

[1957. *From Platonism to Neoplatonism. The New Scholasticism*, 31(1), 113–114.]

From Platonism to Neoplatonism. By Philip Merlan. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955. Pp. xv + 210, with index. 12 guilders.

The Publication Committee of the American Philosophical Association reviewed this work in manuscript and recommended it as a meritorious contribution to philosophy. The Committee's readers reported it as "in the very best tradition of European classical research." With this justifiable praise, only a short account of the contents is required.

How close are Platonism and Neoplatonism? Are they identical or are they completely different? The author investigates this question by an examination of Iamblichus, Speusippus, and chiefly, Aristotle. One of the admitted characteristics of Neoplatonism is the division of being into three spheres: the ideas, the mathematical, and the physical. This division was reported by Aristotle as Platonic. Whether or not Aristotle was correct in this report is immaterial to an early dating of Neoplatonism; Aristotle thought he was correct and adapted the principle in his division of philosophy into metaphysics, mathematics, and physics. Posidonius, in interpreting the *Timaeus* accepted the division and equated the mathematical with world soul. Originally the mathematical, like the Ideas, were regarded from the extreme realistic viewpoint as actually subsisting. They were not abstractions from sensory experience. Aristotle's acceptance of the tripartition plus his doubts as to the subsistence of the mathematical involved him in endless difficulties.

These may be grouped around three interesting problems. First is the relation between mathematical and the soul, almost identified in the *Timaeus*? The identification is explicit in Xenocrates and is probably accepted by Speusippus. Even Aristotle has traces of this identification. With this is connected the problem of the origin of motion, and the question whether causality is logical (Hegelian) or efficient. For interesting reasons this is connected with the quadrivium as an education program; and St. Thomas is credited with the attempt to remove the incompatibility of a realistic tripartition of being with a faulty tripartition of theoretical knowledge.

The second of the three problems has to do with the derivation of one sphere of being from another; and the third problem concerns the assumption of a pair of opposites as first principles.

In his reinterpretation of Aristotle with reference to the theme of realism versus abstractionism Merlan concludes that there is a rift in Aristotle's metaphysical writings. Jaeger explained this rift as a result of Aristotle's development from his early Platonism toward a more naturalistic and empirical type of philosophy. Merlan rather inclines to the assumption of a permanent and unresolved conflict. The traditional attempt to find in Aristotle one entirely coherent system "is decidedly on the defensive."

Professor Brumbaugh (*Philosophical Review*, April 1955, p. 319) takes offense at this, and lists several modern writers whose “traditional approach seems successful and decidedly not on the defensive.” Perhaps Merlan’s phrase ‘on the defensive’ was unfortunate; but whether the traditional approach is successful is another matter.

Of course, among Merlan's innumerable details and wide grasp of the subject matter, each scholar may find one or two to question. The present reviewer is inclined on the one hand to believe that Merlan has much the better of Cherniss (pp. 36-43, *et passim*), but on the other hand that his treatment of efficient causation in the *Phaedo* (p. 173) is at best incomplete.

But however one may judge of some of these points, Merlan seems to me to have abundantly substantiated his main thesis; and with this he has shed a flood of new light on difficult passages in the *Metaphysics*. When a member of the Publication Committee wrote that his work “will almost certainly become the basis of further discussion,” one wonders why in the world he said ‘almost.’

GORDON H. CLARK

Butler University

Indianapolis, Ind.