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Critical Notice



Platonic Dialogues and Platonic Principles

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Thomas A. Szlezák. *Aufsätze zur griechischen Literatur und Philosophie*.
Baden-Baden: Akademia Verlag, 2019.

Thomas Szlezák is one of the most influential thinkers of the Tübingen-Milan school of Platonism, as well as one of the most distinguished classical scholars in the German-speaking world; this collection of articles in German, English and Italian stretching from 1978 to 2019 is a welcome addition to the literature on the esoteric interpretation of Plato.¹ While the volume treats a broad range of subjects, I shall focus here on the underlying thematic unity which connects many of them. Szlezák's corpus—or the selection of it presented here—is significant for the following reasons. Firstly, it provides detailed analyses of Plato's theory of principles (the One and the Indefinite Dyad). Secondly, Szlezák provides one of the most cogent and persuasive lines of argumentation for why one should accept the esoteric approach of the Tübingen-Milan School, i.e. that the Unwritten Doctrines—*agrapha dogmata*—(or theory of principles) underpin Plato's dialogues in view of the fact that the dialogues themselves are insufficient to completely understand Plato since he did not fully commit his

1 For literature on the Tübingen School in English see Krämer, H. J. *Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics: A Work on the Theory of the Principles and Unwritten Doctrines of Plato with a Collection of the Fundamental Documents* (SUNY Press, 1990), although this is a translation of the Italian translation and Halfwassen J. *Plotinus, Neoplatonism and the Transcendence of the One* (Franciscan University Press, 2021); my introduction to the volume outlines differences in the approach to Platonism taken by the German and Anglophone traditions.

oral teachings to his written work. Thirdly, and related to the preceding point, Szlezák carefully examines the passages containing Plato's criticism of writing to account for this reluctance to openly broadcast the *agrapha dogmata*, and investigates whether the criticism should apply to Plato's own works. Fourthly—and this is not a minor consideration—Szlezák provides a detailed account of the history of Platonic scholarship. This is of relevance too for properly understanding the divergence of the Anglophone and Tübingen-Milan traditions of Platonic scholarship since the current approach in the English-speaking world has been heavily influenced by a particular branch of German scholarship (i.e. the views of Schleiermacher) which has historically been dominant there.² Finally—and more broadly—in his examination of topics such as the nature of dialectic or the limits and restrictions of philosophical communication, Szlezák is concerned with no less an issue than the nature of being a philosopher, what it means to do philosophy and the most effective manner available to us in which one can philosophize.

While Szlezák assiduously outlines Schleiermacher's influence on the Anglophone tradition of Platonic scholarship, he scrupulously distinguishes between the positions of Schleiermacher (whom Gadamer presents as deriving his view of Plato "wholly from the dialogues")³ and Cherniss (who denied "the historicity of Plato's oral teaching", p. 344). A strength found in Szlezák's treatment of Schleiermacher is the extent to which he contextualizes it within the scholarship of its time. Schleiermacher's failure to examine the indirect tradition was outdated in his own day; both Tiedemann and Tennemann had already noted that Plato's theory of principles is not explicitly outlined in his dialogues and had argued for the credibility of Aristotle's testimony concerning Plato's oral teaching. They felt that the "deliberate gaps", passages where Plato in his dialogues explicitly thematizes that he is avoiding discussion of an important question, was an argument for his esotericism (p. 345) and Szlezák pursues the question of whether there are, in fact, any such "deliberate gaps" ("Aussparungsstellen"). The value of this pursuit is that Szlezák is able to explain the relationship between Schleiermacher's view on esotericism and his misguided understanding of the chronology of Plato's works. Schleiermacher remains undisturbed by the "deliberate gap" at *Resp.* IV, 435c-d when Socrates avoids the "longer way" of clarifying whether the soul has the same three parts as the state since he locates the *Republic* in Plato's late—rather than middle—period, confining esotericism to Plato's

² The extent of Schleiermacher's influence in the US is disputed by Dorothea Frede, a point addressed by Szlezák (pp. 499-500).

³ Gadamer, H. G. "Schleiermacher als Platoniker" [1969], 374. Reprinted in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4 (Tübingen, 1987).

final years (pp. 346-8), thus positioning it as an aberration rather than a central feature of his thought. Schleiermacher's attempts to explain away such "deliberate gaps", which are fundamentally tied to Plato's criticism of writing, are elegantly connected with the suggestions of modern scholars (Rowe, Brisson, Wieland, Vegetti) to account for passages where Plato's Socrates appears to withhold information from the reader.

