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Book Reviews

Vassallo, Christian. *The Presocratics at Herculaneum: A Study of Early Greek Philosophy in the Epicurean Tradition*. Berlin / Boston: De Gruyter 2021, xxi + 763 pp.

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In this essential volume, Christian Vassallo offers a comprehensive sourcebook gathering all the witnesses mentioning or alluding to the Presocratics (following Vassallo, I use this conventional term, despite its demonstrable inadequacy) in our Herculaneum papyrological sources. The selection criteria (defined on pp. 80–84) are inclusive; verbatim “fragments,” instances of naming, and allusions are all treated under the umbrella of testimonia. An extensive introduction precedes the main event, the *Corpus Presocraticorum Herculanense (CPH)*, where up-to-date texts are provided alongside useful, if sometimes only preliminary, translations. The *CPH* (195 testimonia in total) is followed by a detailed commentary covering both papyrological and philosophical issues. An appendix tackles the criticism of Presocratic philosophy found in Diogenes of Oinoanda.

The *CPH* is the product of autopsy of all the relevant papyri in Naples, but Vassallo is a generous scholar who scrupulously notes all those who have contributed, both formally and informally, to the readings and translations printed. The magnitude of the project and the years of work behind it are continuously made obvious. Each witness is given a full apparatus and relevant critical editions are listed in the footnotes accompanying the texts.

The distinguishing feature of this book is its clear identification of an audience argued by its author to have been largely ignored in previous works covering the philosophical content of the Herculanean papyri. This is the ‘average’ historian of ancient philosophy—an obvious beneficiary of a comprehensive volume covering the papyrological evidence—who has yet to engage fully with this valuable source of evidence and has (unfairly) treated the study of the papyri as an “esoteric discipline” (p. 80) Vassallo reasonably points to the recent Loeb edition of Laks and Most as a striking example of the lamentable trend of bracketing off the evidence of the papyrological tradition. Vassallo does not attempt to unpack why this situation in scholarship emerged, but several features of this book suggest that part of his answer is that previous work was simply too focused on addressing only fellow papyrologists and failed to be user friendly enough for those not yet versed in the conventions of the discipline, particularly its sometimes difficult to follow numbering and its peculiar norms of presentation and publication.

Vassallo addresses those new to this corpus of material above all. For example, in the *Prolegomena*, we find a complete catalogue of the non-Herculanean testimonia on the Presocratics transmitted via papyri. This gives the reader a more accurate sense of the extent of the evidence. The wide bibliography is noted throughout in footnotes, and introductory readings are referenced consistently in the commentary.

The introduction assumes little previous knowledge while also making the case for the importance of the Presocratics for Epicurus and the Epicurean tradition. On the latter point, Vassallo’s ambition is broad-based. The Presocratics, it is argued, make up “a considerable proportion of his [i.e., Epicurus’] ‘professional rivals’” (borrowing David Sedley’s term) (p. 14). The polemics con-

structed against the Presocratics by the Epicureans are noted for the directness of their criticisms and their range, extending to the areas of physics, theology, epistemology, and ethics. Theology and epistemology emerge throughout the introduction and commentary as the areas where Vassallo thinks the most exciting developments in the scholarship may be found within the Epicurean reception of the Presocratics. These two areas, but especially the latter, receive novel discussions in the commentary.

Vassallo's general case for how the Epicurean tradition engaged with early Greek philosophy is well-supported and plausible. Where one wants perhaps something more is on how the direct, almost 'peer-to-peer' approach to early Greek thinkers in these texts marks out what is distinctively Epicurean from the alternative approaches pursued by other traditions. Is, for example, the Stoic appropriation of Heraclitus a parallel or a point of departure to the Epicurean use of the early Greek philosophical tradition? What about the 'Socraticism' of such much Hellenistic thought? Does the Epicurean departure from the broad authority bestowed upon Socrates by, e.g., the Stoics and Cynics, motivate or contextualize their approach to the Presocratics?

In the following, I take up only a small selection from the corpus and commentary, focusing mostly on the evidence of the Eleatics. I hope to demonstrate what makes this work so valuable for scholars of ancient philosophy, while also noting some limitations of the book.

