

BOOK REVIEW

Bios Philosophos: Philosophy in Ancient Greek Biography. Edited by MAURO BONAZZI and STEFAN SCHORN. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2016. Pp. 313. Paper, €75.00. ISBN 978-2-503-56546-0.

This volume comprises ten papers on the place of philosophy in ancient Greek biography. In particular, it concentrates on the ways in which philosophers engaged in biography for philosophical purposes. Given the vast amount of relevant evidence that might be considered, one expects to find a clear statement of intent explaining the rationale behind the various papers and spelling out how they all come together and synergize to challenge established views. Somewhat disappointingly, then, the very short introduction is content to draw attention to the scholarly interest in the role of philosophy in ancient Greek biography with a brief literature review, and it does not really sell the present volume beyond an expressed desire to show that there is still much to be said on the topic. As a result, it is not entirely clear how the volume is greater than the sum of its parts. Each paper has its own strengths and subject matter and hence they are best treated separately.

In “Pythagore chez Dicaéarque: anecdotes biographiques et critique de la philosophie contemplative,” Thomas Bénatouil explores the link between the Peripatetic philosopher Dicaearchus’ biographical researches and his ethical and political positions, in particular his advocacy of the practical over the contemplative life. Bénatouil argues that Pythagoras serves as a counter-model for Dicaearchus: in particular, famous episodes from his life do not accord with the best practical life. Pythagoras was, however, a model figure for the Academic philosopher Heraclides of Pontus, who maintains that philosophy is primarily contemplative. Bénatouil argues persuasively that Dicaearchus engaged critically with Heraclides and that he presented Pythagoras’ life and activities differently in the service of his competing philosophical positions.

Phillip Horky’s paper, “*Empedocles democraticus*: Hellenistic biography at the intersection of philosophy and politics,” provides a detailed analysis of a report of Empedocles’ political character in Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (8.63–66). Horky makes the case that Aristotle saw Empedocles as an anarchist rather than a democrat, as someone who sits outside of political life (a god or a

beast), and that he inferred this from Empedocles' own poem in which he lays claim to divinity alongside espousing values that are associated with democracy. Aristotle's characterization then influences later authors, in particular the historian Timaeus of Tauromenium, who offers an alternative judgement on Empedocles in which his democratic credentials are stronger. Much of Horky's argument is necessarily speculative and premised on hypothetical claims and possibilities, but, like Bénatouil's paper, it provides a compelling picture of how the biographical tradition regarding philosophers quickly developed complex layers of influence and critical interplay.

In "La biografia del Κῆπος e il profile esemplare del saggio epicureo," Dino De Sanctis explores the biographical tradition in Epicureanism, focusing in particular on works by Philodemus (first century BC) and Philonides (second century BC). De Sanctis adds detail to the familiar picture: later Epicureans presented Epicurus himself as the model sage, whose character and virtues exemplify the successful living of Epicurean precepts, and they drew heavily on his own letters and writings when doing this; later Epicureans also presented biographical sketches of a range of Epicurus' followers, which allowed them to show how people of all types and backgrounds managed to live the happy Epicurean life. As well as being a way to preserve the school's history and to provide concrete illustration of what Epicurean theory looks like in practice, biography also emerges as a marketing tool for Epicureanism.

In "Plutarch's unphilosophical lives: philosophical, after all?," Jan Opsomer stresses that Plutarch's philosophical interests pervade his *Lives*, despite the fact that he does not write biographies of philosophers (with the exception of the Cynic Crates). In particular, argues Opsomer, by writing biography Plutarch does not just illustrate the virtues and vices through a portrayal of character and deeds, nor does he simply stress the disconnect between philosophical theory and practice, but rather he seeks to motivate people to engage in moral reflection and self-betterment, in keeping with his interest in the practical utility of philosophy.