A subsequent contribution contrasts Schleiermacher's 1804 introduction to his Plato translation with the views of Tiedemann and Tennemann and enriches this outline with further details. The sources of Platonic philosophy outside the dialogues which Tiedemann identified in *Geist der spekulativen Philosophie* (1791) are considered: the oral teaching as well as Plato's "lost works", mentioned in the testimonia of Aristotle, which, for Tiedemann, revealed that Plato had a general theory of principles (p. 466). Tennemann largely agreed with Tiedemann in suggesting that Plato had an esoteric and an exoteric philosophy (p. 468). In this way, while the Tübingen School is closely associated with the work of Hans Joachim Krämer and Konrad Gaiser in the fifties and sixties, Szlezák illustrates that many of its characteristic features can be traced back in the German intellectual tradition to before Schleiermacher. However, Szlezák goes beyond a simple historical account which places Schleiermacher in opposition to the work of his close predecessors. Instead, his portrayal is more nuanced, carefully outlining the features of Tennemann's account which Schleiermacher adopted, such as the relationship between Plato the philosopher and Plato the literary author (pp. 472-3). An interesting by-product of this work is that Szlezák demonstrates that the two dominant approaches to Plato, namely that of the Anglophone world (which ultimately stems from Schleiermacher) and the esoteric approach, dominant at many German and Italian universities, both stem from the German tradition, which underlines its global influence upon the study of ancient philosophy.

One of the difficulties in assessing Plato's *Schriftkritik* is to determine whether it should be applied to his own works. This is particularly problematic for the criticism of writing found in the *Seventh Letter*, which is widely regarded as spurious. (A particularly well-known difficulty is that it argues for Forms of artefacts.) However, as Szlezák shows, it is not necessary to accept the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter* in order to agree with many of the positions argued for by the Tübingen-Milan School—in any case a criticism of writing is notably found at *Phdr.* 278b-e. The significance of the *Seventh Letter* is the subject of a contribution which reviews the methodological considerations relevant for investigating the nature of Plato's oral teaching (pp. 323-42). Irrespective of the question of the *Seventh Letter's* authenticity, Szlezák addresses the issue of its interest for Greek philosophy on account of its content, such as its reflection on the limits of

knowledge, the consequences of the restrictions of language for the philosopher and the alleged motives underlying Plato's involvement in Syracusan politics.

Approaches to the dialogues, as we have seen, can be regarded as located along two poles: that of Schleiermacher, which represents the totality of the dialogues as autarchic and the view that the Platonic dialogue is an image (*eidolon*) of dialectic—but yet with all of writing's usual limitations. The dialogues do not really function as images of dialectic conversations; instead they depict conversations between interlocutors of unequal rank. Encounters between philosophers of equal rank are either monologues (e.g., *Timaeus*) or discussions between one philosopher and an inexperienced interlocutor while the other philosopher remains silent (e.g., *Sophist*, p. 328). Consequently, Szlezák both relativizes the notion of what we mean by an “image” and shows that Plato's dialogues do not escape his own criticism of writing: they cannot answer the readers' questions (even if they respond to those of the dramatic interlocutor), they cannot seek out the appropriate addressee and they are incapable of defending themselves. The esoteric position can therefore be derived entirely from the dialogues (p. 336) and the *Seventh Letter* can be portrayed by Szlezák simply as a clear summary of views found in the dialogues themselves. The possibility that Plato's own writings might avoid these deficiencies in presenting an image of the dialectic process is examined more fully in a separate contribution (pp. 398-408). While Szlezák briefly revisits the issue of whether the inauthenticity of the *Seventh Letter* can be demonstrated (p. 337-8), his aim here is to illustrate that the point is actually moot, as far as defending esotericism is concerned. This is a significant piece of scholarship since it uncouples the validity of the Tübingen-Milan School's position from the authority of a text whose authenticity is doubted (at least in certain quarters) and rests it instead upon less easily assailable dialogues.

The recurring strand of esotericism in the philosophical tradition after Plato is traced out in a contribution (pp. 285-305) which brings this aspect of Platonism into dialogue with esotericism in Wittgenstein, Kant, Schleiermacher, Nietzsche, and Hegel; the need to limit philosophical communication has repeatedly been the subject of conscious reflection. Szlezák's treatment is sensitive to the intellectual context in which each thinker was working; the political overtones of Kant's brand of philosophical esotericism are contrasted with the more apolitical deliberations of Wittgenstein. The advantage of analysing a range of philosophers from different periods and with their own biases is that it highlights both the extent to which Plato's brand of esotericism sets the tone for this strand of presentation in the subsequent philosophical tradition, as well as underscoring the unique nature of Plato's esotericism, which Szlezák finds the ‘most nuanced’ (p. 285).

