

Marsilio Ficino. *Commentaries on Plato, Volume 2: Parmenides, Part I*. Ed. and trans. Maude Vanhaelen. The I Tatti Renaissance Library 51. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. lxii + 286 pp. \$29.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-06471-3.

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This welcome new addition to the I Tatti Renaissance Library presents the first critical edition of an important text together with a good translation, sound introductory material, informative and helpful notes, and a comprehensive index: volume 1 has its own index, while that of volume 2 covers both parts.

Plato's dialogue *Parmenides* has often been described as obscure. In the words of one recent commentator it is "elaborately opaque, defying clarification" (Harrison J. Pemberton, *Plato's Parmenides: The Critical Moment for Socrates*, 1985). The writings of Parmenides himself are even more challenging, surviving only in fragmentary form and being perhaps misrepresented, in any case, by Plato. Yet Marsilio Ficino, convinced of the central significance of the *Parmenides* in Plato's writings, was determined to penetrate its opacity. To help him in this task he had the antique commentary of Proclus on it, both in the medieval translation of William of Moerbeke and in the Greek original. Proclus's commentary also records the views of his teacher, Syrianus. Vanhaelen in her scarcely less daunting task has been able to draw on recent work by Carlos Steel, John Dillon, and others that has made Proclus's text far more accessible to the modern reader. Nevertheless, Proclus's commentary does not cover the whole of Plato's text. From chapter 79 of 111 Ficino had to rely on his own inner guidance and experience, supported by what additional clues he could draw from Proclus's *Platonic Theology*. Ficino was not in a position to appreciate the indebtedness of Dionysius to Proclus, since he believed Dionysius to be a contemporary of St. Paul. But he was aware of the significance of Dionysius's *Divine Names* and *Celestial Hierarchy* in establishing a specifically Christian approach to Plato's metaphysics.

Ficino's full-length commentary on the *Parmenides* was started in 1492 and finished by August 1494, but it was first published in 1496. Vanhaelen draws

attention, however, to his earlier engagement with the work, from 1464 onwards, and through her notes charts those sections that were developed specifically in response to issues raised by Pico della Mirandola. Vanhaelen's introduction summarizes the controversy that persisted between them over the preeminence that Ficino accorded to "the One" over "Being," a preeminence that Pico vehemently denied both in his *Commentary on a Canzone of Benivieni* (1486) and in *De ente et uno* (1491). She also notes his careful balancing of interpretative ideas drawn from Proclus with those of Plotinus, and the caution he exercises over passages relating to both the henads of Proclus (which he internalizes to the human mind) and the pantheon of pagan gods.

From the outset Ficino regarded the *Parmenides* as occupying a special position in Plato's work. Following the Neoplatonic interpreters, he favors the theological interpretation of the work, finding in Parmenides's otherwise impenetrable pedagogy a method through which divine unity might be apprehended. The dialogue thus provides, in his view, not only a firm metaphysical foundation based on the restatement of the theory of Forms or Ideas, but also a demonstration of the creative use of dialectic to establish an unshakable belief in divine unity. The pupil — in this case, Socrates — is led through argument and discussion to a point beyond argument and discussion, in a process that appears to allow a kind of poetic inspiration and, ultimately, union with the divine. Complementary to the *Sophist* and the *Timaeus*, it occupies for Ficino a special place in the training of a philosopher. This also gives the work a special importance for all who would wish to study the philosophy of Ficino.

Although his commentary has seemed to some as daunting as the original Platonic text, Ficino strove hard to offer his readers a clear understanding. Even where Plato's arguments are obscure, Ficino attempts to smooth the path and encourage the reader to consider the purpose and meaning of each step. Vanhaelen has succeeded in bringing to her translation an equivalent degree of clarity. I have found very few occasions where the choice of word or phrase grated (for example, "psychic one" for the *unum animale*) and these are easily resolved by reference to the facing Latin text. The introduction and notes provide generous guidance for further study in both antique sources and the latest scholarship.

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