

Paul Richard Blum

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Brill's Companion to German Platonism. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019*

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ABSTRACT. Alan Kim produced a handbook on the impact of Plato on philosophers in Germany from the 15th through the late 20th century. Chapters are dedicated to Nicholas of Cusa, Leibniz, Mendelssohn, Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Schopenhauer, Cohen and Natorp, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Krämer and Gaiser, and Gadamer. Evidently, Nicholas of Cusa and Leibniz belong to an era prior to classical modern German philosophy, which started in the late 18th century; they set the tone of how Plato was known, namely, as the alternative to Aristotelian school philosophy and support of Christian philosophy. With Mendelssohn and Kant the reception of Plato began to focus on his original thought. Plato represented an alternative to dogmatic philosophizing: philosophy is performance in dialogue and approximation to truth. Likewise, religious parameters were set aside, and the balance between the absolute and the finite, between dualism and monism, epistemology and metaphysics was laid down. This handbook opens a new view on famous philosophers and encourages to investigate further the engagement of philosophers with Plato and various strands of Platonism.
KEYWORDS: Plato, German Platonism, Brill's Companions.

Investigating the presence of Plato in philosophy in Germany has the twofold promise to find a common denominator among the many

© P.R. Blum (Baltimore). prblum@loyola.edu. Loyola University Maryland. Palacký University Olomouc.

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routes philosophy took, especially from the 18th into the 20th century, and to reflect on the patterns that shaped present-day understanding of Plato's philosophy. The term Platonism might suggest a specific kind of appropriating Plato in this part of Europe, as distinct from Hellenism and the Renaissance, for instance, as we will see at the end. On the other hand, from the 15th century with Nicholas of Cusa into the second half of the 20th century with Gadamer, the notion of 'German' varied dramatically. In 1941, Joachim Ritter contributed an essay on Cusanus to a book *Das Deutsche in der deutschen Philosophie* (ed. Theodor Haering)¹ – he masterfully avoided the national outlook and presented him as a philosopher beyond boundaries. Also in this sense, a “companion” is well needed when studying “German Platonism”.

In the “Introduction”, the editor points out a linguistic problem of writing in English about German studies of Platonism: “In contemporary anglophone Plato-scholarship, the use of the English word, ‘Idea’, has been abandoned in favor of ‘Form’. But virtually all German interpreters of Plato naturally use the German word, ‘Idee’” (p. 13). Therefore, in this review the preferences of the individual authors have been respected without questioning.

The book opens with Nicholas of Cusa. Claudia D’Amico gives a detailed report on the Platonic influences through Proclus and Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite on Cusanus’ key concepts like the coincidence of opposites and on the philosophy of oneness through Parmenides. Cusanus aimed at harmonizing Christianity with Platonism and studied Platonists continuously into his late years. Helpful is the emphasis on the support from fellow Platonists in Germany: Heymericus de Campo, Albertus Magnus, Dietrich von Freiberg, Meister Eckhart, Berthold von Moosburg. As to the reception in Germany, it should be mentioned that interest in Cusanus gained momentum only when Giordano Bruno, who had built upon some of Cusanus’ speculations, caught the attention of the debate about atheism in Germany. F.A. Scharpff published an apologetic biography in 1843 and a collec-

¹ See Ritter 1941.

tion of his writings in German translation in 1862, whereas F.J. Clemens compared Cusanus with Bruno (aiming at Hegel) in 1847; both were active Catholics.²

Although many authors that influenced Cusanus lived in what is now Germany, they were not primarily Germans but members of their religious orders and schools. The next philosopher treated is Leibniz, and this gap of more than three hundred years is remarkable. Not many philosophers in German lands that engaged with Plato come to mind because professional philosophy lived in universities that were dominated by Aristotelianism. However, Philipp Melanchthon, Agrippa von Nettesheim, Eilhard Lubin, some Lullists (who tended to be Platonizing), and the Jesuits Athanasius Kircher and Christoph Clavius, both working in Rome, could be worth investigating.

Jack Davidson offers a useful and reliable introduction into Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's life and thought. Leibniz is called "The Last Great Christian Platonist" in the title of the chapter for he knew Neoplatonism's role in Christian theology. But he was well aware of the divergences between the Neoplatonists and Plato himself and built upon their patterns of thought his peculiar theories of the best possible world, epistemology, and metaphysics. With formulas like "Leibniz and Plato agree..." (in this order) the author presents the Greek as conversing with the German, which to some extent undoes the historic intent of the chapter, and he compares them without explaining why and how Leibniz might have emphasized aspects that are neglected in other interpretations. Hence, the differences between both authors appear arbitrary and thus philosophically indifferent. Philosophy looks like a toolbox of *-isms*, in which Leibniz rummaged and picked propositions randomly and non-historically.

