

BOOK REVIEW

From Plato to Platonism. By LLOYD P. GERSON. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013. Pp. xi + 345. Hardcover, \$59.95. ISBN 978-0-8014-5241-3.

In his book *From Plato to Platonism* Lloyd Gerson asks whether Plato was a Platonist. Put differently: was Plato's philosophical position in substantial agreement with that of his disciples and his followers of later times? Contrary to the negative answer given by the majority of modern scholars, Gerson argues for the correct answer's actually being "more likely to be yes" (3).

The book attempts to make this claim plausible in three parts. The first focuses on "Plato and His Readers" (1–129). Its aim is to "reconsider a number of modern assumptions regarding the Platonic dialogues and their relation to Platonism, the relation between Platonism and a putative Socratic philosophy, and the direct and indirect testimony of ancient philosophers regarding Platonism" (ix). Four separate chapters deal with the topics "Was Plato a Platonist?" (3–33), "Socrates and Platonism" (34–72), "Reading the Dialogues Platonically" (73–96), and "Aristotle on Plato and Platonism" (97–129). The most important claim is that Plato and all of his followers were committed to 'Ur-Platonism,' a hypothetically reconstructed purely negatively defined philosophical position characterized by antimaterialism, antimechanism, antinomialism, antirelativism, and antiskepticism—or, in short, by antinaturalism. To this 'Ur-Platonism,' so Gerson, any Platonistic position relates as a "positive, integrated response" (19), including Plato's own philosophy, especially as expressed in the dialogues.

The second part "The Continuing Creation of Platonism" (131–223) addresses the question of whether the disagreements among later Platonists might be a threat to the claim that Plato was a Platonist himself: the reason for this situation might be that, actually, there was no coherent and systematic philosophical position in Plato's works themselves and so, *a fortiori*, no such thing as 'Plato's Platonism' at all. In this vein, Gerson reviews Platonism up to the second century CE by discussing "The Old Academy" (133–162), "The Academic Skeptics" (163–178), "Platonism in the 'Middle'" (179–207), and "Numenius of Apamea" (208–223). By adducing ample historical evidence for the claim that it was just

'Ur-Platonism' "what Platonism was always thought to be" (x) and that there thus "was a profound agreement about first principles" (x) among all Platonists including Plato, Gerson backs up and corroborates the results achieved in the first part.

The third part argues for understanding the late-antique Platonist Plotinus not only, with Proclus, as an "Exegete of the Platonic Revelation" (225–304), but, more strongly, as the "most authentic and insightful" one, "both in his construction of the Platonic system and in his demonstration of how that system is the ultimate basis for many of the solutions that Plato gives to the philosophical problems he raises" (x). The first chapter "Platonism as a System" (227–254) explicates "the Plotinian system independently of its putative Platonic basis" (229), whereas the two subsequent chapters specifically focus on "Plotinus as Interpreter of Plato": Gerson shows first that Plotinus may be regarded as a faithful exegete of Plato's philosophy (255–282); and second that Plotinus firmly connects the "distinctive Platonic anthropology that [...] does define the limits on acceptable Platonic answers to human questions" (284) with the metaphysics of 'Ur-Platonism' and thus in principle stands in agreement with Plato himself (283–304).

The book ends with a succinct conclusion (305–309), a bibliography (311–327), a general index (329–334), and a comprehensive *index locorum* (335–345).

Gerson has written an impressive and thought-provoking book that is, all in all, very well able to make a persuasive case for Plato's being a Platonist indeed. In particular, Gerson succeeds in making plausible that and how Plato's philosophy might be understood as a coherent system sharing the main principles with the philosophical positions of later Platonists and especially Plotinus.

Nonetheless, the fact that 'Ur-Platonism' explicitly is defined negatively leads to a not unimportant methodological quibble (which, though, mainly relates to the book's third part and might not hurt Gerson's whole project), for this implies a consequence that Gerson in effect does not sufficiently allow for: namely the possibility that the positive responses to 'Ur-Platonism' may have differed substantially between the Platonists in such a way that they are not only more or less good approximations to the "maximally consistent positive construct one can make on the basis of" 'Ur-Platonism' (22), but that they are in principle (partly) incommensurable with one another just *qua* being positive responses to 'Ur-Platonism.'

With the implication that irrespective of whether both Plato and in particular Plotinus shared a commitment to 'Ur-Platonism,' this fact of itself does not prove that Plotinus' answers to the problems of 'Ur-Platonism' were the very same answers Plato would have given, even if they do seem to make sense in the context of his dialogues and even if Plotinus for (probably) good reasons did believe "that he is faithful to the master's vision" (229). Rather, this suggests that Plotinus might *potentially* have given good answers to Plato's questions. However, for using them to "fill out the picture of Platonism in the dialogues" (309) their *actually* being so would have to be proved more comprehensively, and this not from the perspective of 'Ur-Platonism' (cf. 22–23), but of Plato's own systematic positive construct of Platonism.

One last, minor technical quibble: though the book is, all in all, very well produced, for a second edition the Greek quotations should be checked. Not a few pages with Greek text, especially in the second half of the book, contain at least one and often several typos (mostly, though, relating to the diacritics: cf. 289; 291; 292; 294; 295; 296; 297).

In sum, Gerson's book is a highly valuable, well-written contribution to Plato(nism) research. It persuasively makes a case for understanding Plato's philosophy as a coherent system that has an intricate and meaningful relation to later Platonistic philosophical positions. From this viewpoint, Plato appears as a Platonist indeed.

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