Given the extent to which the Tübingen School is characterized by its understanding of the theory of principles, the chapter examining the Form of the Good as a principle in the *Republic* is a welcome inclusion (pp. 569-90). Starting with the information concerning this principle—such as its knowability via dialectic—provided by Plato's Socrates, Szlezák follows its traces in the indirect tradition, identifying a theory of principles which differs somewhat from the one that is derived from Socrates at *Resp.* VI and VII (pp. 571-3).⁴ Szlezák resolves the conundrum by regarding the theory presented by Socrates as an abbreviated version of the theory of principles found in Plato's unwritten teachings (p. 579), i.e. the "long path" of dialectic (p. 579). In this way, Socrates, the dramatic figure, displays the reticence that characterizes Plato's works. Additionally, it is not possible to clarify the functions which Socrates assigns to the Good—either from the text alone or from the normal "ethical" understanding of Good (pp. 585-7); we are here dealing with the metaphysical Good (rather than the moral Good).

One of the most influential of Plato's works is the "perfect" dialogue, the *Timaeus*. Naturally, the principles are discussed in Plato's account of world-generation—even if, as Szlezák notes, the *Timaeus* is not a dialogue on the first principles (p. 591). Despite this—and in keeping with the key themes that define his work elsewhere—Szlezák is interested in the manner in which the dialogue discusses the principles. He argues that the *Timaeus* can be viewed as less of a philosophical dialogue than an uninterrupted monologue delivered by an astronomer—although the dramatic setting offers Plato the opportunity to include a dialogue between philosophers of equal rank (pp. 592-3). *Timaeus'* demiurgic myth itself becomes an example of esotericism: it is actually possible to find and describe the demiurge's nature, difficult though it is, just impossible to describe it to everyone. *Timaeus* also mentions the principle/s (48c2-6), but notes that he should not speak about this matter "for the present". Szlezák examines the validity of *Timaeus'* declared grounds for avoiding an explicit discussion of the principles, concluding that his stated reasons (such as the limits of human nature in attaining knowledge of such principles) are not particularly convincing. *Timaeus* acknowledges the existence of "higher" principles beyond those which he concentrates upon in the course of treating the issue of world-generation, principles which are known to the man who is dear to the god (i.e. it is clear that knowledge of such principles does not, in fact, lie beyond the limits of human knowledge). Szlezák's

4 Found in the *Testimonia Platonica* collected by Gaiser, K. *Platons Ungeschriebene Lehre. Studien zur systematischen und geschichtlichen Begründung der Wissenschaften in der Platonischen Schule*, 2nd ed. Stuttgart, 1968, 441-557. Szlezák (p. 572 n. 1) provides a more detailed overview of various editions of the testimonia.

treatment of the *Timaeus*, then, serves to reinforce a claim made elsewhere in the volume that Plato's dialogues contain deliberately left gaps. The theory of principles is not problematized in the *Timaeus*, but simply referred to and explicitly omitted from the dialogue. This treatment of the *Timaeus* connects with the overarching themes of the volume in another way: despite the shortcomings which we can identify in Schleiermacher's interpretation of Plato, he at least—unlike some of his followers—accepted that Plato only expressed his thoughts “purely and completely” in his oral teachings when he was sure that his listeners would follow him as desired (p. 600).