I begin with Anaxagoras. *PHerc.* 224, fr. III Sudhaus (*CPH* 13), which seems to contain part of Book 4 of Philodemus' *On Rhetoric*, offers a partial doxography of Presocratic thought. It begins with a mention of generation from water (Thales?); there follows the name of Anaxagoras and his 'everything-in-everything' principle, then a nod to Metrodorus' scepticism, concluding, in what is readable, with the monism of Parmenides and Melissus. Vassallo usefully notes how these topics nicely follow the broad contours of ancient doxography, including (a) the physical-cosmological, (b) the ontological, and (c) the epistemological. He then situates this catalogue within the broader context of doxography within the Epicurean tradition, noting Lucretius *DRN* 1.635–920 and Diogenes of Oinoanda fr. 6 (Smith). Generally speaking, Vassallo's discussion is expansive and inclusive; we find attention to not only the details of *how* early theories are discussed, but also treatment of the theories themselves. Here Anaxagoras' 'everything-in-everything' principle, and the 'substantialist' and 'qualitative' interpretations of this theory, are given judicious introductions with bibliography. While this wider discussion of Presocratic interpretation does make this volume welcoming to those with little background in the material, one occasionally wonders whether a sharper focus on the wider reception of early Greek philosophy in the Hellenistic philosophical schools might have been a more natural fit.

There is no doubt that such doxographical frameworks figured heavily in Epicurean texts, but it is unclear how much is distinctively Epicurean in *CPH* 13. Vassallo cites the concluding section of Seneca *Ep.* 88 as a parallel. This text certainly discusses early Greek theories from an epistemological perspective. Seneca's aim is destructive: some of these theories, we are told, belong to the class of useless knowledge, the others to the class of things which undermine knowledge. Yet Parmenides is the only overlap between the two testimonies, and the Epicurean heritage of Seneca's catalogue is possible but far from certain. We should also not minimize Seneca's own contribution to whatever doxographical materials he worked from. Pointed criticism of excess technicality and the unclear application of theoretical constructs is a characteristic feature of the *Letters*.

The mention of the monism of Parmenides and Melissus in the same breath in 13, alongside the conflation of positions of the two and the 'Melissization' of Parmenides as an advocate of a strong (perhaps numerical) unity of being, are reasonably seen by Vassallo within the context of the Peripatetic tradition. He misses, though, the most relevant parallel for Philodemus' report. This

is the discussion found in the Peripatetic Aristocles of Messene F7 (Chiesara).¹ Here we find that Xenophanes, Parmenides, Zeno, and Melissus maintain that “being is one” because they “overthrow” (καταβάλλειν) sense perception. This neatly tracks Philodemus’ report that Parmenides and Melissus maintain that “the all is one” because “sense-perceptions are false.”

The close overlap between these texts speaks against aspects of Vassallo’s interpretation. For example, it seems unlikely that Philodemus himself constructed the reductionist view of Eleatic monism presented in his testimonium. It also seems unlikely that he was responsible for the attribution of such a view to both Melissus and Parmenides. This is implied, perhaps without substantial commitment, by Vassallo. Indeed, some of the basic ingredients for the Philodemus/Aristocles report are already to be found in Aristotle’s *De gen. et corr.* 325a13 ff.

Vassallo appeals to Theophrastus’ summary of physical tenets as a likely source for Philodemus’ confusion of Parmenides’ monism for one we more comfortably attribute to Melissus alone. Of course, Theophrastus is a probable source for much of the broad Peripatetic tradition. Perhaps the Theophrastean evidence (*ap. Simpl. In Phys.* 15.11–13 Diels) does suggest the reduction of Eleatic monism to Melissus’ version, but it does not *directly* support the conflation of the two thinkers.

An alternative scenario worth raising emerges if we look to Cic. *Luc.* 129. Here we find Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Zeno (although not Melissus) presented as constituting a school devoted to the notion that the sole good is unitary, alike, and the same. Euclides and the Megarians are then said to follow in this school’s footsteps. This is notably the same connection between the Eleatics and the Megarians made in the Aristocles text, which, of course, closely mirrors Philodemus (cited above). This is interesting for us because a probable source for both the Cicero and the Aristocles passages is Clitomachus’ *Περὶ αἰρέσεων*. Is such a source relevant for Philodemus? There is no clear answer to this question, but one worry that surfaces throughout the commentary is the lack of discussion on Philodemus’ broader intellectual background and the range of his sources outside of an Epicurean framework. There is, for example, *only one* oblique mention of Antiochus of Ascalon here, but how he and Philodemus might be contrasted on their respective receptions of earlier traditions appears a promising comparison. One wonders, then, how we can track what is distinctively Epicurean about *CPH* 13, particularly as this testimonium comes from outside the easier to identify theological context of Philodemus’ *De pietate*.

