

BOOK REVIEW

Hermias: On Plato Phaedrus 227a–245e. Translated by DIRK BALTZLY and MICHAEL SHARE. *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. Pp. viii + 316. Hardback, £85.00. ISBN 978-1-3500-5188-1.

An English translation of the commentary on Plato's *Phaedrus* by Hermias (c. 410–450 CE) has been needed, and thankfully has now been provided—at least the first half of it—and in good form. It is regrettable, given the cost of these volumes, that the decision was made to divide the text. Hildegund Bernard's 1997 German translation managed the entire text and a generous amount of ancillary material in 442 pages, well under twice the size of the present volume. Such decisions, of course, do not rest with the authors, and Baltzly and Share have done a commendable job.

The particular interest in Hermias' commentary is not only that it is the sole complete commentary on the *Phaedrus* surviving from antiquity, but also that it is reckoned to be a fairly direct report of the seminar given by the legendary Platonist Syrianus (d. circa 437 CE), of whose own work we possess tragically little, but whose influence upon the history of philosophy looms large through his pupil Proclus. In the pages of Hermias we glimpse Syrianus the teacher, who is given to frequent digressions, but these never fail to be illuminating in their own right. At one point, we even find Hermias' fellow student Proclus asking a couple of astute questions (96, 25–97, 12).

The reader keen for insight into the systematic doctrines of Athenian Neoplatonism will be somewhat disappointed to find that the portion of the commentary corresponding to Proclus' account of the noetico-noeric (or "intelligible-intellective") hypostasis falls within the next volume. This account in Book 4 of Proclus' *Platonic Theology* is drawn in large part from his own reading of the *Phaedrus*, and Hermias' commentary on the relevant passages is a key source of information on this little-studied doctrine. The conception of a distinct hypostasis of the intelligible-intellective, which includes the supra-celestial *topos* where the Gods gather for their symposium and to feast, as it were, amidst and upon

Real Being (the *ontôs on* of *Phaedr.* 247c-e), is one of the important innovations in Athenian Neoplatonism. It offers a good example of what scholars have too often dismissed as a mere tendency to multiply intermediate terms, whereas I for one have argued that the intelligible-intellective plays a crucial systematic role in Proclus and indeed may be one of the most underestimated doctrines in Platonism.

The major threads of the commentary in this first volume pertain to determining the scope of the dialogue, the reasons behind Socrates' first interpretation of Lysias' speech and his subsequent palinode, and, at the end, the logic of the argument concerning the soul's immortality. But it is substantially augmented by a number of what are, in effect, minor embedded treatises on such matters as daemonology (70,10ff), pollution or miasma (78,26ff) and the difference between "source" (*pêgê*) and "principle" (*archê*), another doctrine the significance of which has been greatly underestimated (121,11ff).

The translation is eminently faithful, accurate and readable. Supplementation of the text to smooth the sense is always scrupulously bracketed. Baltzly and Share are to be commended, in my view, for returning to Thomas Taylor's straightforward use of "wholes" for the Platonic technical use of the term *holon*. This can require a certain courage on the translator's part, as it has an alien sound to the English ear, e.g., "The second [analysis], the one that transfers the tale (*logos*) to the [realm] of wholes, goes something like this. (It in no wise nullifies the first [version], since divine myths have often made use of actual events and accounts (*historia*) [of such] to teach about the [realm of] wholes.)" (30,27f, p. 76). But recent translations of Platonists such as Proclus and Damascius have at times fallen short of the sense of the original by failing to heed distinctions between technical terms such as *holon* and *pan*.

One point on which I believe Baltzly and Share to have erred in this respect is the translation of *heniaios* at 32,14 as "unified" (p. 77), when we ought rather to respect the technical distinction, important for Proclus and Damascius, and thus quite likely for Syrianus as well, between *heniaios* and *hênômenos* by translating the former always as "unitary" and the latter as "unified." Indeed, at 42,20f (p. 87) Baltzly and Share demonstrate an awareness of the issue through their parenthetical clarifications: "And also [*daemonically*] shows that he has grasped beauty dividedly (*memerismenôs*) and not as a unity (*hênômenôs*) or a single entity (*heniaiôs*); for to divide (*merisasthai*) is to distribute (*daiasthai*). Such, then, are the things that the word *daemonically* might indicate to us." We cannot fully appreciate the point Hermias (or Syrianus) is making here unless we recognize that the use of the terms *heniaios*, *hênômenos* and *memerismenos* indicates a gradation of

levels of being of the sort which late antique Platonists are particularly known. Compare Damascius, *De Principiis* I, 3.17: we “categorize all things ... in at least three ways, in a unitary mode (*heniaiōs*), in a unified mode (*hênōmenōs*), and in a multiplied mode (*peplêthusmenōs*),” (trans. mine). What is *heniaios* is actively individuating, what is *hênōmenos* is passively “unified”, and the *memerismenos* (which Taylor would have rendered as “partible”) is a part of some whole ontologically prior to it. In the passage from Hermias, the use of “daemonically” is supposed to evoke for the student the disposition of *daimones* below gods and angels in the ontological hierarchy.

For the reasons indicated above, the budget-conscious reader will likely choose to invest not in this volume, but in its companion, due to its greater systematic significance—hopefully there is no intention of stretching the publication of this text beyond two volumes. In any event, when the publication of Baltzly and Share’s translation of Hermias’ commentary is complete, it will be an indispensable addition to the Platonic scholar’s bookshelf as well as to the study of late antique thought and culture in general.

EDWARD P. BUTLER

Independent Scholar, epb223@gmail.com