins examines the culture of Humanism, its relationship to scholasticism, and
the movement’s overall conception of philosophy. Focusing mainly on Petrarch’s critique of scho-
lastic philosophy, Hankins also discusses the failure of Humanist philosophers to produce great
philosophy, and he explains why it is comprehensible that Humanism “bracketed the deepest
questions about nature and human existence in the desire to make its peace with religious
authority” (46). In an essay on the revival of Platonic philosophy, Christopher Celenza surveys
the history of Plato’s dialogues from Petrarch to Leibniz, but saves the bulk of his discussion
for Marsilio Ficino. In so doing Celenza situates Ficino at the center of the narrative history of
the dialogues in the Renaissance, while at the same time nicely revealing the central features of
Ficino’s own interpretation of Plato’s dialogues. While Celenza’s discussion of Ficino is crystal
clear, his treatment of the history of Platonism is, at times, opaque and difficult to follow. Jill
Kraye adds an excellent essay on the revival of Hellenistic philosophies in the Renaissance. Kraye
argues that although the three schools of Hellenistic philosophy each went through a compli-
cated revival in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they nonetheless remained on the “margins
of Renaissance philosophical culture” (97), which was dominated by Aristotelianism. With clar-
ity Kraye outlines the difficulties of incorporating Hellenistic philosophies, especially Stoicism
and Epicureanism, into a Christian philosophical framework; she concludes her interesting
discussion of Epicureanism in the Renaissance by recognizing that it was not until the seventeenth century that the “abhorrent doctrines” were neutralized. Brian P. Copenhaver closes Part I with a provocative discussion of the philosophical nature and aims of Renaissance magic. Copenhaver focuses most of his attention on Ficino’s magical practices, especially *De vita* III, compares Ficino with Aquinas, and finally reveals the theological risks that were associated with magic in the Renaissance. Copenhaver claims that Ficino’s theory of magic is a “tour de force of caution and evasion” (164). The essays by Celenza and Copenhaver illustrate the practical side to Ficino that earned him the reputation as a *medicus animarum*, and both chapters lessen the stereotype of the Florentine Platonist as a philosopher divorced from the body and its concerns. Celenza says that Ficino’s unique brand of Platonism was not “mentalist, divorced from the body, with ethics and the realities of everyday life decidedly in second place to metaphysics” (84); Copenhaver explains how Ficino’s *De vita* uses the “primordial knowledge” of Persia and Egypt to show “his contemporaries how to use ordinary natural objects to better themselves in magical ways” (137). Both essays reflect the opinion, dominant today, that the creative, imaginative, and magical elements of Ficino’s thought, rather than the more systematic aspects, more accurately capture the peculiar character of his thought.

Part II looks forward to modernity. It opens with an essay by Dermot Moran on the philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa, and its influence on modern philosophy. Moran argues that Cusa is a “lone figure with no real successor” (173), even if some of his ideas would resonate in some modern philosophers. Although Moran attempts to show how Cusa is both “profoundly traditional” and modern in his epistemology, he fails to make any real connection to modernity itself. Lodi Nauta contributes a lucid essay on Lorenzo Valla and the rise of humanist dialectic that focuses mainly on the theories of Valla and Agricola because they are “largely responsible, each in his own way, for having inaugurated the transformation of Aristotelian-Scholastic logic into a humanist dialectic” (193). Nauta describes how the study of language, especially the common usage Latin based on classical authorities, was for Valla a “sharp-edged tool for exposing all kinds of errors and misunderstandings” (195), especially in the realms of metaphysics and ontology. Nauta weaves what he understands to be the shortcomings of this approach into his rich discussion of Valla. Part II also includes an excellent discussion, by John P. Doyle, of Hispanic scholastic juridical, moral, and theoretical philosophy that takes the reader to regions far afield from the Iberian Peninsula itself. The book concludes on a strong note with lucid discussions of humanistic and scholastic ethics by David A. Lines, and the problem of the prince by Eric Nelson.

The contributions are largely excellent, and the volume as a whole skillfully illuminates the rich and distinctive texture of Renaissance philosophy by carefully situating it in the historical context of both Medieval and modern philosophy. One problem is that this approach causes some amount of repetition which cannot be avoided. The volume also includes a chronology of important events, and brief biographies of Renaissance philosophers that will be helpful to the general reader. At times, however, one may get the feeling that the connection between Renaissance and modern philosophy is thin and unsubstantiated, and that some threads are dropped as soon as they are picked up; this is especially evident in Moran’s essay on Cusa, where there is only casual evidence given for Cusa’s “subterranean influence” on Spinoza and Leibniz. The connection between the Renaissance and modernity, therefore, is suggested mostly on the level of innuendo. An essay that considered, in part, the legacy that the Renaissance recovery of Hellenistic philosophies had on the development of modern philosophy would have perhaps solved this problem, and complemented Kraye’s essay nicely. This shortcoming, if anything, is excusable, since there are certain understandable limitations that must be placed on a book with this scope.