conceptualizing the immaterial world beyond our experience. The power of these objects and their tactility return us to Jones's chapter in the relief volume.

Like Yasin's volume, this is a very long book and it is undoubtedly difficult at times, but the clear direct quotation of texts and the very many images help ground the abstract by offering physical manifestation of the types of seals being imagined in the texts. The book is exceptional in its balance of the conceptual and material and the literary and visual.

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Philosophy

Anyone interested in Plato's 'unwritten doctrines' is in luck, thanks to the recent publication of two studies on this thorny topic. The first one is a new addition to *The Cambridge Elements in Ancient Philosophy* series titled 'Plato's Written Doctrines' and authored by Carl Séan O'Brien.[1] This short book will bring anyone up to date on the history of the debate, offering a sympathetic assessment of the Tübingen-Milan interpretation, with special attention to the contributions of Thomas Szlezák, Joachim Krämer, Konrad Gaiser, and Giovanni Reale. But the text also connects this interpretation with the earlier generations of Platonists. In this way, O'Brien describes his aim as primarily interested in clarifying 'the difficulties which the Tübingen scholars (and earlier Platonists) identified in interpreting Plato's legacy and to examine the merits of the solutions which they propose' (5).

The book is divided into six brief sections. The first one, officially dedicated to answering 'What Are the Unwritten Doctrines?', briefly presents the evidence in Aristotle's *Physics* 209b11–16, *Metaphysics* 187a15–20, Aristoxenus' report of Plato's lectures *On the Good*, and offers a passing reference to other texts. O'Brien then offers a helpful summary of his understanding of the clash between interpretive and methodological approaches, highlighting the 'significant obstacles' (7) in Anglo-American scholarship and the attractiveness of the Tübingen-Milan solutions. One of the main challenges, we are told, is the textual evidence in Plato's dialogues of a criticism of writing. This is the topic of the second section, which focuses on *Phaedrus* 247b–278e, the *Seventh Letter*, and evidence of 'deliberate gaps' (21) in the *Republic* and elsewhere, and closes with a reflection on the possible purpose of the dialogues in the Tübingen-Milan interpretation. The third section finally tackles the philosophical content of the 'unwritten doctrines', that is, the Theory of Principles in the testimonia, its alleged outline in *Philebus*, and its relation to the theory of Forms. Section four connects the

[1] *Plato's Unwritten Doctrines*. By Carl Séan O'Brien. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2025. Pp. 72. Paperback £18.00, ISBN: 978-1-009-50620-5.

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Tübingen-Milan interpretation with the philosophy of the Old Academy, Plotinus, and Proclus, claiming that one of the interpretation's advantages is that it highlights the continuity of Platonic thought. A fifth section tackles the 'Critics of the Unwritten Doctrines', going back to Schleiermacher, and focusing on the criticisms by Shorey, Vlastos, and Cherniss, but mentioning some more recent critics. Section six closes by summarising the interpretative challenges faced by the Anglo-American scholarship, the questions that the Tübingen-Milan help us see more clearly, and how the Tübingen-Milan school answers the challenges and questions with a coherent analysis that makes clear 'which solution is more persuasive' (63). Or so O'Brien would like us to believe. Although there is no doubt that the book is a useful, clear, and passionate defence of an 'unfashionable' (1) interpretation, it might prove a frustrating read for those less sympathetic to the project of reading Plato as a doctrinal and unitarian Platonist who uses Socrates as the mouthpiece of his authentic voice. Without one of those assumptions, it looks like the house of cards of the Tübingen-Milan interpretation collapses, and the opposition with the Schleiermacheans reveals itself as a false dilemma. Unintentionally but illuminatingly, O'Brien might have proved the limitations common to both sides of the question.

If you think that is too quick a dismissal of this important family of interpretations of Plato, you might be interested in Rafael Ferber's *The Ignorance of the Philosopher: Why Did Plato Not Write the "Unwritten Doctrine"?*[2] The origins of this book go back to the nineties, since this is a 'slightly updated' (9) version of *Die Unwissenheit des Philosophen oder Warum hat Plato die "ungeschriebene Lehre" nicht geschrieben?* (1991). The book focuses on why Plato decided not to publish in writing everything he considered worth communicating orally (11). After a brief preface and introduction, the book offers three chapters, one focusing on *Republic*, a second one on *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*, and a final chapter dedicated to the answer from the *Seventh Letter.* After these chapters, the original book is now complemented by a lengthy 'Retraction' in which Feber revisits the topic, addresses the discussion the original text provoked, and raises two further questions regarding the interpretation of the *Seventh Letter*. At the end, we get a brief but interesting appendix on the dating of the 'lecture on the Good', an index of names, and an index of the main passages discussed.

