
Hellenic Philosophy: Origin and Character by Christos C. Evangeliou
Aldershot/Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2006. Pp. x+231. ISBN 0-7546-
5847-3. Cloth \$99.95/£55.00

Reviewed by
Peter Lautner
Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest/Piliscsaba
lautner@btk.ppke.hu

The book contains six chapters that were published separately in different periodicals. They all aim at clarifying the character of ancient Greek philosophy, its Mediterranean—most prominently its Egyptian—sources, and the influence which it has exerted on European thought.

The first essay is about the Egyptian origins of Greek philosophy. We read of a contrast between the opinion of ancient writers and the views held by modern Europeans, exemplified by W. Jaeger and W. K. C. Guthrie. According to Evangeliou, the ancients were free of the prejudices that govern conventional modern historiography. As he sees it, they were ready to acknowledge their debt to the great civilizations of the Euphrates and the Nile. The reports about statesmen and scholars visiting Egypt prove their interest in that civilization. Facing a common foe, the Persian empire, the Greeks and their Egyptian allies developed close cultural bonds and relations [14]. Evangeliou stresses that certain philosophical doctrines (Pythagorean ‘number theory’, the Socratic ‘care of the soul’ and Plato’s ideal state) are rooted there [9]. Furthermore, he claims, the references in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, *Phaedrus*, and *Laws* show an awareness of this debt. Among others, Evangeliou cites also Isocrates [*Bus.* 13–20] for the Egyptian origin of the principle of specialization that we find in the *Republic*. By contrast, modern European scholarship, in Evangeliou’s view, insists on the indigenous nature of Greek philosophy. Jaeger is quoted to show that his statements concerning this issue reveal ‘a Teutonic attitude towards other nations and races’ [23]. Similarly, Guthrie also is taken to deny any formative influence by Egyptian science and philosophical doctrines on Greek philosophy. In sum, this ‘Northern European approach is shown to have

© 2007 Institute for Research in Classical Philosophy and Science
All rights reserved

ISSN 1549-4497 (online) ISSN 1549-4470 (print) ISSN 1549-4489 (CD-ROM)
Aestimatio 4 (2007) 44–55

been unfair to the Egyptians and insulting to the Hellenes' [27]. In conclusion, Evangeliou draws a sharp dividing line between the tolerant, pluralistic *milieu* of Hellas and the monotheistic intolerance and theocratic despotism in Northern and Western Europe [29], and calls for shaping 'a new millennium in the renewed spirit of philosophic diversity, tolerance and democratic freedom for the common good of humanity and its fragile sanity' [35]. This is the argument of the whole book as well.

There are some points to be disputed in this account. Evangeliou takes Plato to say that philosophy originated in Egypt [16–17]. The passages on which the claim is based are *Theaet.* 155c–156a and *Phaedr.* 274c–275a. The first connects the origin of philosophy to Thaumias the father of Iris; the second talks about the Egyptian king Thamus to whom the god Theuth revealed the arts of geometry, astronomy, and writing. Evangeliou equates Thamus with Thaumias, and thus concludes that on Plato's view philosophy comes from Egypt [17]. But Plato never equates Thamus and Thaumias explicitly. Moreover, the equation seems to be ill-founded since the two words have different roots and different etymologies.¹ Evangeliou also states that

- Plato had an intimate knowledge about the educational system in Egypt since
- he spent three years there, in Heliopolis [26 and n96].

The first claim may be true, but it has yet to be proven by drawing on what we know of the Egyptian educational system from other, preferably non-Greek sources. There is no such proof offered in this chapter. The only hint that the case may not have been exactly as described by Plato is given in a reference to [Caminos 1954](#) [n95]. If Plato's picture is an idealized one, however, then the question is what did he take over from Egypt. The second claim is based on Strabo's report in *Geog.* 8.17.1.29. The problem with this report is not just that Strabo is not considered a very reliable author in general, but also that the *Seventh Letter* does not mention such a sojourn at all, although this is the text where Plato (if he is the author) talks about his travels. Why does he keep quiet about this important period of his life? To put it otherwise, if the author is a member

¹ See [Frisk 1970](#), *ad θαῖμα*, related to words signifying seeing: cf. [Chantraine 1968](#).