The chapter on the fundamental hermeneutic problems of Plato's interpretation, building on the author's previous work, presents a cogent argument for esotericism by undermining the basis of the anti-esoteric interpretation. In this sense, that article represents an important contribution, irrespective of where one stands on the issue, given its analysis of the anti-esoteric position in terms of the misguided hermeneutical approach taken to four particular texts or *corpora*: 1) Plato's *Schriftkritik* at *Phdr.* 274b-278e, 2) the indirect tradition of Plato's theory of principles within the Academy, 3) the developments of systems derived from Plato's oral teaching by his students Speusippus, Xenocrates and—most famously—Aristotle and 4) Plato's literary representation of the dialectician (p. 685). Underestimating the indirect tradition (primarily Aristotle's comments) concerning Plato's theory of principles is a tendency that can also be traced back to Schleiermacher. Aristotle's testimonia includes valuable information, not just about the principles, but also concerning Plato's intellectual development. By a close analysis of Schleiermacher's comments that the indirect tradition does not contain anything divergent from the dialogues, Szlezák demonstrates that Schleiermacher had scant knowledge of the indirect tradition (i.e. of *Met.* A 6). Interpreting Plato largely depends on how we understand the form of the dialogue to relate to the philosophical content which underpins it (for Schleiermacher they were inseparable). This helps to clarify the centrality that the figure of the dialectician plays in Szlezák's interpretation of Plato—the dialogues' plots vary greatly, yet the dialectician remains a constant presence (p. 700). It is the figure of the dialectician who points beyond the dialogues to the orally-transmitted philosophy underpinning them. Szlezák convincingly argues that the anti-esoteric position which ignores this feature is the product of a series of erroneous hermeneutical approaches (pp. 703-4). What makes his contribution particularly useful is that rather than simply engaging in polemic, Szlezák anchors what he takes to be hermeneutical fallacies in their original intellectual-historical context.

A similar methodological analysis is applied to Plato's criticism of writing (*Phdr.* 274b-278e, pp. 409-418), analysing how the view that this *Schriftkritik* does not apply to Plato's own dialogues results from an incorrect reading of many key

terms, such as the claim that the *συγγράμματα* he attacks are “treatises”, not (his) dialogues. The chapter draws upon extensive research of such terms, as Szlezák conducted for *Platon und die Schriftlichkeit der Philosophie*, and forms a sobering warning on the necessity of respecting the relevant interpretative rules of classical philology when reading a philosophical dialogue.

Other contributions examine the nature of philosophy and philosophical communication more broadly (which was a preoccupation of Plato himself, illustrated by the central role which it plays in the *Cratylus*): one such example is the chapter on the path and the goal of Platonic dialectic (pp. 615–38). Dialectic obviously plays a unique role in Plato’s corpus as the basis for achieving the *telos* of likeness to God and yet, while various features of it are noted in the dialogues, it remains the preserve of oral communication. Szlezák turns here to examining the problem of philosophical communication in the dialogues from another perspective: it is not just an issue of concern for the philosopher-author, but also relevant for the reader in so far as it is a possible response to the question of how we become dialecticians by reading the dialogues. This brings us back to a point Szlezák makes repeatedly: dialectic—or at least a full account of dialectic as opposed to concise pointers—cannot actually be found in the dialogues, as Plato himself frequently makes clear. Three examples are provided: 1) Socrates’ refusal to provide a brief sketch of dialectic to Glaucon on the grounds that he would not be able to follow at *Resp.* 533a, 2) the dialectician adopts as his model the clever farmer who avoids sowing seed in the garden of Adonis where it would be without profit (*Phdr.* 276b–e) and 3) the statement in the *Seventh Letter* that a rational person would not commit anything serious to writing (pp. 617–9).

Of particular interest is Szlezák’s reconstruction of the manner in which one can become a dialectician based upon the evidence from the dialogues. If, during Socrates’ life, the path to dialectic was through contact with him, its eventual success was not solely dependent upon either teacher or student, but rather upon the “divine” (p. 621). The character of the would-be dialectician is also decisive, as we learn from the discussion of the ideal city at *Resp.* 593d7–9. The value of this contribution is that it causes the reader to move beyond the uses of Plato’s “unwritten doctrine” and the question as to whether there are deliberately left gaps in the dialogues to consider why it is that Plato avoids committing to writing details concerning the nature of dialectic. Given that the essence of dialectic is “living thought” (p. 623), it would not be possible to truly reflect what dialectic is in written form. Despite these difficulties, Szlezák is nonetheless able—via an extensive analysis—to provide a detailed portrait of what it is possible to understand by Plato’s “dialectic”: it is the *technē* that leads to knowledge of both the Forms (especially the Form of the Good) and the principles, and it is a comprehensive process. The ultimate evaluation of

Plato's pedagogy is found in the question of whether this dialectic programme is realizable. This points again to the significance of Szlezák's interpretation of Plato. More than simply presenting historical studies on Plato (important though that would be), he repeatedly examines the limits both of philosophical communication and even of philosophy itself.