Although Feber acknowledges that he shares major assumptions with the Tübingen school, including the existence of unwritten doctrine; the idea of passages of omission in the dialogues that make reference to this doctrine; and that the dialogues have a protreptic function (107), he distances himself from the Tübingen school on methodological grounds, arguing that 'it still seems to me to make more sense to place emphasis on the dialogues in order to elucidate the "unwritten doctrines" than to elucidate the dialogues on the basis of the "unwritten doctrines"' (107–8). Another difference is that Feber maintains that divine wisdom cannot be attained, not even temporarily, by the philosopher, whereas Tübingen scholars such as Szlezák and K. Albert disagree. This new version of Feber's book is required reading for anyone interested in the topic, even if, like O'Brien, he only succeeds in showing that his interpretation is possible, not so much that it is the most plausible.

[2] *The Ignorance of the Philosopher: Why Did Plato Not Write the "Unwritten Doctrine"?* By Rafael Ferber. Baden-Baden, Verlag Karl Alber, 2025. Pp. 171. Hardback € 44.00, ISBN: 978-3-49-599183-1.

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For a completely different approach to Plato, acutely reflective about its methodology and how to read Plato without projecting inherited assumptions, preconceptions, and even borrowings from other dialogues, the readers could take advantage of the recent release of the paperback edition of Raphael Woolf's monograph on Plato's *Charmides*.[3] This book is part of M. M. McCabe's Cambridge Studies in the Dialogues of Plato, which promises 'to throw light on such questions as why its chosen dialogue is composed in the complex way that it is, and what makes this unified whole more than the sum of its parts'. Woolf, in this regard, follows the series' brief closely, presenting a lucid and sophisticated reading of one of the most intriguing dialogues.

The book has six chapters, including an introduction in which Woolf lays out his methodology and summarises the dialogue, and a four-page conclusion. The remaining chapters develop the main theses of the book: what the author calls the '"stance of enquiry"' (more on this below), a chapter defending the unity of the dialogue and the relevance of the first half, a chapter on the idea and challenges of taking temperance to be '"knowledge of knowledge"', and a chapter that develops a critical response to the dialogue that sees temperance as the art of self-realisation.

But to understand the project and interpretation behind the book, one has to buy into Woolf's two important methodological principles – which would probably dismay any member of the Tübingen-Milan school and scholars who assume an old-fashioned doctrinal view of Plato – and his analysis of the twofold structure of the dialogue. Woolf calls the first principle the 'principle of agnosticism', which 'states that one should not assume, in advance of reading the *Charmides*, that one has knowledge of the aims and methods at work therein of either Plato or his main character Socrates' (5). As Woolf acknowledges, this principle is, in some sense, obvious, if it were not for the fact that the history of Platonic scholarship is full of examples of people not upholding it. But unless someone suffers from anterograde amnesia, like Leonard Shelby in Christopher Nolan's 2000 film *Memento,* it is probably impossible to uphold to perfection. But the idea is to avoid, to the best of our abilities, 'a kind of circularity, whereby our conclusions about the *Charmides*, read in part through the lens of other dialogues, then serve to reinforce our conclusions about those other dialogues'. (5)

The second principle is dubbed the 'principle of separation', which recommends that 'we should not assume that what is said or done by any of Plato's characters is necessarily endorsed by Plato himself, or identifiable with Plato's own views or motivations' (11). Although this principle might sound painfully commonsensical to any scholar of fiction, it is far from a widespread assumption in Plato scholarship. This, of course, has been noted before, but many would react by thinking that the character Socrates is so obviously dominant and centre stage that it must be for no other reason than Plato agreeing with the historical Socrates or because Plato is using him as his mouthpiece. But Woolf responds to this line of thought by arguing that, while it is plausible that Plato the author 'is representing himself as an admirer of Socrates, it would be rash to deduce that he took himself to be an uncritical admirer, since he would arguably fail thereby to be true to Socrates' own example, as Plato portrays it, of critical scrutiny of persons and their views'. (12)

[3] *Plato's* Charmides. By Raphael Woolf. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023 (paperback 2025). Pp. x + 271. Paperback £26.99, ISBN: 978-1-009-30818-2.

