

**Lloyd Gerson, ed.**

*The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (2 vols).

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The history of philosophy is constantly in the process of being rewritten. One of the more intriguing developments in recent years has been the growing conviction that there should be ‘no gaps’: that is, that all twenty-six centuries of Western philosophy should receive serious attention from seriously minded scholars. (Peter Adamson is attempting this singlehandedly in his awe-inspiring podcast.) According to the emerging consensus, our operative assumption has to be that respectable philosophical activity—really, a considerable amount of it—will have been going on at any given time in any given culture, even if we are not in a position yet to appreciate fully what that activity was and what its fruits were.

At its basest, this is almost a matter of a basic confidence in perennial human curiosity and ingenuity. (As such, it should not be confused with Perennialism either of the Big Questions or Big Answers sort.) On a more refined level, what we have is the conviction that every period of philosophical activity represents a resource to be reclaimed for the purposes of further reflection (provided, I suppose, that a sufficient institutional framework existed for a working record of that activity to be left in the first place. This might exclude a few stretches, like perhaps for Western Europe the period between Boethius and the Carolingian Renaissance). Among other things, the new approach encourages letting go of old prejudices when it comes to the supposed barrenness or fecundity of given time-periods—late scholasticism, say, or late Hegelianism—or certain styles of philosophizing, like commenting on a previous philosopher’s works or philosophical topics being addressed within the folds of religious literature.

There may be no subfield that has benefitted more from this conviction than the study of philosophy in late antiquity. As Lloyd Gerson, the editor of the volume under review (hereafter *CHPLA*) rightly notes, an astonishing amount of work of the highest standard has taken place in recent decades, work that collectively has served to overturn the traditional understanding of this tumultuous period. That traditional understanding, crudely speaking, was that next to no philosophy of note was done in the waning years of the Roman Empire, and certainly none of the type that a twentieth-century analytic philosopher could appreciate. To the contrary, this ‘age of anxiety’ supposedly produced mere parchment-dry exegesis on the one hand, speculative and religiously tinted metaphysics on the other.

A more careful examination of the sources has revealed an altogether different picture. In the first instance, it has been reinstated that writing according to the conventions of commentary need not preclude philosophical ingenuity, and indeed that it

did not, historically speaking: late antique commentators managed to mask much that was innovative under the rhetoric of a respectful deference to Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle and others. Another discovery is that under the auspices of exploring the Platonic and Aristotelian curricula, all areas of philosophy were touched upon and given serious attention. Far from being limited to religiously motivated speculation, late antique philosophy developed logic, philosophy of language, natural philosophy, and ethics, all in a serious and sophisticated fashion. The results are only now beginning to be assessed in full (with some scholars drawing on the prior efforts of Renaissance adaptations).

A further signal development has been the recognition that there is much in early Christian literature that can be viewed positively in philosophical terms (the flipside to Harnack's old thesis that Hellenization led Christianity away from its roots). More and more, it is appreciated just how expert the early fathers of the church were at appropriating and adapting for their purposes aspects of the Greek philosophical tradition, even as they publically railed against some of its tenets. This has had the effect of placing figures such as Augustine and Boethius—but equally as much thinkers of the likes of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa—squarely within the realm of late antique philosophy, rather than treating them as mere precursors to medieval thought. As a consequence, *CHPLA* takes over much of the ground that in the previous generation was covered by the *Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*: the change in titles alone is telling.

All of this is reflected in Gerson's monumental undertaking. The book divides into eight parts, with chapters on the mainstream of the Platonic tradition (Parts 3 and 6) alternating with long stretches laying out the different phases in which Christianity's encounter with Greek philosophy unfolded (Parts 2, 5, 7—these are particularly appositely grouped according to the types of philosophy with which Christians engaged). In between, Gerson takes care to note that other schools and philosophical approaches continued to enjoy currency, especially Aristotelianism (Part 4); while immensely useful bookending sections are devoted to thumbnails of the original materials that contributed to the genetic makeup of late antique philosophy, as it were (Part 1), and its passage into the medieval world in Byzantium, in the house of Islam, and in Latin Christendom (Part 8). One cannot deny the basic narrative force in all this, and the sheer ambition of the collection (two volumes, 1312 pages) is breathtaking.