Karin Schlobach's paper, "The spectacle of a life: biography as philosophy in Lucian," looks at three different "biographical" works by Lucian (*Nigrinus*, *Demonax*, *Peregrinus*) and argues that they display a distinctive Lucian position regarding the expression of philosophy – the meaning of the words, deeds, and books of philosophers is never straightforward but always dependent on context and the interpretation of others. The scope for absurdity, miscommunication, and humor is obvious, and Lucian showcases this with literary aplomb. Schlobach also makes the attractive suggestion that Lucian invites his readers to engage in the

very process of philosophical interpretation that he portrays through his portraits of the philosophers, which allows us to appreciate better Lucian's own philosophical agenda in these highly literary "biographical" texts.

In "Biographie und Fürstenspiegel. Politische Paränese in Philostrats *Vita Apollonii*," Stefan Schorn examines three episodes in which the philosopher Apollonius engages with kings: the unphilosophical Parthian king Verdanes, the philosophical Indo-Pathian king Phraotes, and a nameless but philosophy-hating Indian king. Schorn rightly orientates these episodes in a long tradition of kingship and advice treatises, and argues persuasively that they address the serious question—what types of ruler can be taught by philosophers? The biographical portraits provide concrete exemplars of three types of ruler and how a philosopher might act as an adviser in each case. The paper reinforces a familiar conclusion: biography offers a paradigm to reflect on the effectiveness of philosophy in politics.

In "Zwischen Polemik und Hagiographie: Iamblichs *De Vita Pythagorica* im Vergleich mit Porphyrios *Vita Plotini*," Irmgard Männlein-Robert looks at two biographical texts by Neoplatonic figures and neatly shows another way in which philosophers used the literary genre of biography. A close comparative reading reveals that these *Lives* are protreptic texts, in which Porphyry and Iamblichus introduce and advocate their own competing visions of what philosophy involves: Pythagoras was open to external influences, a great absorber and appropriator of other religious and philosophical traditions, and he is a model to follow; in contrast Plotinus represents a methodical system-building approach relying on one's own postulates and convictions. Hence, rather than simply being more or less hagiographical portraits of earlier "godlike" philosophical figures, these *Lives* show the playing out of debates in the Platonist philosophical scene about how philosophy should be practised.

Matthias Becker's paper, "Depicting the character of philosophers: traces of the Neoplatonic scale of virtues in Eunapius' collective biography," offers another fairly uncontroversial example of the use of biography in an ethical context. Although Eunapius never mentions the scale of virtues that culminate in one's divinization, there is evidence for an implicit use of the model: his catalogue of lives offers a mosaic in which different virtues on the scale are exhibited by different figures. Becker concludes that Eunapius offers "icons" for the reader's reflection, portraits that aid ethical development as one strives to ascend the ladder of the virtues.

In “Il filosofo platonico secondo Damascio,” Franco Trabattoni makes the case that the *Vita Isidori* is a biographical text that serves a dual purpose: Damascius praises both Isidore and the tradition of great Platonist philosophers to which Damascius himself belonged. Damascius’ key concern, however, is to present a general picture of the traits of the Platonic philosopher *par excellence*, and what he should be doing at the height of his tasks and responsibilities. He is not uncritical in his portrayal of Isidore, who falls short in various ways, and we are encouraged to see Damascius himself as the best exemplar of the Platonic philosopher. Trabattoni’s reading offers yet another use of biography, as a means to write indirectly about oneself.

In the final paper, “Κάθαρσις e protrettica nel βίος dei *Prolegomena alla filosofia di Platone*,” Mario Regali presents a number of reasons why the βίος passage should be distinguished strongly from the rest of Olympiodorus’ *Prolegomena*. The biographical account emphasizes the divine nature of Plato and the ways in which his philosophical legacy provides a schema through which we can also “become like god” and ascend from the imperfect physical world to the realm of the divine. Once again, we have an example in which the life of the philosopher displays and markets the promised results of his philosophy.

The volume as a whole demonstrates that there is indeed much to say about the role of philosophy in ancient Greek biography, but productive synergies between papers are hard to find and no firm overarching conclusions are reached; interested readers will find that most value lies in the particular details of the particular case-studies.

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