Of course, this is a book that focuses on the evidence of the Presocratics and not on Philodemus’ doxographical strategies, but the question of sources and their variety crops up throughout.² A notable example is *PHerc.* 1428, col. 319 (*CPH* 30) on Anaximander and Anaximenes. This testimonium, reconstructed thanks to Vassallo’s own efforts, attributes to Anaximander a cosmology of perishable gods. This view is only firmly attested elsewhere in Cicero’s *De nat. deor.* 1.10.25, a passage that closely mirrors the run of the Philodemus testimonium, with which it clearly shares a common source. As Vassallo notes, Philodemus goes on to criticize Anaximenes in this text in terms that closely match Velleius’ criticism of Anaxagoras in *De nat. deor.*, suggesting once again the importance of determining their shared sources and where they differ. As he notes, “something strange must have occurred in how Philodemus and Cicero made use of the sources at their disposal” (p. 375). Indeed, but the historical economy of doxographical transmission, which pre-

¹ Vassallo does refer to this passage in the Xenophanes section of this commentary (p. 587). This connection is noted by Diels, who quotes both Philodemus and Aristocles at DK30A14.

² Vassallo has discussed elsewhere Philodemus’ use of doxography in his (2016) “Parmenides and the ‘First God’: Doxographical Strategies in Philodemus’ *On Piety: Praesocratica Herculanensia VII*,” published in *Hyperboreus* 22, 29–57.

sumably here includes at a minimum Philodemus' teacher, Zeno of Sidon, Philodemus himself, and Cicero still remains opaque.

Returning to *CPH* 13: there is little here that encourages a strong identification of this testimony with anything peculiarly Epicurean. What is there instead points more to the Peripatetic or Academic traditions. I am not sure Vassallo would entirely depart from this view. What we need to get clear about is how an interest in the epistemological topics found in the doxography may successfully divide the Epicurean from the Stoic, the Peripatetic, or the Academic. The evidence from Aristocles demonstrates that an interest in this alone is not sufficient to demarcate successfully the Epicurean.

We can agree that there is something peculiarly Epicurean in an interest in epistemological questions and their connections to theology. The Epicurean view of the gods and how humans may conceive of them are such that this interest arises naturally. Where we need further spelling out is how we can interpret questions of epistemology outside of a theological context in the Epicurean reception of earlier philosophy. In short, is there, for example, in these testimonia an Epicurean analysis of scepticism that is not fundamentally concerned with atheism? The nature of our evidence may suggest a negative answer to this question. Yet, if so, does this not give a slightly different nuance to the view that early Greek philosophers are treated as 'live' opponents in Epicurean polemics?

I turn now to Parmenides. Philodemus *De piet.*, *PHerc* 1428, col. 324 (*olim fr.* 13) Vassallo (159 *CPH*) is an extraordinary testimony reporting aspects of the cosmology and theology of Parmenides and thus supplementing 28B12 and 13 DK. The results of Vassallo's new autopsy furthers this connection by making the reading of Eros' name in 1.9 now possible. The context of Philodemus' discussion, then, is Parmenides' theory of celestial spheres, or rings, and his presentation of the 'first god' as soulless. This 'first god' in turn then generates others gods and these are subject to the passions just as humans are.

Vassallo takes us in detail through the most pressing puzzles in understanding Parmenides' cosmology, including whether Cicero's account in his *De nat. deor.* conflicts with Aëtius' presentation (28A37 DK), and how the fire and goddess in 28B12 DK may support or contradict these testimonia. The latter question, in particular, is a source of much difficulty because it is presented by Simplicius during a process of questioning Alexander of Aphrodisias on his interpretation of Parmenides. Alexander allegedly understood Parmenides' "according to the opinion of many and appearances" as indicating the status of the claims he offers to be unqualifiedly false. Simplicius responds that any deception is rather the product of a shift from examining what is true intelligibly to what is evident sensibly. This is an interesting and important distinction that mirrors some of the recent discussion in the literature of the unity of Parmenides' poem and on the status of the "Doxa". However, the worry for us is that the Peripatetic framework of efficient and material causes then enters Simplicius' discussion as the means of interpreting Parmenides' cosmological views. We are left, then, with Cicero's report of the divinity of the outermost crown, Aëtius' suggestion of the place of the goddess in the middle of the mixed crowns, and Simplicius' placement of the goddess at the center of everything (cashed out by him as the efficient cause of the cosmos).

