H. Weidemann: Noriega-Olmos: Aristotle’s Psychology of Signification

Altertumskunde’s aufnahmen, offenbar überschätzt haben, auf der einen Seite und dem langen Anlauf, den er in den ersten drei Teilen seines Buches nimmt, bevor er im vierten Teil endlich ’die Karten auf den Tisch legt’¹, auf der anderen Seite besteht ein Mißverhältnis, das sich kaum treffender beschreiben läßt als mit dem bekannten Dichterwort: parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus.²

Hinterzarten

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Kechagia’s book, the revised version of her D.Phil. thesis in Oxford, focuses on Plutarch’s polemical treatise against the Epicurean Colotes (floruit ca. 285–265). Plutarch’s treatise is a reply to a no longer extant work of Colotes, in which the latter attacked several ancient philosophers, including Plato. The title of Colotes’ treatise was ‘On the fact that life is impossible according to the doctrines of the other philosophers’, and was addressed to King Ptolemy, presumably Ptolemy II Philadelphus (Adv. Col. 1107E; p. 89–91). This is not the sole critical treatise that Colotes authored. Like many other Epicureans of the first generation and Epicurus himself who wrote a number of polemical works against Plato and Aristotle (see p. 71–79), Colotes wrote against Plato’s Lysis and Euthydemus, which survive only in scanty fragments in Herculaneum papyri (PHerc. 288, PHerc. 1032), as well as a work criticizing Plato’s myths, which we know through the reports of Macrobius (in his Commentary on Somnium Scipionis) and of Proclus (in his commentary on the Republic).

The focus of the book shapes its two main research aims: first, to reconstruct Colotes’ lost critical treatise and retrieve its main claims, and, second, to examine the method and argument that Plutarch uses in responding to Colotes. The book is accordingly divided into two almost equal parts: part one focuses on Colotes’ critique (p. 19–132), while part two deals with Plutarch’s treatment of Colotes’ claims (p. 135–289). The book is rounded off with the addition of an epilogue (where the findings of the research are summarized), three appendices, a bibliography, and two indexes, of passages and subjects.

One issue that unifies the book and is addressed by the author from the outset is why Plutarch wrote such a work at all. This is a natural question to ask, given that Plutarch wrote his reply to Colotes more than three centuries after the composition of the latter’s targeted critical treatise (ca. 268–246), that is, around 100


² Horaz, Ars poetica, 139.
CE (p. 90–91). Plutarch of course was a fierce critic of Epicureanism for reasons clearly expressed in his two other surviving Epicurean treatises, *Non posse suaviter vivere secundum Epicurum* and *De latenter vivendo*. He strongly objected to Epicurean materialist metaphysics that assumes the existence of only atoms and void, to Epicurean theology according to which there is no reason to assume the operation of divine providence, and also to Epicurean ethics, especially the doctrine that pleasure constitutes man’s final end. This evidence, however, does not make Plutarch’s motive in writing *Adversus Colotem* easier to understand, but rather sharpens the question. Why should Plutarch want to reply to Colotes, who, from all we know, exercised little, if any, influence on later generations of philosophers? The way to address this question is to scrutinize Plutarch’s reply and on the basis of that scrutiny to reconstruct the philosophical motivation and the philosophical rationale of both Colotes and Plutarch. This is largely what Kechagia (K.) endeavors to do in her book. In this sense her book is an investigation into the history of philosophy, as the subtitle claims.

K. does well to start part one, which offers a reconstruction of Colotes’ critical treatise, with some methodological remarks. She divides Plutarch’s testimonies of Colotes’ work into three categories: a) reports, b) quotes, and c) echoes of Colotes’ claims (p. 87–88). K. does some commendable philological work in order to specify and justify these categories. The results of her research in this regard become manifest in Appendix I, where she lists all testimonies of Colotes that Plutarch preserves. I tend to agree with the methodological principles of this division. I find it odd, however, that in the Appendix K. somewhat blurs this division by listing together quotes and echoes, which, as K. explains (p. 87–88), differ considerably: the former are introduced by a verb of saying (φησί or λέγει), and are close to Colotes’ actual wording, while the latter only echo or paraphrase Colotes’ claims. K.’s careful examination of Plutarch’s evidence yields further interesting results. She comes up with concrete suggestions regarding the scope, the structure, and the content of Colotes’ treatise. Colotes, she suggests, targeted a number of philosophers, namely Democritus, Parmenides, Empedocles, Melissus, Socrates, Plato, Stilpo, and finally Colotes’ contemporaries, the Cyrenaics and Academic sceptics (p. 103–4). Colotes’ main claim apparently was that the doctrines of all those philosophers are so absurd that they make life impossible to live, let alone happily, and that the only way to lead such a life is the philosophy of Epicurus. The latter aspect, K. suggests, gives Colotes’ work a protreptic character. K. actually claims that Colotes must have intended this work as a protreptic since he shows how the other philosophers had failed (p. 132).

In my view neither the adduced evidence nor the carefully attempted reconstruction justify such a conclusion. The ancient genre of protreptic is rather well defined: works of this character (such as those of Aristotle, Cicero, Iamblichus, or Galen) are geared towards overtly recommending an idea such as the pursuit of philosophy in general or of a certain kind of philosophy. This is missing from Plutarch’s evidence. I agree with K. that the implication of Colotes’ critique is surely that only Epicurean philosophy is viable, but this does not make it a protreptic more than his other works that were directed specifically against Plato.
They were simply of a polemical character and their aim was to discredit the views of professional rivals such as Plato, not to recommend Epicurean philosophy per se. In this sense the ancient genre of polemic suffices as a description of Colotes’ work. And as K. explains, by writing a polemical work Colotes conforms to a strong Epicurean tradition.