A further audacious decision on the editor's part has been to interlace the history of philosophy being told with occasional sidelong glances at concurrent societal and political developments. Elizabeth DePalma Digeser (EDD) has had the unenviable task of providing for the historical neophyte's consumption a bird's-eye view of the intricate and complex history of the late Roman Empire. While this reviewer is scarcely qualified to judge the overall quality of these historically minded summaries, minimally one can say that they are all very readable and consistently informative. Sometimes when EDD attempts to stitch together sociopolitical events and philosophical happenings the seams show rather obviously (a sample segue, admittedly chosen for dramatic effect, from p. 594: 'Ruling from Carthage as his capital, Geiseric (428–77) also seems to have left the tax collection structure in place and issued laws that copied Roman rescripts in form. In

the East, the renegade population that flourished were the adherents of the Academy...’). Also, on occasion, EDD’s proclamations regarding certain large-scale developments in the institutional history of philosophy seem a tad undercooked or overegged. Overall, though, EDD acquits herself admirably.

Given the immensity of the book’s scope, doing any kind of justice to its contents is plainly impossible. With 48 chapters to choose from, even the time-honoured tactic of picking selected highlights becomes a bit of a shell game (not to say a snub to those whose contributions are not so honoured). Suffice it to say that I did not read a single contribution that wasn’t written to a high and exacting standard, and that many attained true excellence in a remarkably compressed space. Noticeable also is the surprising degree of uniformity in tone that the various contributions adopt—possibly the sign of a strong editorial hand at work at the volume’s inception and early planning. This makes the book a particularly useful research and teaching tool: the reader or instructor, in consulting a particular chapter, knows to a decent extent what she or he is getting.

But what is that something? The editor is commendably explicit in laying out the precepts guiding the book’s overall orientation. For Gerson, a proper history of philosophy in late antiquity ‘ought to be oriented first and foremost towards the positions or doctrines held by the leading philosophers of late antiquity...the disparagement of histories oriented towards the positions held by philosophers is unreasonable’ (6). Thanks to the editor’s diligence in implementing his vision, the book exhibits a structure that looks like something of a curiosity today, even if as little as fifty years ago it would have been par for the course. What we have, in essence, are reams upon reams of chapters with titles such as ‘Clement of Alexandria’ or ‘Olympiodorus’. The very obscurity of some of these names to all but a few professional philosophers (and of course a much wider group of classicists and church historians) is, one suspects, part of the point.

The overall impression reinforced throughout is that a great deal more was going on than the standard run-through of Plotinus, Porphyry, and Augustine. Surely this is a welcome reminder; surely, moreover, there is great value in devoting a decent amount of space to thinkers commonly sidelined in the standard account. It is curious indeed to consider that instead of merely contributing to ongoing discussions about this, that, and the other thing, a consummate commentator like Simplicius may actually have had a philosophy of his own! And if this is so for a first-rank thinker such as Simplicius, then the revelations will feel all the more startling when it comes to such relatively obscure figures as Hierocles of Alexandria or Synesius of Cyrene.

Yet there is a problem in all this as well, one that I think it is best to confront head on. Viewed in a certain light, Gerson’s approach, which is essentially that of providing a thicket of names and positions with little by way of an overarching story attached, poses the exact opposite concern to a work such as Richard Sorabji’s three-volume sourcebook *The Philosophy of the Commentators* (which, by the way, acts as a useful complement and counterweight to the present work—many of the same principal players have contributed to both projects). Whereas Sorabji in that work and many others presents the materials solely in terms of continuing themes and conversations, very nearly erasing in

the process the force and footprint of individual interests, personalities, and projects, Gerson's preferred mode of presentation cuts up the process of philosophical debate into such minute chunks that it would be difficult, if not impossible, for the uninitiated reader to get a sense of what the overall developments were just from reading *CHPLA*. EDD's historical chapters, and the editor's much shorter introductory words to each part, do some work here, plus of course individual authors have to tie in their discussion with what has gone before. But without an overall philosophical narrative or narratives—several would be preferable to just the one—to guide the reader's eye, it is all too likely that what remains is an impression of Big Ideas strung together in nearly-but-not-quite-identical constellations across a multitude of thinkers. Not only does this give the appearance of all late antique philosophy being a bit same-y; it also obscures from sight many of the more minute discussions that held people's interest over centuries but that nonetheless never made it into the headlines, so to say.