Bruce Rosenstock picks up at Leibniz introducing Moses Mendelssohn as an admirer of Leibniz's calculus. The infinitesimal calculus developed by Leibniz enables to measure the change in the slope of a curve and, as we learn, guarantees the perfection of the soul, the perfection of which is its power of representation. Unfortunately, for

² See Scharpff 1843 and 1862; Clemens 1847.

lack of context of the mostly short quotations the chapter offers, it is hard to follow the argument. For instance, on p. 90 Mendelssohn is quoted from his adaptation of Plato's *Phaedo*: "‘It seems to me’, Socrates says, ‘that everything that is changeable [*alles Veränderliche*], cannot remain unchanged at any moment’." This is supposed to be evidence that "Mendelssohn's *Phädon*... stresses the continuity of the change, not its movement from one opposite to another." But in the context, change and opposites are not the subject but, rather, the innate power of the soul. Mendelssohn does not mention the infinitesimal calculus in any of the quotations. But Rosenstock suggests it as an interesting touchstone when reading Mendelssohn. Given this interpretive lens, it remains unclear, in which way the law of continuity in change is connected with the power of the soul to ascend to the ultimate principle (which is Neoplatonic heritage) and both — with the infinite calculus? As evidence of Mendelssohn's competence in physics, the author points to his letters on Roger Boscovich, the contemporary Jesuit scientist, that discuss the nature of change. For specialists of Mendelssohn, this is an interesting view on Mendelssohn's reception of Plato.

"Kant and Plato: An Introduction" by Manfred Baum presents an interesting revival of the historic Plato as distinct from the tradition, mostly based on the *Dissertation* of 1770. Kant revised the blurring of the sensible and intelligible world as it was promoted by early modern school philosophy up to Christian Wolff, thus returning to a dualist interpretation of Plato. The Kantian *noumenon*, wherein the understanding generates its own concepts as real, is distinct from the *phenomenon*. Kant distinguished between Platonic Ideas (what in the Anglophone literature is termed 'Forms') and concepts of understanding and reason. Thus, the *noumenon* differs from Plato's 'Idea' in that its reality is grounded in the understanding. The notion of ultimate perfection had to be adapted to the extent that it could play a role in ethics. Hence, the possibility of experience and the foundations of morals depend on a new function of the ideal. In this process, the Neoplatonic theory of emanation had to be abandoned. Curiously, in the numerous quotations the editor equipped Latin words with superscript dashes to mark

long vowels — a very unusual practice and definitely not given in the edition quoted; such diacritical signs have no bearing on semantics and slow down reading.

For Jere O'Neill Surber, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel initiated a new approach to Plato. Plato was the starting point of philosophical history that culminated in Hegel. Plato's *Idea* morphed into Hegel's *Begriff*: the convergence of form and content and thus also of identity and difference. Ideas are neither properties of things (however lofty) nor mere constructs of the mind (*entia rationis*, as the scholastics would have it). Consequently, any dualist reading of Plato is misguided, according to Hegel. The *Parmenides* was, to him, the forerunner of his own dialectics, while in the Renaissance the dialogue had been read either as a logical skirmish or the pinnacle of negative theology. Plato is neither esoteric and theological nor a representative of a literary past; rather, he transforms antecedent thought into systematic philosophy. As the author notes, Hegel read Plato in translation; the German version by Schleiermacher probably came too late, but Marsilio Ficino's slightly revised Latin text was available, just recently reprinted in Zweibrücken in 1781–1787.³ A comparison of Ficino's Neoplatonic, theological comments with Hegel's interpretation would be an interesting sequel to this chapter.

Friedrich Schleiermacher's German translations of Plato's works systematically emulated the original syntax so that (as the joke goes) he taught Germans to read Greek without a dictionary. Thomas Alexander Szlezák discusses Schleiermacher and his impact on Plato studies. The introduction to the translations effected an epochal change in reading Plato. Previous approaches emphasized the critique of writing and the implied distinction between esoteric and exoteric philosophy. Schleiermacher, instead, detected the distinction between the engaged reader and the common uninitiated reader. Hence, Plato's critique of written philosophy expressed a continuum between personal teaching and public writing, which does not allow for surmising any hidden message. Oral philosophizing is more appropriate to conveying any philosophi-

³ The so-called *Editio Bipontina*.

cal insight. Schleiermacher restricted the critique to temporary circumstances of Plato's writing. In spite of many exegetic and hermeneutic problems, Schleiermacher developed a theory of dialogue that continued into the 20th century.

