

## Review

*Eriugena, Berkeley, and the Idealist Tradition*. Stephen Gersh and Dermot Moran, eds. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2006. ix + 318 pp.

*Eriugena, Berkeley, and the Idealist Tradition* is a collection of fourteen papers (plus the editors' Introduction), originally delivered at an international conference, with the same title, organized in Dublin in March 2002 by the University of Notre Dame and Trinity College Dublin. This aspect is worth mentioning because what should have normally been an inessential ingredient, something having to do only with context of the book's genesis, has become in this case a prominent feature of the project. For what makes reading this volume a particularly refreshing and rewarding experience is due precisely to its unique blend of scholarship styles: contributors are scholars from Ireland, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Poland, Finland, Sweden, and Germany. These scholars bring into play a wide range of traditions of research and cultures of scholarship, which confers upon the project a definite sense of ample conversation, marked by polyphony and openness, at the same time keeping it safely away from a certain Anglo-Saxon research provincialism that often undermines similar—otherwise promising—projects. Moreover, and in close relation to its dialogical openness, this volume is an example of highly interdisciplinary work: throughout it the topic of idealism is being considered not in a narrow sense, just philosophically, but the contributors look at it from a variety of complementary angles, employing methodologies and narrative strategies pertaining to such fields as history of ideas, classical philology, theology and hermeneutics. Last but not least, the book displays an appropriate amount of free spirit and playfulness. At times fine irony borders on sheer artfulness, as when, for example, Vittorio Hösle notes how he is “waiting impatiently for an enlarged edition of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* by a worthy successor of Sir Karl Popper that shows us with new and better philological arguments how utterly undemocratic Plato was” (76).

In their Introduction Stephen Gersh and Dermot Moran map out the ample conceptual as well as historical territory that the term “idealism” covers. For them, there is a sense in which the history of idealism overlaps to a significant extent with the history of the Christian West. This is because both are based on the same set of metaphysical principles: to see all things as deriving from “a divine immaterial principle that is also primarily understood as being *at least* mind, [a view that] is undoubtedly central to the Western Christian theological tradition” (2). If Christian theism is to be self-consistent and accept the theoretical corollaries of its metaphysical premises, it also has to be *immaterialist*. For Gersh and Moran, “every Christian theist ought to be an idealist. No Christian theist can assent to the claim that somehow the source, ground, and cause of the created world is a material principle” (2).

The main outcome of these “cartographic” efforts is a division of idealism into “four historical-conceptual categories” (5). First, the editors distinguish “*Platonic* or *Neoplatonic idealism*.” The second major category is “*Berkeleyian immaterialism* or *mind-dependence* of physical objects.” The third is “*Kantian* and neo-Kantian *transcendental*

*idealism,*” with its emphasis on the “a priori correlation of objectivity with subjectivity (e.g., in Edmund Husserl) and its claim that space and time are conditions of sensibility rather than intrinsic properties of mind-external objects (Kant).” Finally, the fourth category of idealism is, for them, “Hegelian *absolute idealism*, with its conception of the cosmos as the self-evolution and coming to self-awareness of absolute spirit” (5). One might point out that, since there are also discontinuities between the various versions of idealism, methodologically the categorization may not be flawless. Yet, the two editors reassure the reader that “the degree of continuity is sufficient to justify a reexamination of the entire question in some kind of unified program” (5).

The chapters of the book are mainly organized along the historical and conceptual lines delineated by this fourfold categorization. Three chapters are dedicated to Plato as the founding father of the Western idealist tradition: “Non-subjective idealism in Plato (*Sophist* 248e-249d)” by Vasilis Politis; “The Platonic forms as *Gesetze*: Could Paul Natorp have been right?” by John Dillon—actually, as the title suggests, Dillon offers an indirect reading of Plato, namely through Natorp’s neo-Kantian lenses; and Vittorio Hösle’s “Platonism and its interpretations: the three paradigms and their place in the history of hermeneutics,” which discusses three different types of interpretation of Plato’s philosophy throughout the centuries. The next three chapters are dedicated mostly to Neoplatonism and its relationship to other schools of thought (such as Stoicism): “The Roman Stoics on divine thinking and human knowledge” by Gretchen Reydam-Schils; “The object of perception in Plotinus” by Andrew Smith; and “Saint Augustine and the indwelling of the ideas in God” by Jean Pépin. Johannes Scottus Eriugena’s philosophy occupies a prominent place in the economy of the book with three large chapters dedicated to it: Dermot Moran’s “*Spiritualis incrassatio*. Eriugena’s intellectualist immaterialism: is it an idealism?,”; Stephen Gersh’s “Eriugena’s fourfold contemplation: idealistic and arithmetic”; and Agnieszka Kijewska’s “Eriugena’s idealist interpretation of Paradise.” Then, Peter Adamson’s paper (“Immanence and transcendence: intellect and forms in al-Kindī”) occasions a journey into the universe of the medieval Arabic philosophy. Three chapters are dedicated to Berkeley: “The scientific background of George Berkeley’s idealism” by Bertil Belfrage; “The chain and the animal: idealism in Berkeley’s *Siris*” by Timo Airaksinen; and “Idealism from Kant to Berkeley” by Karl Ameriks. The final chapter, “Idealism and realism in classical German philosophy” by Walter Jaeschke, discusses versions of idealism present in classical German philosophy.