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Woolf understands the structure of the *Charmides* as comprising two aspects. What he calls the 'horizontal structure' is the linear sequence of conversations and events which the dialogue portrays, i.e., Socrates' return to Athens, his encounter with Chaerephon, and the encounter with Critias and Charmides. The vertical structure is the way the sequence of conversations is embedded within a series of levels: at the 'top' is Plato writing the *Charmides*, which in turn presents a narration in the first person by the character Socrates to an unnamed companion, which in turn comprises a series of conversations and events (16). Noticing this complex structure allows for a sophisticated application of the principle of separation that becomes crucial to Woolf's interpretation of the *Charmides*, since he argues that Socrates is presented as mainly motivated by erotic desire for the beautiful, but Plato uses his portrayal of Socrates' pursuit to instil in his readers the critical stance, understood as 'the attitude that does not take ideas or arguments on trust but engages reflectively and critically with them' (18). Thus, according to Woolf, Plato does not seek 'to encourage his reader to undertake an erotic quest for beauty of the kind Socrates is shown pursuing [. . .] Plato does not aim at our emulating Socrates' quest. [. . .] We are, rather, to come to regard ourselves as valuing critical enquiry by coming to see ourselves, through our engagement with the text, as pursuing such enquiry' (18). The traditional challenge regarding the horizontal structure of the dialogue is, in turn, about the unity of the two main halves, given that the more philosophically substantial section seems to occur halfway, during the conversation with Critias. But Woolf argues that seeing the vertical structure also helps us to solve this puzzle.

One of the important takeaways of Woolf's reading is that it allows us to take Socrates down from the pedestal the tradition has put him on, and helps us see that Plato, at important inflexion points, finds Socrates' attitude towards interpretation wanting, and we, as readers occupying a critical stance, are supposed to notice. In this respect, he concludes that Plato 'attempts to carve out a space for the written word (and work) to function as a stimulus for critical reflection. The Socratic approach, remarkable though it is, does not have all the best tunes when it comes to the conduct of enquiry; perhaps it even has some shortcomings. A written work may, in its content and construction, offer richer prospects than oral dialogue for interpretative engagement and the progress of enquiry' (255). After this bold defence of writing philosophy, we can only hope that Woolf's next project tackles the *Phaedrus* and Socrates critique of writing there.

Olof Pettersson and Pauliina Remes have put together a wonderful volume titled *Platonic Autonomy: Self-Determination, Unity, and Cooperation*.[4] The book is the result of a research project and a conference at Uppsala University, Sweden, held in 2019 on *Power and Knowledge in Plato and the Platonic Tradition* (although contributors refer to it slightly differently; see p. 58). The title of the book immediately raises the question of whether and where Plato used and discussed the Greek term *autonomos* in his dialogues. The answer is nowhere (as acknowledged in the introduction on p. 10, and discussed in Chapter 1). However, the authors use 'autonomy' here to refer to self-control and self-government in Plato, and to explore how these connect or differ from more modern conceptions of personal and political autonomy. Although in the 'Introduction' the

[4] *Platonic Autonomy*: *Self-Determination, Unity, and Cooperation*. Edited by Olof Pettersson and Pauliina Remes. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2025. Pp. xiv + 269. 5 tables. Hardback £90.00, ISBN: 978-1-009-52048-5.

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editors lay the groundwork for the volume with a somewhat top-down, retrospective approach that seems to impose a foreign conceptual framework on Plato, the individual chapters do not assume this framing, and the editors, ironically, might be attempting to give more unity to the volume than there really is. Having said that, none of that detracts from the high quality of the contributions and the volume's overall attributes. Moreover, the editors give a fair representation when they write 'this collection of essays examines how autonomy is conditioned by self-sufficiency, what kind of ideal rational self-governance is supposed to be, how unity and self-determination are connected, and to what extent personal autonomy depends on collaboration and social context' (7–8).