According to Robert Wicks, Arthur Schopenhauer philosophized about time, influenced by Plato's formula of the moving image of eternity. Since his early studies he sought for interpretations of how Kant and Plato agreed about the thing-in-itself and the Forms. Reason, for instance, transcends the spacio-temporal world as Platonic Ideas do. Under the influence of empiricism, Schopenhauer developed his theory of representation and from there he came to a new, quasi-Platonizing appreciation of beauty. Following Kant's conception of time as mind-dependent, Schopenhauer sided with Plato in denying existence to the Now so that time as such is eternity in motion, that is, beyond experience. Consequently, what is known are not particulars but the eternal form. This influences also the moral perspective. The "cave of ignorance" is a metaphor for reality known only as shadows in the visible world. Schopenhauer later translated the Platonic Ideas into objectifications of the Will that are before plurality and thus identified them with Kant's thing-in-itself, insofar as both are not representations.

Appropriating Plato philosophically and yet remaining historically precise, that was the intent of Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp, the representatives of the Marburg School of Kantianism, as Karl-Heinz Lembeck explains. They continued the work of distancing Plato from the Neoplatonist, theological receptions. Cohen advanced a psychological reading of Plato that understood the Forms as *a priori* factors in human cognition. Plato's 'idea' is translated into conceptual 'vision' while participation is no longer a metaphysical claim but the possibility of being viewed and sensibly manifest. Later, Cohen aligned this with Kantian transcendentalism. Now, the Forms denote the function of synthesis of appearances. The author discusses in detail to what extent this interpretation departs both from Kant and from Plato. Paul Natorp was nicknamed 'Platorp' for his authority in Plato studies. He first focused on Plato's *Parmenides* and *Sophist* with an interest in epistemology. To

him, the One was the expression of the synthetic unity and the Not-One was the indeterminate relation of determinations (likely the indeterminate duality in Plato). He dismissed the ontological interpretation of Plato's Forms in favor of a theory of scientific knowledge. Philosophy, therefore, becomes fundamentally the study of logic as such. However, after reading Plotinus, Natorp later stressed the ontological bearing of Forms in the sense of "presumption of being". The form indicates the ultimate foundation and the ultimate beyond of philosophy, which reveals itself by way of manifesting itself in reality. Eventually, he interprets the one in terms of negative theology. However, the Neokantian reading of Plato was what influenced later Plato studies.

Richard Bett shows the complexity of Friedrich Nietzsche's relationship with Plato. He knew Schleiermacher's reading of Plato as an artist — and then refused it. More importantly, he rejected idealism, moralism, and all the Christian notions that were popular among Platonists. Summarily, we could say that Nietzsche attacked the aesthetic and the moral interpretation of Plato but also the transcendent, idealistic reading and, on the whole, the Greek philosopher as the epitome of the Christian worldview. All this is condensed in his notorious claim to propose "inverted Platonism". Nevertheless, one can also find appreciations of Plato, especially in terms of psychology. Nietzsche goes so far as to assume that Plato's idealism was based on his personal complex psychology with overpowerful senses. One way of expressing his disdain and appreciation of Plato was to blame Socrates for some of his debatable behaviors and teachings. Here appears yet another version of interpreting Plato as both the philosopher and the poet.

Juxtaposing Plato with a modern author yields insights into both of them. An exemplary case is Alan Kim's comparison of Husserl with Plato. This is not only a fine introduction into Husserl's phenomenology but also an important interpretation of Platonic thought. Like several other authors in this book, Husserl rejected the naïve Platonism that believed in the metaphysical existence of Ideas or Forms and tended to express itself in mystical terms. He operated creatively with Plato's imagery of vision, seeing, and shaping in order to construe his

own phenomenology. Like Plato, he contrasted the sensible and experiential reality with the essence, which is not an ontological ground but a guarantor of the reality of the factual. Plato's Forms, to him, are transcendental rules that constitute particulars.

From the very beginning, Martin Heidegger tried to expose inconsistencies in Plato's metaphysics. He notoriously blamed him for abandoning Being as such in favor of beings (*Sein vs. seiendes*). The careful analysis by Francisco J. Gonzales unavoidably suffers from the intricacy of Heidegger's idiosyncratic German, including his eccentric way of translating Greek terms — and all that, in this paper, translated into English. The author proves that Heidegger, besides his “official interpretation” of Plato as known from his essay *Plato's Doctrine of Truth* (and also his *Letter on 'Humanism'*), had pursued sophisticated interpretation, both in his early and his later lecture courses. However, there were also continuities between the analyses, for instance of the *Sophist*, and *Being and Time*. It should be mentioned that this critique of Plato's philosophy was aimed at Natorp's Kantian Platonism (both philosophers met in Marburg). We could even say that Heidegger's refusal of Plato's metaphysics, his “official interpretation”, was actually a critique of Neokantian transcendental philosophy. Therefore it comes as no surprise that a clear rupture becomes evident in lecture notes by Herbert Marcuse, which remain unpublished so far, in which Heidegger explains the *Parmenides'* achievement that agrees with his own philosophy of time, namely, that time is not eternity but rather the instant. As opposed to other statements about Plato, here the *Parmenides* is taught as having fathomed the problem of the difference between Being and beings.