A detailed discussion of the ideas advanced by the fourteen contributors is, regrettably, beyond what can be done in the limited space of a short review. Most of the contributions to this volume are remarkably well written, rich in ideas and highly competent. I will only single out, very briefly, three papers, out of several possible, which are, I think, particularly illustrative of the polyphonic richness and varied research cultures underlying the structure and production of this volume. The first of these contributions is by Dermot Moran (University College Dublin, Ireland). The main point that Moran is making is that “radical versions of immaterialism and intellectualism,” which for him means a clear “commitment to idealism” (123), permeate the work of the Irish Christian Neoplatonist Johannes Scottus Eriugena (c. 800-c. 877). In his chapter Moran argues that Eriugena produced what is probably “the most systematic and coherent” version of Christian

Neoplatonism, both in the ancient and the medieval world (123), and Eriugena remains “the greatest *immaterialist* of Western philosophy prior to Berkeley” (145). Employing expressive imagery, Eriugena comes to see matter as nothing else but a ‘thickening of the spirit’ (*spiritualis incrassatio*) (145). Moran’s contribution is an excellent example of work at the intersection between Continental philosophy, the history of ideas, theology, and classical philology. It is a philosophically informed reading of a historical figure, at the same time showing the uttermost respect to its specific *historicity* and approaching it with admirable hermeneutical wisdom. In a time and place where ahistorical treatment of historical figures becomes norm, Moran’s interpretative credo should teach many a lesson: “To interpret an ancient or medieval thinker in the light of modern philosophical conceptual constellations requires the exercise of due hermeneutic diligence” (124).

The same type of hermeneutic wisdom is displayed in the paper contributed by Agnieszka Kijewska (Catholic University of Lublin, Poland). Kijewska’s essay focuses on Eriugena’s treatment of the notion of Paradise. She argues that “a closer look at his understanding of the biblical concept of Paradise also affords us an opportunity to explain his concept of biblical exegesis” (169), as well as access to the ultimate “originality and specificity of his approach” (168). What impresses in Kijewska’s contribution is the outstanding care with which she approaches her subject matter. When we read a text that was written centuries ago we should not look in it for answers to our own questions (we might find some answers, of course, but that’s a different story): it might well be the case that the questions that the text attempts to answer may not even exist (or be conceivable) today. When we read Eriugena, for example, “we ought to remember that his fundamental work, the *Periphyseon*, is a monumental commentary on *Genesis*” (169). The hermeneutic context in which a medieval text is to be understood is entirely different from ours:

There existed an essential parallelism between the realm or words and the domain of things; both these worlds were subject to and could be understood thanks to the rules of grammar. This conception of the world as a text finds a particularly ample development in the thought of Eriugena: the Bible and nature are both texts of a sort; both were created for man and in a way through man; both are subject to the rules of the seven liberal arts, which exist to provide an indispensable aid for the reading and understanding of them. (182)

Finally, the text contributed by Timo Airaksinen (University of Helsinki, Finland) is of special interest since it deals with one of George Berkeley’s most misunderstood and misrepresented texts (*Siris*). Among most Berkeley scholars, *Siris* (1745) is seen today as a major cause for embarrassment, something any philosopher (and Berkeley, most of all) should be ashamed of. To write *Principles of Human Knowledge* and then *Siris* is like getting the Nobel prize for peace and then going into arms trafficking. In this context, Airaksinen’s contribution is a remarkable sample of hermeneutic attentiveness. If a text does not make much sense to us, he suggests, maybe there is nothing wrong with it; it is just that *we* have to read it differently, with a different mind-set. And this is exactly what he is doing in his essay: “a philosopher must use methods which are no longer purely discursive, rational, and demonstrative, as Berkeley himself does in *Siris*” (224). For

Airaksinen, *Siris* is, in a remarkable phase, “a treatise on metaphorical metaphysics” (224).

By adopting more comprehensive hermeneutic lenses, Airaksinen gains access to a different layer of *Siris*, a more interesting one. This procedure allows the careful reader to notice “that Berkeley avoids any expressions of overconfidence. Thus his two favorite words are “hints” and “glimpses.” In its own way, *Siris* is a moderate and epistemically humble text” (228). Berkeley’s approach in *Siris* is indeed different from whatever he did before: now he understands philosophy not an agonistic exercise, where a philosophical position is valid only if it overcomes (and thus replaces) another philosophical position. In *Siris* Berkeley often “does not use arguments from premises to conclusions; he does not pretend to demonstrate anything, the only thing he wants to do is suggest some deep truths. He is pointing his finger in the right direction” (230). Berkeley thus seems to adopt an understanding of philosophy as *philosophia perennis*, as a new dialogical culture where all players are welcome and all voices are heard.

Timo Airaksinen’s chief merit is to have offered a convincing alternative reading of *Siris*. Besides that, his contribution is rich in fresh insights and innovative points. To give only one example, toward the end of his essay he advances the notion of a possible Hegelian reading of Berkeley, which I consider to be one of the paper’s most fertile insights, the development of which would deserve another essay:

In its own way Berkeley’s idealistic method resembles Hegel’s dialectic. Partial, incomplete, and inconsistent elements of thought are shown, step by step, to be unified by a higher principle, which is spiritual and idealistic in its nature. (242)

To conclude, *Eriugena, Berkeley, and the Idealist Tradition* makes an important contribution to an interdisciplinary, culturally-enriched rereading of the idealist tradition at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the efforts of the editors and contributors are to be appropriately praised.

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