

Dominic J. O'Meara, *Platonopolis. Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2003. Pp. 249.

Among the recent flowering of studies on Platonic philosophy in the late Roman Empire, the works of Dominic J. O'Meara occupy a special place. With his inquisitive mind and researcher's intuition, he isolates from his source material individual philosophical insights of such depth that their reconstruction yields an all new vision of the period's philosophy. Each new book by this seasoned expert in the Neoplatonic philosophy of Late Platonism, the patristic tradition, and the history of Late Antiquity blazes new trails in research on the spirituality of the period and helps better understand and describe it.

In his latest book, *Platonopolis*, which the author acknowledges in the "Preface" is in a way a sequel to his *Pythagoras Revived. Mathematics and Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford 1989), O'Meara tackles the relationship between Neoplatonic metaphysics and political philosophy. He brilliantly captures another strand of the Pythagorean legend in late Hellenism, which speaks of Pythagoras as a reformer and political thinker, and scrutinizes the paths in Late Platonist thought (evoking Pythagorean ideas) on political models and their place in Neoplatonic ascent to God. Already in the "Preface" he explains that he drew an incentive to pursue this theme not only from a private researcher's sense, but also from the deeply unsatisfactory state of existing research on the political thought of Neoplatonism. Conscious that this subject went largely unexplored by scholars in late Greek philosophy, he nevertheless engages in a discussion here and there with those few who did address the problem (such as A. Ehrhardt) and in the process tried to prove a mutual estrangement of Neoplatonist metaphysics and political philosophy (e.g. pp. 204-205).

Right from the beginning of his discussion in the "Introduction," O'Meara suggests that the guaranteed, immutable, hierarchical, transcendent metaphysics of Neoplatonism may beget forms oriented to temporal, political life and illuminate the outside world as it orders it according to pure, beautiful, divine-like rules. So eagerly defended by Neoplatonists, the goal of their philosophy, the **divinization of man** (*theosis*), usually taken to mean a withdrawal from the political sphere, in reality contains a possibility and, indeed, necessity of both theoretical speculation on politics and participation in political life. Starting in the "Introduction" from the central reference of **divinization to politics**, and after a presentation of schools and philosophers to whom reference is made in Chapters 3 to 11, O'Meara devotes two main parts of his work to a reconstruction of Neoplatonic political philosophy based on relevant texts of Neoplatonists from Plotinus to David. In Part I, Chapters 3-6 (pp. 31-65), he uses them to analyze the entire grand exertion of the soul's ascent of the philosopher who, by asceticism, cognitive effort, and piety attains successive degrees of virtues, starting from political qualities, improving his assimilation to God, and masters their respective sciences: first practical, then theoretical. In this way the soul rises to happiness of a higher order, to a transcendent life free from bodily dependence, and it attains the bliss of communicating with the divine Good. Thus permeated by the all-encompassing rays of the Good, the divinized soul descends, according to the Neoplatonic dogma, back to the political level in order to transform its divine science into political action in the state. The philosopher who experienced this descent looks at this world with altered vision as he serves it in a reformist, providential, legislative, judicial, and religious capacity. The theme of divinization of the state by the philosopher who acquired knowledge at the very source and reflects divine light fills Part II, Chapters 7-11 (pp. 73-139).

In both parts of the work in which O'Meara reconstructs the Neoplatonic political theory as he asks – after the philosophers he quotes – questions about the motives and positive value of the philosopher's descent from the intelligible world to a chasm of ignorance and opinion, particularly noteworthy is Chapter 7, "Philosopher-Kings and Queens." Following Plato and his Neoplatonic commentators, O'Meara furnishes an answer to the questions that troubled them. The philosopher should be the king, the ruler, for according to the Neoplatonic thought the contact of philosopher and idea is binding, and participation in the fecundity of happiness in the "revelation" of God implies that the philosopher must spread such revelation further, relay his theoretical science to those who stand lower than he.

The same duty, O'Meara argues, is imposed by Neoplatonists on philosopher-queens (7, 3). Philosophers like Iamblichus, Proclus, Theodore of Asine in general defended Plato's idea of including women among the rulers of an ideal state. As he analyzes the question of the common nature of men and women, O'Meara casts a new light on the phenomenon, sometimes surprising to us, of women present and important in the Neoplatonic circles of Late Hellenism. Thanks to his careful observation, we can reclaim the vocation of Hypatia, Sosipatra, Asclepigeneia, the devotion of Gemina and her daughter to Plotinus, the spiritual way of life of Marcella or Aedesia. Sosipatra, who rose even to the level of theurgical virtues, appears to us now as a philosopher-queen in her school at Pergamum in which she guided students through her entire scale of virtues to the unity with the One, to the state of divine possession. As a philosopher-queen, the mathematician Hypatia not only acted as a divine ruler in her private school in Alexandria, but also served as a counselor to the city's rulers. She gave political counsel and advice to city and imperial officials based on her practical wisdom – *phronesis*, theoretical science, and highest virtues. But her renunciation of living the life of the higher levels of virtue in favor of sharing with others the knowledge of the transcendent Good, her descent from the divine to the human ended in her tragic failure. In the "cave" of the material world, she fell prey to those irrational, material, carnal powers that she had long before renounced and had in vain tried to improve and liberate from darkness, ignorance, and evil. Contrary to her providential mission, it was her turn to be defeated by them. The political ideal of Platonopolis had been sullied.

