



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

Runia, D

Title:

Review of G. Boys-Stones, Platonist Philosophy 80 BC to AD 250: An Introduction and Collection of Sources in Translation

Date:

2018

Citation:

Runia, D. (2018). Review of G. Boys-Stones, Platonist Philosophy 80 BC to AD 250: An Introduction and Collection of Sources in Translation. The Studia Philonica Annual, 30, pp.297-300

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/250273>

BOOK REVIEW SECTION

GEORGE BOYS-STONES, *Platonist Philosophy 80 BC to AD 250: An Introduction and Collection of Sources in Translation*. Cambridge Source Books in Post-Hellenistic Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xiv and 648 pages. ISBN 97804521838580 (hardcover); 97805215547390 (paperback). Listed price £142 (hc), £30 (pb).

The young English scholar George Boys-Stones burst onto the academic scene in 2001 with his book *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy*, in which he put forward the hypothesis that the guiding thought of the philosophy of this period was the concept of philosophy as the recovery of ancient wisdom (see the review by John Dillon in this Annual, vol. 14 [2002]: 236–38). Now, nearly two decades later, he takes up this period again and slightly narrows his focus to Platonist philosophy, treating the thought of what is generally known today as “Middle Platonism,” a term with which he does not in principle disagree, though not using it in his title. The book has a distinguished Cantabrigian lineage. Its only predecessor in the series Cambridge Source Books in Post-Hellenistic Philosophy was the volume *Peripatetic Philosophy 200 BC to AD 200* with the same subtitle by the late Robert Sharples, published in 2010. That book in turn took its cue from the well-known sourcebook of Anthony Long and David Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (1987), which has become the standard work for the study of that period of ancient philosophy.

The present work under review stands in that lineage, but also diverges from its predecessors in a number of respects. Most importantly, whereas the first two for the subjects treated in individual chapters first presented a selection of texts, followed by a commentary, Boys-Stones divides each chapter into *three* parts. First there is a general discussion, untitled as such, which is further divided in sub-topics. This is followed by a section entitled Notes and Further Reading, printed in smaller type and also sub-divided further, in which he presents further comments on ancient authors and texts relevant to the topic, as well as extensive references to and comments on the relevant scholarship. Finally, starting on a new page he presents a section of Texts, in larger type again, up to a maximum of nearly fifty and varying from a few lines to a page or more. This sequence is very deliberate. Boys-Stones’s primary purpose is to understand Platonism in terms of

its philosophical beliefs and their justification, rather than considering it chiefly in terms of its sources in earlier philosophy and in the writings of Plato himself. This means that the background of Platonic exegesis is downplayed. The method of placing his own commentary separate and first is a key technique for achieving his main aim. The starting point is what he calls "the dialectical context," asking "how Platonists in the post-Hellenistic period argued their corner" (p. 5). The texts have been selected in dialogue with the commentary (and often referred to in it) so that each informs the other, but the reader is warned to be on guard, since different texts might have been chosen. Stated somewhat crudely one might say that, in comparison with his predecessors, Boys-Stones's method in handling the textual evidence is more deductive, whereas their approach was more inductive. The notes are very full, providing a remarkable (and refreshingly non-Anglocentric) overview of past and current scholarship. The views of others are stated dispassionately, but the author definitely does not hold back with his own judgments. As a result the book has become rather compendious, more than double the length of that of Sharples. Like its predecessor, it does not publish the Greek and Latin texts on which the translation is based, thus not following the example of Long and Sedley, who published a separate volume with the texts. But Boys-Stones has very usefully made available an online file which contains the original texts using the same pagination as in the published work, which may be found on the book's CUP website (see Resources).

The first chapter treats Plato and the history of philosophy. It well illustrates Boys-Stones's approach. The upshot of Hellenistic philosophy was a stalemate: the argument from disagreement dictated that there was no way to the truth. Platonists came to believe there was a way out, the commitment to a belief in transcendent causes. The ascription to Plato of absolute doctrinal authority should not be regarded as a *credo* but rather as a working hypothesis. Moreover, Plato was not unique in his systematic exposition of the truth. Earlier generations had also had some success in this quest. *Pace* Sedley, Plato did not just have the authority of the founder of a school. There was something distinctive in the absolute commitment to his texts as infallible reference-points for philosophical questions. His authority was even expressed in religious language, though this did not place it beyond discussion or justification. A series of twelve texts accompany this interpretation, the most important being from a philosopher who was not strictly speaking a Platonist, Numenius.