of the Academy, why did Plato's followers fail to mention that the scholarch had spent such a considerable amount of time in Egypt? At a more general level, it seems to me that what Jaeger emphasized in his *Paideia* is the unique nature of the classical Greek culture. This is not to say that the Greeks did not rely on other cultures—for instance, the Anatolian origin of many elements in their mythology has been well researched by Walter Burkert [e.g., 1984]. Even if Jaeger's definition of culture was formulated in a way to fit the Greek *milieu*, which is to concede that it was overly narrow, we should allow that his aim was to emphasize those complex features in Greek culture which were without precedents. For Jaeger, the political and cultural environment in fifth century Athens (the paradigmatic case in his work) was without precedents in other Mediterranean cultures. Of course, this does not contradict the statement—which he admits—that certain elements were around in other places as well. But, for Jaeger, these elements did not constitute the essence of what we see in Athens in that period. Still, there are other approaches to clarify the unique nature of ancient Greek culture that might have been taken into account.²

The picture of a pluralistic, tolerant and civilized Egyptian society [23] may also be somewhat idealistic. At certain periods at least, it does not seem to have been the case. Herodotus [*Hist.* 2.91: cf. 2.35, 49, 79] mentions that the Egyptians avoided adopting other people's customs (Greek customs included), which fits the picture the Bible gives of them [*Gen.* 43.32]. Their negative attitude towards foreigners manifests itself in their pantheon as well, with Seth becoming the god of what is foreign [see Brunner 1983]. As regards Egyptian perceptions of the Greeks, cases of Hellenophobia can also be cited.³ In Hellenistic times, the strained relations between the Hellenized cities in Egypt and the *χώρα* are also well known. Finally, I think we have to make a distinction between how Egypt (or certain elements therein) was perceived by Greek authors and how it actually was. Evangeliou also mentions that these two things did not always match. In the light of this discrepancy, then, we have to ask which features were taken over, and which ones were projected. Furthermore, to mention just two samples, the charges of *ἀσεβεία* at Athens in the classical

² Assmann [1992, ch. 7], e.g., stresses the role of the Greek alphabet.

³ For references, Assmann 2005, 37–49.

period and the somewhat gloomy picture we find in the *Laws* may also modify what we say about religious and intellectual tolerance in that period.

The second essay deals with the fate of Plato's teachings in Europe. Again, we find a marked distinction between the true Plato and the way in which his teachings were distorted in the Frankish West. Thus, Evangelioiu thinks that we have to modify Whitehead's dictum that European philosophy consists of footnotes to Plato. He argues that European 'philosophy' acquired certain bad habits, and that first of them all was a docile servitude to alien authorities to dogmatic theology and theocracy, which appears to have been transferred to modern technology and Marxist political ideology. For this reason, philosophy has become something very different from what it was in Hellenic times [59]. After a brief survey of the intellectual conditions in late Antiquity, with an admittedly 'synoptic, speculative and oversimplified' [87n20] account of Rome's fall, two case studies are offered—one about the relation between Porphyry and Augustine; and the other, considerably shorter, about Gemistus Pletho. The first focuses on *The City of God* and aims to show that Augustine's critique of Porphyry marked a gap between the believer in a Christian god and the philosopher who can only be persuaded by rational arguments. Augustine thought that he had found *the* way to salvation and aimed to show that a combination of selective doctrines from Plato and Porphyry would yield essentially the same truth. Porphyry, however, looked at the matter from a different angle. His contact with Plotinus and the study of Platonism helped him, as Evangelioiu claims, 'to rise above the common superstitions of his time in search of the philosophical way which does not exclude other ways for other schools, but tolerates them by giving each "its due"' [73]. Next Evangelioiu surveys the history of European philosophy from the Renaissance up to Whitehead, and shows that the doctrine in *Process and Reality* fails to include the two versions of Platonism, the Christian and the Hellenic. Because of Caesar's (and the Pope's) domination of Christianity and of Christianity's domination of the European mind and ethos, the so-called 'European philosophy' cannot be characterized simply as 'a series of footnotes to Plato' without serious equivocation [83].