Vittorio Hösle opens his portrait of the Tübingen School with a brief overview of the various forms of the reception of Plato including modern Germany. As he points out, any reception of Plato is determined by the fact that he himself was the leader of a school, the Academy, from which many reports survived that are not easily to be found in the known writings. Hence the assumption that there was something like an unwritten doctrine. While the history of Platonism was often

shaped by the antagonism between the literary form and the philosophical system, the Tübingen School achieved to reconcile these by assuming that the published works conveyed his philosophy as suitable for both the non-initiate and the inner circle of the school so that the apparently esoteric teachings of Plato, which continued to be discussed in ancient Platonism, do not conflict with the dialogues and the letters but complement each other. Hans Joachim Krämer und Konrad Gaiser were the main authorities in Tübingen. After Krämer had shown that Aristotle's philosophy is much more dependent on Plato than opposite to him, Gaiser was able to publish a collection of the testimonies of the so-called unwritten doctrine. He was also able to recuperate the Pythagorean dimension of Plato's philosophy, which was very well-known in the Renaissance and early modernity but mostly forgotten in the later Plato reception. Höhle counts Th. A. Szlezák (author of the Schleiermacher chapter) and himself to this school of Plato studies.

Hans-Georg Gadamer is best known for his 1960 book *Truth and Method*. This concluding chapter "Form and Language: Gadamer's Platonism" by François Renaud shows that he also has a peculiar role in interpreting Plato, starting with his acquaintance with Natorp and continued through his publication of an anthology of Platonic texts. While emphasizing the dialogical structure of Plato's thought, he was not alien to the dialectics of the One and the many as well as the mathematical background of Plato's thought. In this respect he anticipated the Tübingen School. *Logos* and mathematical structure, dialogue and Idea are not opposite. He reconciles the conflicting approaches by emphasizing that the Forms are still apparent in language and dialogue and they are not the endpoint but the starting point of the philosophical inquiry. The Platonic Ideas are present in language because of the ideal nature of the word, that is, the inherent ideas in spoken language. For the same reason, they are not, as the Neokantians would have it, mental concepts, but rather the presence of the absolute in the life of the thinker. The distinction between 'oral' and 'written' is now transformed into that of doctrinal presentation versus dialogical search, or the dogmatic and the dialectic Platonism. The traditional distinction

between the metaphysician and the artist has found yet another variation. This is true both in comparison with Schleiermacher and with the Tübingen School. Thus Gadamer gains a new understanding of the unity of Plato's philosophy. While he engaged with Plato throughout his long active scientific life, from his *Dissertation* of 1922 through his *Truth and Method* of 1960 and beyond, it is clear that Gadamer's hermeneutics is the fruit of this engagement. Gadamer was befriended with the historian of Greek mathematics Jacob Klein and the political philosopher Leo Strauss, who published Mendelssohn's *Phädon* in 1932. It would be interesting to follow the traces of German émigrés who could have, or should have, brought specific German ways of reading Plato into the American culture. As is being remarked in several papers, some of the achievements of Plato studies had little echo in the philosophy of English-speaking scholars.

In the "Introduction", the editor Alan Kim calls Platonism a syndrome that characterizes philosophy in Germany: philosophers have not plainly endorsed Plato's teachings but developed and challenged their philosophy by measuring up to the Greek paradigm. This had likely to do with the preference of Greek over Latin culture that grew in competition with the Romance cultures in Italy and France in combination with 18th-century Philhellenism, of which Heidegger was the culmination. As A.N. Whitehead said, philosophy is all footnotes to Plato. It appears that among the most frequently 'footnoted' works of Plato in this book are the *Parmenides*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Sophist*. (The volume is furnished with indices of historic persons, modern persons, and subjects.)

From this collection of essays we learn about the German philosophers that they were continuously concerned with keeping religious and theological frameworks at bay while evaluating the balance between the absolute and reality, epistemology and metaphysics, truth and life, dualism and monism. A balance that is also reflected in changes of direction within the scholarly life of some of the philosophers discussed in this book. Several essays open the desideratum of a comparative study of modern Platonism and its Renaissance prede-

cessors, as Werner Beierwaltes (quoted in the Cusanus chapter) pursued. About Plato, the lesson is that any dogmatic approach misses the promise and project of philosophy from the beginning to the effect that paradoxically close reading of the sources and open mind (as exercised in the *Phaedo*) define philosophy as a process of approximation to truth.

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