Vassallo's contribution to this thicket of issues is to turn our attention to Plato's *Symposium* 195b6-c6. Plato's text discusses the accounts of the gods found in Hesiod and Parmenides and suggests that what they relate is the work of Necessity and not of Love. The thought is that distinguishing these two causal entities (assuming Parmenides accepted a role for both) allows us to imagine that in 28B13 DK *Eros* is a separate being from the *daimon* who generates him. In 28B12 DK, then, Aphrodite may be safely assumed to be the goddess Simplicius reports.

This is helpful, but it only takes us so far. The "ring of lights" (presumably, the stars), which encircle the sky, is given the name "god" by Parmenides, according to Cicero (*De nat. deor.* 1.11.28).

Yet we still need an account of the general scheme of the divinity of cosmic rings, and of how the inner and outer portions relate on this scheme. This is a puzzle, of course, larger than the Philodemus testimonium, but there seems to be something more we can do with this passage than to point simply to the difficulties in reconstructing Parmenides' cosmology. This report suggests that we need to understand a hierarchy of gods, with the primary god lacking at least some human qualities, such as the capacity for emotion. Parmenides' innovation, then, is to divide gods into classes, and this could perhaps help resolve familiar contradictions. This is true even if we accept that Parmenides ultimately disavows such an account, as of lesser status (however this is construed) than what is found in the first half of his poem.

In this vein, Vassallo rightly connects the epistemologies and theologies of Xenophanes and Parmenides in interpreting Philodemus' *κατὰ σήματα ἀνθρωπίνως* in ll. 21–22. He takes it that the human use of “signs” is criticised by Parmenides on both epistemological and theological grounds. On the former, humans deceived by mere appearance and opinion are simply subject to epistemic and methodological errors. They attempt to name forms or posit opposites that do not correspond with reality, or what is true. 28B1, B8, and B19 all provide support for this interpretation of Philodemus' line.

On the theological level, Vassallo's thought is that Philodemus is responding to a close connection between Parmenides and Xenophanes in the doxography. By building on Xenophanes' critical theology, Parmenides is understood to denounce the human tendency to ascribe false *σήματα* to the gods, including, e.g., the capacity for the emotions (or so Philodemus reports). This seems, as Vassallo notes, fully consistent with the previous column (194 *CPH*), where Xenophanes is said to have rejected anything spoken about god as untrue opinion.

I have two queries about these *σήματα* in 159. First, Vassallo translates the line as “according to [the] signs [interpreted] in a human way” (p. 284). However, it is clear in Parmenides' fragments that human “signs” are to distinguished from the reliable sort described in 28B8.2 DK by the very act of their imposition and not by their mere interpretation in human terms. At 28B8.55 DK, opposites in body are “assigned” (*ἔθεντο*) *σήματα*. A version of *τίθημι* appears again in 28B19 DK, where humans assign a name as a “mark” (*ἔπιστημον*). Here it is on things that originate and end in time that names are bestowed. The idea, then, seems to be that human “signs” function as rivals to divine and eternal ones. The mistake is epistemic but it is also theological in its illicit appropriation of something properly divine.

Second, I accept the close connection between Parmenides' divine cosmology and the imposition of *σήματα*. It is unclear, however, how this works in principle. 28B8 DK tells us that human beings assign *σήματα* to the opposites, Light and Night. Whether signs are given to these two forms or to being and non-being (as Long has it), how this mistake generates the theory of celestial spheres with its central goddess needs explanation. And I think this points to an issue that continuously crops up in interpreting Parmenides. Is the mistake a diagnosis of where (presumably dualist) thinkers went wrong, thus allowing that much else besides this basic opposition underpins mortal theoretical constructs? Or does the basic opposition operate as something theoretically basic, and we are to assume that the cosmology we are offered derives somehow therefrom? In short, is what makes the *σήματα* of humans false some fundamental and comprehensive commitment to developing illicitly opposed pairs of explanatory principles? Or is this but one of their mistakes, with, perhaps, a false view of the value of sense perception further adding to human confusion?

These are large, and vexing, questions. I raise them to make Vassallo's fundamental claim of the value of this project explicit and to demonstrate how much I am in agreement. The contribution of the *Herculaneum papyri* to the study of ancient philosophy is not to be ignored. With this valuable volume, there is no reason for any scholar of early Greek thought not to engage with this material.