Just a few points to raise. Evangelioiu talks about a split within the revived Platonism in late antiquity and maintains that there existed one group the members of which were in favour of cultural

diversity and tolerance towards new ideas, trends, cults, and another group which accepted the new Christian faith and demanded radical change in every aspect of civil tradition [62]. As Porphyry's criticism shows, Christianity was not by any means something to be tolerated—and this was well before Christianity became a received (not to mention the ruling) religion of the empire. Porphyry was not alone in his criticism. Among other Platonists, Celsus accused Christianity of *καινοτομία*. For him, it was a new-fangled divergence from the Jewish tradition which was in turn a divergence from the Egyptian wisdom [*ap. Origen, Contra Cels.* 3.5]. The theme turns up in other Platonists as well.⁴ This fits with the Platonist trend of rejecting what they thought to be derivative cultural traditions. Moreover, despite the tolerance stressed by Evangeliou, Neoplatonic texts contain much sharp critique of the views of other philosophical schools. Plotinus offers good evidence for that, to mention but one example. On the other hand, monotheistic tendencies are evident in the pagan culture of the late Roman Empire as well.⁵ One should also note that Augustine's relation to Porphyry and his notion of *fides* were more complex than the picture Evangeliou presents. His debt to Porphyry is documented in his early works. More importantly, his notion of *fides* and use of the verb *credere* show that the contrast between his acceptance of the revealed grace of God and the rational arguments employed by Porphyry [72–73] is overstated by Evangeliou. Augustine adopted Stoic and Sceptical theories both in his early works [e.g., *Contra acad.*] and in his later works [*De praed. sanct.* 2.5, *Ench. ad Laur.* 5–7] to show among other things that faith is a rational act. In *Divers. quaest.* 54, the contrast is between the content of *credere*, which can be either false or true, and the content of *intelligere*, which can only be true and forms a part of the true content of *credere*. In other works, Augustine connected belief, which does not involve full knowledge, to the concept of the *reasonable* [*Conf.* 6: cf. [Menn 1998](#), 185–194]. All this amounts to saying that Augustine's theory of knowledge was more complex than

⁴ See Theophilus, *Ad Autolyicum* 3.4; Porphyry, *Contra christ.* fr. 69.7–8, 25–27 (Harnack). For pagan views of early Christianity, see the collection of *testimonia* in [den Boer 1965](#).

⁵ For ample references and insightful studies, see [Athanassiadi and Frede 1999](#).

the simple contrast of *credere* and *intelligere* would suggest.⁶ Finally, one may also say that the relation in *Phaedrus* 279b between Pan and the gods is not that between ‘God and other gods’ [83 and n94]: the dialogue does not ascribe to Pan such an eminent role—in the myth, it is Zeus, a pure intellect, who leads.

The third essay discusses the role of Aristotle in Western thought. In order to show that Aristotle’s philosophy is not responsible for what he considers as the two European vices, *ratio* (the rule of the calculating human reason) and *imperium* (imperialistic power of the colonialist type), Evangeliou examines the concept of *λόγος* (discursive reason) and *νοῦς* (intuitive mind). Thus, Aristotle turns out for him to be someone who is more than a mere representative of European and ‘Western rationality’ [99]. On Evangeliou’s view, Aristotle claims that intuitive mind is prior to discursive reason also in the sense that discursive reason must be surpassed in order that we attain our final goal. For Evangeliou, ‘discursive reason must yield to intuitive and superior power of energized human intellect’ [100]. The intellect suddenly grasps, as in a flash of self-awareness, the truth that the human being is essentially the same as the divine intellect.⁷ Nonetheless, Aristotle was presented in the West equally narrowly,

either as the scholastic logician and rationalist thinker in the service of dogmatic medieval theology, or as the empirical and analytic thinker in the service of technocratic modern science. [100]

Next, Evangeliou examines the meaning of the terms ‘reason’ and ‘rationality’ in Aristotle. I am not sure that he says it at the end, but he claims rightly that Aristotle cannot be classified a rationalist or an empiricist, which is not surprising, to my mind, since these categories are inventions of modern historiography to describe the philosophical currents of the early modern age. By drawing on passages in the *Metaphysics* [981b25–982a6, 1069a18–34, 1072b14–29], *De anima* [402a1–8 with short sections from books 2 and 3] and *Nicomachean Ethics* [1094a1–4,⁸ 1177a13–18], Evangeliou states that Aristotle recognized the kind of life of which man is optimally capa-

⁶ On the historical background of his theory, see more recently [Führer 1999](#), 191–213.