Let me now move on to the second part of the book, where, as I said, K. sets out to examine the method and argument of Plutarch’s critical exposition in *Adversus Colotem* (p. 134–289). K. begins by comparing the reconstructed structure of Colotes’ work with that of Plutarch’s critique (p. 137). From this comparison a number of interesting features emerge. One of them is that Plutarch reverses the order of Parmenides and Empedocles and also that of Socrates and Plato. K. argues that Plutarch’s motivation for this reversal of order was his eagerness to proceed by thematic units, so that his refutation comes out as better structured and thus also more convincing. It makes sense, for instance, on the part of Plutarch to treat jointly Colotes’ criticisms of Parmenides and Plato, since the main critical claim against both philosophers was that they distinguish between sensible and intelligible reality, a distinction that Epicureans denied (*Adv. Col. 1114F*). K. further shows that Plutarch is also concerned with creating thematically coherent sections in his work against Colotes by also dividing his work namely into three parts that correspond to the dominant division of philosophy at his time, namely into physics, logic, and ethics (p. 160–164). K. thus offers us a valuable anatomy of Plutarch’s polemical strategy.

K. then proceeds to examine the substance of Plutarch’s polemics, that is his arguments against Colotes’ critical claims. She distinguishes two kinds of arguments, vindication arguments and overturning arguments. The force of the former is to the effect that Colotes made a wrong claim when arguing that the philosophical doctrine he attacked makes life impossible, and this, K. suggests (p. 172), may be either a) because the doctrine in question hardly makes life impossible, or b) because the philosopher attacked had not held the doctrine criticized by Colotes. The first option is employed in the case of Parmenides, Empedocles, and Arcesilaus, while the latter is used in the case of Democritus and Plato. Overturning arguments instead turn Colotes’ criticisms against himself by showing that such criticisms are applicable to Epicurean doctrines more than any other. In the case of Democritus, for instance, Plutarch appears to have agreed with Colotes that Democritus did eliminate sensible qualities and sensible beings more generally, but Plutarch argues that the Epicureans fully endorsed the same thesis. Vindication and overturning arguments often occur closely connected to each other to the extent that one comes to think that they appear as two turns of the same argument. This is the case with Plutarch’s refutation of Colotes’ critique of Plato. Colotes argued that Plato had denied the existence of sensible beings and in doing so made human life impossible. Plutarch replied first that Colotes had misunderstood Plato’s doctrine of the Forms (vindication argument) and second that it is the Epicurean distinction between eternal and ever-changing entities that is at odds with reality and makes life impossible (overturning argument).
K. does a good job in identifying and illustrating these argumentative strategies also by contextualizing them in the tradition of ancient philosophy and science (p. 175–8). What is objectionable in the way K. proceeds in this part of the book is that she focuses on selected cases (p. 169; cf. p. 178). K. does not explain why she does so, nor does she justify her selection. Quite noticeably, K. leaves out Empedocles, Parmenides, Socrates, and Arcesilaus from this selection, and she concentrates on Democritus, Plato, and the Cyrenaics. The omission of Arcesilaus is particularly unfortunate, I think, in view of the fact that Plutarch approved of academic skepticism. Plutarch actually synthesized skeptical and doctrinal versions of Platonism while maintaining their combatibility. K. often speaks of Plutarch’s Platonism or his Platonist viewpoint (e.g. p. 174). This, however, needs to be qualified, because this viewpoint is shaped by academic skepticism. It must be admitted, however, that the selective scope allows K. to pay close attention to the details of the specific sections of Plutarch’s text and to be thorough in her analysis.

One of the goals of the book, as K. explains in the introduction (p. 3), is to appreciate Plutarch as a historian of philosophy. She claims that one of the aims of Plutarch’s criticism against the Epicurean Colotes was to show «how to go about doing history of philosophy properly» (p. 168). I am not sure whether Plutarch or Colotes distinguished philosophy from history of philosophy even if this phrase is understood not in the modern sense but within the framework of the ancient philosophical discourse, as K. urges us to do (p. 4). The argumentative strategies that Plutarch employs against Colotes suggest that the problem with Colotes was his philosophical understanding and reasoning. In other words, Plutarch’s implication is that Colotes was a bad philosopher. On the same token, Plutarch wants to emerge as a good philosopher himself thanks to his commitment to a philosophical tradition that thinks right, namely that of Platonism. For Plutarch this tradition involves not only doctrines but also dialectical skills, by means of which the theses of the others can be judged. In this sense I find the label ‘historian of philosophy’ (p. 4–7) rather misplaced in the case of Plutarch. As with other philosophers of the same age, such as Antiochus, Moderatus, Numenius, or Aristocles of Messene, their interest in the history of philosophy was kindled by purely philosophical motives, viz. to justify their own views and discredit those of their rivals. To me this seems to be what Plutarch also does. Interestingly K. tries to vindicate Plutarch’s claims against Colotes. This perspective has a beneficial effect on her book, which is that she reads Plutarch charitably. On the other hand, however, it is not always easy to judge Plutarch’s interpretations without assuming his Platonist point of view that involves, for instance, the acceptance of doctrines like the distinction between sensible and intelligible reality, which are open to discussion, to say the least. Nevertheless K. does succeed in offering a lesson in history of philosophy by showing how much one can retrieve through careful attention to an ancient philosophical text and how much one can enrich the history of ancient philosophy by reading that text charitably.

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