Hypatia's fate is therefore an indication, one in a number, that the ideal model of the Neoplatonic political theory showed a weakness in confronting the limitations imposed by realities on the political ambition of the godlike philosopher. We are made to reexamine the question whether political life can be subordinated to the life of divine knowledge, and what was the real impact of the Neoplatonic theory on the philosophy of action. This possibility of error or defeat is recognized by O'Meara at various points in the book (e.g. Chapter 11). He nevertheless chooses not to pursue a study of the impact these theories had on specific historical practices and events. After all, he declares, his book is devoted to a "reconstruction of philosophical theories," which is not to say that, as a suggestion for future study, the question has not been emphasized by the author. After all it is his wish to provoke further study and more detailed investigations of the various aspects of Late Platonic political philosophy. Chapters 8-10 in Part II explore the impact of the theory of divinization of the state on political reforms that may be sought and on constitutional orders of the state; further, they discuss expressions of the theory's principles in legislation and in the judicial art of the philosopher-ruler, or functions of religion in political divinization – all highly engaging questions.

In retracing the judicial part of Neoplatonic political science, O'Meara quotes in Chapter 9, 3 a very interesting but little-known letter of Sopatros 2 to his brother Himerius.

Belonging to the *Mirrors of Princes* literary genre, it is excellent testimony to the desire of Neoplatonic political thinkers to introduce the highest moral standards in legislation and judicial science, and to use those as a basis for the idea of a virtuous, not autocratic ruler who would be guided by the good of the citizens.

O'Meara devotes Part III of the book (Chapters 12-14, pp. 145-197) to some Christian and Islamic thinkers of Late Antiquity and the early Medieval period who developed concepts drawn from Neoplatonic political thought. Quoting texts of fourth-century Christian political thought, the author discovers various elements of the Neoplatonic Platonopolis and the ideal of the philosopher-king in *Praise of Constantine* by Eusebius of Caesarea and in the early, Pythagorean in spirit, work of Augustine *On Order*. With scientific exactitude, O'Meara detects Augustine's evolution in his attitude toward Neoplatonism and goes on to demonstrate how an early proclivity for Pythagorean political instruction was later rejected in favor of a brand new political ideology, a new Christian concept of the state's structures and ideals of social good in Augustine's *City of God* (Chapters 12, 3-4). Leading up to sixth-century authors who were influenced by Neoplatonic political ideas, his presentation contains analyses of two works reflecting that influence. They are *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and the anonymous dialogue from the time of Emperor Justinian, *On Political Science*. Moreover, as if to add a finishing touch to the political ideology of the time of Justinian, the author mentions the "Mirror of Princes" (*Ekthesis*), written by deacon Agapetus in honor of the ideal ruler Justinian, noting nevertheless that it had but a distant relation to Neoplatonism. It is to the anonymous author's *On Political Science* dialogue, preserved only in fragments, that O'Meara attributes special significance. Not only does the text reflect the nature of Neoplatonic political philosophy but it also penetrates with its ideas deep into the inner realities of the time, into the current problems of Constantinople of the first half of the sixth century (Chapter 13.2). Owing to its philosophical kinship, it bears some resemblance to the Pseudo-Dionysius, which, however, O'Meara stresses, in his hierarchical Church, which was an ecclesiological transposition of the Neoplatonic political theory of state and a visible continuation of the celestial hierarchy, concentrated only on divination and the salvation of man through sacred hierarchical orders and activity (Chapter 13, 1).

In the last chapter, O'Meara complements his discussion of Neoplatonic political ideas in Late Antiquity with a presentation of Platonopolis in Islam (Chapter 14). In describing Al-Farabi's early medieval concept of the ideal state and ruler contained in his work *Best State*, he emphasizes the vitality of Neoplatonic views on politics not only in the Byzantine world and in the Latin West, but also in Islamic thought.

The whole book is crowned by the "Conclusion" and two Appendices appropriate for the problems posed by the author in his work. In his *Platonopolis*, O'Meara brings about a turning point in studies on Neoplatonic philosophy and his scholarly vision has once again helped better understand the ideological tendencies of late Platonism. Given the wealth of political content in Neoplatonic sources and in the light of Neoplatonic political ideas received in subsequent political thought as reconstructed by O'Meara, it will no longer be justifiable to claim that Neoplatonism had no interest in political theory. A critical reading of this work is certain to give a substantial boost to further studies on the Neoplatonic Platonopolis.

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