⁷ The reference is to *Eth. Nic.* 10.1177b–1178a.

⁸ Which is not about ‘bringing together two divinities’.

ble, as well as the communal and political arrangements which would make possible the flourishing of such a life for the best qualified citizens. They are not arbitrary recommendations of some divinely inspired and dogmatic prophet, rather they form the fulfillment of an *entelechy* which is present in the human soul and human nature *qua* human. The distinction between *ontology* and *ousiology* aims at showing that Aristotle moved dialectically from the former to the latter. It means that the theory of being *qua* being was transformed into the theory of substance, the most primary substance being God [109]. The noetic powers of human soul are the best of psychic powers, and shared with other divine intellects. Nevertheless, surprisingly enough, Evangeliiou concludes that the ‘end of man’ is the well-ordered *πόλις* [110]. At the end of the chapter, there is a list of five possible post-modern objections to Aristotle’s political theory. They concern natural slavery, the lack of women in legislation, the division between Hellenes and Barbarians, the very limited number of those who can be virtuous, the identification of human goal with virtuous activity of the citizens, and the connection of the supreme good for humans with the noetic activity of the Divine.

One problem for Evangeliiou’s account is that the emphasis on intuitive intellection is not alien to medieval thinking at all. The idea of *visio dei* (or *Gottesschau* in Meister Eckhart), a direct, unmediated vision of God, runs through the whole epoch. It may suffice to mention the names of Eriugena, Bonaventure (in the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, for instance) and Cusanus [e.g., *De docta ignorantia* 1.26]. If this is the case, however, it is going to be difficult to maintain the view that the role of Aristotle’s *νοῦς* was suppressed or downplayed by medieval theologians.⁹ In the same vein, it is also going to be difficult to say that medieval thinking is responsible for what Evangeliiou calls one of the two vices of European thinking, the emphasis on *ratio*. Moreover, it is a well attested tradition in medieval philosophy that the human soul carries a trace or spark of the divine. This *scintilla animae/rationis* connects our souls to God and inclines us always towards the good [e.g., Bonaventure, *In II Sent.* 2.7b (Quaracchi)]. The use of this motif starts in late antiq-

⁹ Evangeliiou once [84n2] refers the reader to a volume edited by W. Beierwales. This same scholar wrote extensively on, say, the *visio beatifica* and related issues in medieval Platonism.

uity and flourishes in the 14th century [see [Tardieu 1975](#)]. In sum, the relation of Christian Platonism to its pagan counterpart raises important questions that cannot be treated in such a cursory manner.¹⁰ Furthermore, one needs further clarification about the goal of man. If, according to *Eth. Nic.* 1177b–1178a, the best way of life is characterized by the activity of *voûs*, and this theoretical activity has determinate objects, then what allows us to say, with Evangeliou [100], that it is the well-ordered *πόλις* where the ‘end of man’ is located? What the well-ordered *πόλις* can provide at best is just a necessary means to this end.

The fourth, short, essay deals with Aristotle’s critique [*Pol.* 2.1–5] of Plato’s political theory in the *Republic*. For Aristotle, Plato’s ideal state is based on the community of women and children, and on the community of property for the guardians. Evangeliou stresses that Aristotle’s criticism is based on a commonsense view of human nature, and disregards the substantial role of Platonic education in the formation of a guardian or philosopher in the ideal state. The guardians were a new type of men, transformed by proper education. Aristotle assumes, however, that human nature is very much constant, that humans would behave and feel in very much the same way in Plato’s ideal state as they do elsewhere. Evangeliou suggests that as a way out of this difficulty,

Plato would have to argue that his proposal of total communism was not an innovation. For it had been in practice in the very distant past not only among primitive African peoples, but also among the Athenians and even the Atlantans. [146]

This is an interesting suggestion and should have been supported by more textual evidence. But note that the *Critias* does not speak about total communism, that is a community of property in the whole society. It says at 110c–d only that in Atlantis soldiers—and not everybody—had everything in common. So far as ancient Athens is concerned, the *Critias* just reports that soldiers made no use of silver and gold [112b–d]; it does not speak about the community of everything. And no mention is made of primitive African people.