Why should Plato so explicitly thematize his own reticence? After all, as Szlezák notes, this attitude is unnatural in an author (p. 639). Although it can be cursorily explained by issues raised in Plato's *Schriftkritik*, the question is a problematic one and deserves a fuller answer based on an extensive textual analysis of the dialogues, which Szlezák provides here. This involves a return to one of the central themes of Szlezák's work, namely the interconnection between, on the one hand, philosophical communication, the process of philosophizing and Plato's concept of philosophical pedagogy and, on the other hand, the aim of illustrating that esotericism is a deeply-embedded feature of Plato's corpus. The allegory of the cave represents philosophical understanding as a new orientation, rather than a gradual development of intellectual capacities. This new orientation is dependent upon ethical purification which cannot be supplied by writing (p. 643). The "pious" path to dialectic is not one to be found summarized in the dialogues, but rather the "long detour" (μακρὰ περίοδος) of oral teaching (*Phdr.* 273d8-274a3). Reasons for Plato's reticence can also be found in the historical context in which he wrote: Socrates' execution and the prosecution of Aristotle shortly after Plato's death suggest more practical grounds for philosophical esotericism. A particularly interesting feature is that Szlezák's account does not stop there, but considers the relative weight that commentators have attached to this aspect of Plato's *oeuvre* depending on the circumstances in which the protagonists themselves lived. Tiedemann and Tenneman, writing at a period where censorship was normal everywhere, attached greater importance to this political dimension than twentieth-century scholars.

The status of the philosopher and the use of the term φιλόσοφος forms another overarching theme of this collection, from details concerning the philosopher's value (p. 645-6) to the view of Plato's Socrates that the title only applies to a limited group. The "lovers of spectacles" (φιλοθεάμονες), for example, are excluded, since their thought is unable to approach the Form of the Beautiful (p. 434). The centrality which knowledge of the Forms plays in Plato's thought is here clear since it is the ability to attain this knowledge which separates the philosopher from the non-philosopher. The "elitist" overtones of such a position are less problematic, perhaps, than the possible contradiction with Plato's own psychology, according to which every soul has glimpsed something of the Forms (p. 435); this would suggest that every soul should be able to attain knowledge of the Good. Szlezák's solution is that most souls are unable to fulfil

the potential of their λογιστικόν as the result of being incarnated in an unphilosophical existence. The other question that arises is why Plato should insist on the capacity to obtain knowledge of the Forms for all those who would lay claim to the title “philosopher”. The answer is that it is this capacity which permits knowledge of the truth (p. 436) and which consequently lies at the heart of the philosophical mission. Indeed, its centrality is reinforced by Szlezák’s presentation of further case studies: the justification of philosophical kingship on the grounds that it is the philosophers who are the most suitable Guardians of the Good in the *Republic* or the search to define the true philosopher in the *Phaedo*, where this knowledge seems to be only attainable in the afterlife (in contrast to the *Republic* or *Symposium*, for example). Here again we are confronted with the limits of philosophical knowledge.

I have concentrated primarily on Szlezák’s engagement with Platonism here, but the volume also contains other gems, dealing with the classical tradition more broadly. An article on the interpretation of Athens in Sophocles, Thucydides and Plato forms a bridge between the initial literary articles and the more markedly philosophical ones; each thinker representing an aspect of Athenian cultural legacy: tragedy, democracy and philosophy. Szlezák even steps outside the Graeco-Roman tradition in his comparison of the *Iliad* to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (pp. 13-36), while several of the other contributions examine Greek tragedy, with chapters on Sophocles and Euripides.

This collection will be of interest not only to Platonists, but also to those whose interest in the classical world is more literary than philosophical. Szlezák pays considerable attention to the historical development of Platonic scholarship; this is more than a mere issue of historical curiosity and its relevance to current research is clearly demonstrated. From the perspective of the tradition from which Szlezák writes, the comprehensive historical treatment reveals the extent to which the views of the Tübingen-Milan School are not an aberration, but rather firmly anchored in the significant insights of previous generations of Platonic scholars. It is the tradition subsequently derived from Schleiermacher which rejects many of the Tübingen-Milan claims. Even those who do not subscribe to the existence of Plato’s unwritten doctrines and prefer to adopt a more Schleiermacherean line of interpretation will find useful Szlezák’s analysis of core problems in Platonic scholarship and the insightful clarifications that he offers. In the course of his various discussions of the interaction between Plato’s dialogues and his theory of principles, Szlezák clarifies what is at stake when we opt for one or the other approach to the interpretation of Plato and he makes a cogent case for why the tradition of Plato’s esotericism offers a comprehensive solution to many of the difficulties which we encounter when reading the dialogues.