All of which is to suggest that the task of establishing, 'descriptively in an appropriate context, the views held' by the late antique philosophers is not only exceedingly difficult, but is also an inadequate description of what philosophers at any given time were doing ('holding views'). One must after all explain why certain things caught the eyes of philosophers, why certain issues were debated while others were not, and why certain arguments were held to be persuasive while others did not receive the same approbation. All this, however, would require serious narrative choices, ones that an organization of the materials into a cavalcade of thinkers and their views seems almost designed to avoid.

To abrogate this responsibility is to risk misleading the reader in various ways. To take an example: Andrew Smith discusses Porphyry and religion over the course of six pages (345-50), while John Dillon deliberately inserts only a passing note regarding theurgy in his chapter on Iamblichus, stating that the attention garnered by that issue has in his opinion been exaggerated (373-4). Add to this the fact that EDD in her introduction to religion and philosophy under Diocletian treats Porphyry and Iamblichus essentially as contemporaries (378-80) and that she devotes more space to Porphyry than to Iamblichus, and the compound impression is that Porphyry was the more religiously engaged thinker of the two. Surely something has gone wrong here; but what? Smith and Dillon are both top-notch scholars, and everything they write is absolutely correct as it stands. I do not even wish to suggest that Gerson's editorial work would have been anything other than astute. My point, rather, is simply that *CHPLA*'s very format necessarily leads to a number of these kinds of distortions great and small.

(In a more facile manner, one might point out that according to *CHPLA*, Damascius emerges as the most important philosopher in late antiquity, since his chapter gets the most pages by a fair margin. Of course this is not what either the editor or the author, Gerd van Riel, means to say: but then what else does the uninitiated reader have to go on? There are more of Damascius' 'doctrines', after all, on display.)

Of course, a thematic presentation would produce another set of distortive amplifications and diminutions. One can, I think, discern from Gerson's own

methodological remarks why he chose not to go down that increasingly popular route. Gerson in his Introduction criticizes recent historians' overreliance on 'influence' and 'development' as explanatory categories; and doubtless he is right to impress upon the reader how both have been widely misused over the years in service of lazy or needlessly speculative scholarship (5). To put this protest in the context of the Aristotelian four causes is quite revealing, I think: after all, to speak against material and moving causes, as Gerson does (5-6), leaves standing the formal and the final ones, which would fit in rather well with Gerson's preferred mode of treating the doctrines of the philosophers largely as self-constituted entities whose inner teleology it remains the philosophical historian's job to uncover. Yet to jettison the concepts of influence and development entirely would be absurd; and in fact few of Gerson's contributors do so. The organic and fluid nature of processes of thought, which in philosophy pass from thinker to thinker and text to text as implications unravel and the force (or lack thereof) of a given suggestion becomes clear, is paralleled in the way any good historian will describe these developments. In the end, they may have more in common with Cassirer's functionalism than with Aristotle's.

I find myself considerably more simpatico with Gerson's preference for contextualization over commensuration. And his success in keeping the discussion of his many contributors properly scholarly, with nary a strained play for contemporary 'relevance' in sight, makes for a far more durable book overall.

To sum up: there is no question but that the editor has put together a *History* that performs a unique function and service in today's scholarly world. Gerson's many contributors have also all risen to a formidable task, making this an impressive showcase for the state of the art in a field that is rapidly gaining in recognition. But that this new *Cambridge History* in its mode of presentation goes against the way most historians of philosophy today tend to conduct their research, and that this raises interesting questions as to how this *History's* materials are to be accessed by scholars who are not specialists already—perhaps this, too, is a conclusion that need not be shied away from.

**Taneli Kukkonen**

University of Otago and University of Jyväskylä