The fifth chapter is about Pletho’s criticism of Aristotle’s innovations. His criticism of Aristotle and Averroes greatly contributed

¹⁰ See most recently [Steel, Vella, and Iozzia 2006](#).

to the revival of Platonism [153]. Pletho's objections to Aristotle are rooted in his conviction that Western Scholasticism depended on valorizing Aristotle's doctrines at the expense of Plato. Pletho's critique accomplished three important tasks:

- it revived the debate about the respective merit of Platonism and Aristotelianism,
- it injected the Renaissance movement with a strong dose of Platonism (though Ficino's version was to prevail), and
- it initiated the process of liberating Aristotle from the embrace of Christian and Islamic scholasticism.

Evangelioi concentrates on the critique of Aristotle's concept of the homonymy of being, the failure to apply the notion of immortal intellect in ethics, and his theory of art and cause. Pletho's critique of the homonymy of being seems to rely on Platonic principles. He supposes that if the multiplicity of beings derives from a single source, they have to have something in common, which is being. But if being is homonymously predicated of them, it cannot stand for their essential commonality [158]. The main problem with Aristotle's ethics is that it considers ethical virtue as a mean between two extremes, and identifies the supreme good with pleasure. Pletho also criticizes Aristotle's objections to the theory of ideas. As for his critique of the Aristotelian 'third man' argument, it would have been interesting to read about Pletho's view of the argument in the *Parmenides*. As Evangelioi concludes, Pletho's arguments made clear that Aristotle's theory is in fact incompatible with what the medieval theologians said about him.

To start with this last point, the preceding remarks about Pletho seem to show rather that Aristotle's critique of Plato failed, not that his doctrines were different from the Averroist and Thomist pictures of Aristotle. Evangelioi mentions that on Pletho's view Aristotle is silent about the creative function of God. It would follow, then, that Aristotle's views are incompatible with the Biblical or Koranic creation stories [155]. This raises the question of whether Pletho has any knowledge of the late antique commentators in the school of Ammonius in Alexandria who interpreted the Aristotelian God as having a creative role in the universe.¹¹ Ammonius wrote a whole book on

¹¹ The claim was based on Aristotle's *Physics*.

the efficient causality of the Aristotelian God [*ap. Simplicius, In phys.* 1363.4–12]. It is ironic (at least if we think that Pletho's aim was to liberate Aristotle from the embrace of Western theologians) that Thomas Aquinas had reservations on this interpretation [*In phys. VIII lectio 2, 986–987; Summa theol.* I q.46, a.1 resp.]. One might also note that Pletho was not quite correct in attributing to Averroes the view that the soul is mortal [154]. It was not his view at all. The problem with Averroes' psychology was that on his view the individual human soul became part of the universal intellect, thus losing its individual characteristics, which makes reward and punishment in the afterlife difficult, if not impossible. Pletho's views on Aristotle's notion of virtue of character as a mean seem also a bit strained. First of all, we have three components (one good and two bad), not two. Evangeliou is right to note that the Aristotelian concept of virtuous character is not free of difficulties (though they are perhaps of a kind different from the one Pletho was noting), but it is a pity that the only literature he is able to refer the reader to is his M.A. thesis of 1976 [168n38]. Even if it was an exhaustive treatment of the subject, quite a lot has been published on this topic since then. One may also note that the revival of Platonism in Italy had many sources [see also 74], from Petrarch to Bruni's translations of some of Plato's works in the early 15th century. One should also study the extent to which Pletho was cited by those Florentine writers (e.g., Ficino) in doctrinal matters and how they received his criticism of Aristotle.

The last essay reiterates the main points about the character of Hellenic philosophy. It has a clear political agenda, which is not my business to discuss. To put Evangeliou's main thesis simply, true Hellenic philosophy has nothing to do with Western 'philosophy'; and because Westerners were alone responsible for colonization and all the horror that has happened since then, Hellenic wisdom is immaculate and is waiting to be appreciated by other nations accordingly.