After a further introductory chapter on "Making sense of the dialogues," there follow seventeen chapters discussing the core doctrines of Platonism during this period. The organisation of these chapters reflects an

interpretation of what was most important in the Platonists' thought. Boys-Stones does not follow the conventional division into logic, physic, and ethics. Instead part one is devoted to Cosmology, beginning with the crucial doctrine of the primacy of non-material causes, followed by chapters on matter and the paradigm forms. The key role of the Creator God, endorsed by all Platonists, is next, linked to theories of creation. Important chapters on the World Soul and Individual Souls follow, then a thorough treatment of the scala of Living Beings. Cosmology ends with chapters on Providence and Fate. Part two, entitled Dialectic, examines epistemology, logic (of relatively little interest to Platonists), the categories, and the hierarchy of sciences. Part three on Ethics has chapters on The Goal, including the ideal life, ethical virtue and the management of the passions, and a brief chapter on Politics. A final, slightly anomalous chapter devoted to the System of the Chaldean Oracles rounds off the main body of the book.

No single author or work dominates the selection of texts. At the end of the book there is a valuable catalogue of Platonists, with type in capitals indicating whether one self-identified as a "Platonist philosopher" or not. Alcinous's *Handbook*, Plutarch, and Numenius (though not, as we saw, a Platonist) are prominent. Later Platonists such as Porphyry and Proclus are not included, but the evidence they provide on their predecessors is listed in the Index of Sources and References.

Readers of this Annual will of course be interested to see the place that Philo of Alexandria occupies in the volume. His entry in the catalogue rightly notes a high regard for Plato, but no self-description as a Platonist. It was later Christian writers who described him as "a zealous student of Plato and Pythagoras" (Eusebius). A list of references to him in the Notes and further reading shows that his evidence is briefly discussed in the majority of chapters, which also generally contain one or more brief extracts from his writings. The discussions do not go deep, but when read in their context are consistently well-informed and show sound judgment. Philo's evidence is perhaps most important for chapter ten on Living Beings, and here it is a pity that the recent discussions on reincarnation in Philo were not (or could not be) taken on board.

All in all, this volume represents an impressive contribution. Its distinctive methodology establishes it beside and as a more compact alternative for the massive (and still uncompleted) project of *Der Platonismus in der Antike* of Dörrie-Baltes with its greater attention to the role of Platonic exegesis. I personally found the emphasis on philosophical engagement enlightening and stimulating. Only occasionally does it go too far and introduce an anachronistic note. This occurs particularly in the treatment of soul, when the World Soul is interpreted as a "distributory mechanism"

(p. 213) and the individual soul as “a quality of some body” (p. 254) which necessarily must possess a soul vehicle. The volume is well organised and readers will soon find what they are looking for. All students of ancient Platonism, including Philonists, will be keen to have this volume on their shelves.

David T. Runia
Australian Catholic University
The University of Melbourne, Australia

JOSÉ PABLO MARTÍN, PURA NIETO HERNÁNDEZ, AND SOFÍA TORALLAS TOVAR, EDS., *Filón de Alejandría: Obras Completas*. Volume IV. Madrid: Trotta, 2016. 461 pages. ISBN 9789498796100. Softcover. Listed price 30,00 €.

The collection *Obras Completas de Filón de Alejandría* (OCFA) is the result of *Philo Hispanicus*, a research project directed by the late Prof. José Pablo Martín, a renowned member of the National Scientific and Technical Research Council and Professor Emeritus of the National University of General Sarmiento (Argentina). The research project team is composed by members of national and international universities with a prominent academic career, who have been called to translate into Spanish the fifty-one treatises that make up Philo's work. From the eight volumes that make up this collection, volumes 1 and 5 were published in the year 2009, and volumes 2 and 3 were published in the years 2010 and 2012 respectively. In each of these books, the research team offers a direct and literal Spanish translation from the Greek text of Philo's treatises edited by Cohn, Wendland, and Reiter (1896–1915), with introductions that constitute real systematic studies that deal with issues not much explored about Philo's thinking and his relationship with the ancient, late ancient, and medieval culture.

Volume 4 is not an exception. It starts with a general “Presentación” (pp. 6–17) written by José Pablo Martín, who addresses different issues that arise from the complexity of the treatises translated in the book. Two of those issues are: a) the type of material selected for this edition, and b) the differences found between the form and the content of the volume's treatises in comparison with the other collections' texts. Regarding the first issue, OCFA IV is made up by six works: *On Dreams* 1–2, *On the Life of Abraham*, *On the Life of Joseph*, *On the Virtues*, and *On Rewards and Punishments*. Based on the editor's criteria, *On Dreams* 1–2 constitute an independent and subordinate series to the Allegorical Commentary as they show a