In general, Evangeliou's agenda is very clear. But when it comes to carrying out its primary task, which is to prove the case on the basis of an analysis of the available textual evidence, the whole argument seems ill-founded. Even if one of the central claims concerns the nature of medieval philosophy in the West, no medieval texts were examined, except for a few passages in the *De civitate Dei*. There is only one scholastic writer who is mentioned, Thomas Aquinas, and this without textual analysis or regard for the fact that Thomas is

not an authority to be taken to characterize the whole current of medieval philosophy. There are also some interesting historical remarks made in the course of Evangeliou's argument. To take one example:

Practicing monotheistic intolerance and theocratic despotism, particularly in Western and Northern Europe, the Popes managed to dominate European culture in the last two millennia. [29]

This is not true even of the pre-Reformation Papacy; and one really should make a clear distinction between a Christian culture with its many facets and a papal cultural dominance, the latter being subjected to various royal interests among other things. Evangeliou also seems to forget about the Age of Enlightenment.

The book is graced with a glossary, bibliography and a detailed subject index. There are some typos: e.g., in 38n23, we should read 'Burkert' for 'Burckert'; in 44n48, 'Patrology' for 'Partology' (repeated in the bibliography in the entry for B. Altaner). In 46n63, the reference is to the *Laws*, not to the *Timaeus*; in 46n64, the Greek accents are partly missing; in 131n61, they are wrong. In the bibliography, the editor of Porphyry's *Sententiae* is Lamertz, not Lambart or Lambert [168n42],¹² and the author of *The Meaning of Aristotle's Ontology* is not a certain Werner, M. (repeated in the index), but W. Marx [1954].

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Assmann, J. 1992. *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. München.

_____. 2005. 'Periergia: Egyptian Reactions to Greek Curiosity'. Pp. 37–49 in E. S. Gruen ed. *Cultural Borrowings and Ethnic Appropriations in Antiquity. Oriens et Occidens. Studien zu antiken Kulturkontakten und ihrem Nachleben* 8.

Athanassiadi, P. and Frede, M. 1999. edd. *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*. Oxford.

¹² And no mention has been made of Smith's edition [1993] of Porphyry's fragments.

- Brunner, H. 1983. 'Seth und Apophis—Gegengötter im ägyptischen Pantheon?' *Saeculum* 34:226–234.
- Burkert, W. 1984. *Die orientalisierende Epoche in der griechischen Religion und Literatur*. Heidelberg.
- Caminos, R. A. 1954. *Late Egyptian Miscellanies*. Brown Egyptological Studies 1. London.
- Chantraine, P. 1968. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*. Paris.
- den Boer, W. 1965. ed. *Scriptorum paganorum I–IV saec. de christianis testimonia*. Leiden.
- Frisk, H. 1970. *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Heidelberg.
- Fuhrer, T. 1999. 'Zum Erkenntnistheoretischen Hintergrund von Augustins Glaubensbegriff'. Pp. 191–213 in T. Fuhrer, M. Erler, and K. Schlapbach edd. *Zur Rezeption der hellenistischen Philosophie in der Spätantike*. Stuttgart.
- Marx, W. 1954. *The Meaning of Aristotle's Ontology*. The Hague.
- Menn, S. 1998. *Descartes and Augustine*. Cambridge.
- Smith, A. 1993. ed. *Porphyrus: Fragmenta*. Stuttgart/Leipzig.
- Steel, C.; Vella, A.; and Iozza, A. 2006 'Quaestio disputata: Is Christian Neoplatonism the True Heir of the Ancient Philosophical Tradition?' Pp. 197–237 in M. di Pasquale Barbanti and C. Martello edd. *Neoplatonismo pagano vs. neoplatonismo cristiano. Identità e intersezioni*. Catania.
- Tardieu, M. 1975. 'ΨΥΧΑΙΟΣ ΣΠΙΝΘΗΡ: Histoire d'une métaphore dans la tradition platonicienne jusqu'à Eckhart'. *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 21:226–255.