The volume is divided into five parts and contains an introduction and eleven chapters. Each part is meant to encapsulate 'one central feature or challenge of personal self-determination and self-rule in Plato' (9). The first one, dedicated to self-determination, contains only one chapter: 'Accounts and Accountability: The Importance of Being *Autologizomenos*' by Amber D. Carpenter. Here, Carpenter offers an eloquent explanation as to why Plato does not use *autonomos* in the *Republic*. In a nutshell, she argues that the term *autonomos* assumes that there is value in following laws and customs that are our own, whereas Plato offers an alternative to this view of self-determination based not in the source of our actions but on thinking, understood as the activity of giving and defending complete accounts, that frees us from the confusion of our intense and unpleasant experiences.

The second part is titled 'Motivational Challenges to Self-Rule' and comprises two chapters. The first one, titled 'Plato's Problems with Aversion', by Nicholas D. Smith, discusses Plato's tripartition of the soul in the *Republic*, and identifies a logical problem with the motivational pluralism it entails. In his words: 'Plato conceives of rational self-governance as achieved when different parts of the soul are harmonised by a properly functioning rational part. I have argued herein, however, that Plato's conception of this process contains a logical flaw in treating aversive desires as if they were the contradictories of desires of attraction' (56). The second chapter is titled 'A Complex Model of Action: What is Ruling?' by Oda E. Tvedt, who tells us that this is a revised version of a chapter of her PhD dissertation. The contribution discusses Korsgaard's view on self-constitution in Plato and argues for a richer understanding of moral psychology in the *Republic*, one that sees reason as being able not only to set the goals for action but also to have its own inclinations.

The third part is titled 'Internal and External Authorities', and has three chapters. The first one in this trio is an interesting study on self-rule in the *Republic* and *Hippias Major* by Franco V. Trivigno. The main thesis is that an ideal political scenario for self-rule is the *Republic*'s focus, whereas *Hippias Major* offers a framework for non-ideal political circumstances. In Chapter 5, Toomas Lott discusses autonomy in the context of conflicting epistemic requirements. Lott argues that, contrary to what many assume, Socrates does not assign intrinsic value to 'thinking for oneself' but only instrumental value as a means of achieving knowledge, with deference to authority as another option, if available. The last chapter in this section is 'Awakening Authority: Olympiodorus' Commentary on Plato's Gorgias' by James M. Ambury.

Part four of the book is dedicated to the limits of autonomy and self-rule, and offers two chapters thematising dialogue and autonomy. In '"Vulnerability, Dialogue, and Epistemic Authority"', Marina Berzins McCoy argues that genuine autonomy of souls, autonomy as thinkers, must include 'other elements that we can broadly name as social

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and reflecting mutual interdependence with other reasoners' (150). This 'dialogical vulnerability' and permeability are features we find in Plato's dialogues that we should not overlook, and that can offer a mature, socially interdependent conception of autonomy. Olof Pettersson complements this line of thought with the chapter, 'Plato, Dialogue, and Epistemic Authority'. The fifth and final part, 'Reconciling Between Freedom, External Authority and Nature', closes the volume with three chapters: one by Charlotta Weigelt on self-government and legal authority in the *Crito* and *Statesman,* an illuminating chapter on Plato's *Laws* and freedom and willing servitude by Susan Sauvé Meyer, and a chapter on the natural preconditions of political freedom by Andy German.

But not everything I read this term was on Plato. There are also recently published books for those interested in Early Greek philosophy. One of them, thankfully published in Open Access, is Chiara Ferella's impressive *Reconstructing Empedocles' Thought*.[5] As the title suggests, the book offers a bold and careful reconstruction of Empedocles' surviving work as a unified whole of religion and physics. The introduction also offers an excellent literature review of the state of the question, which situates the innovation and partial agreements of the reconstruction with previous work. The main aim of the book is to revise the current reconstruction of Empedocles' two poems, *Purifications* and *On Nature*, by arguing that various verses usually attributed to the former are, in reality, better placed in the latter. This challenge to the standard apportionment of extant fragments between the two poems attempts to show that concerns about the place and fate of human beings, individual existence after the death of the body, moral agency, rebirth, and purificatory material are integral to Empedocles' physics. Moreover, Ferella sees his work as the path to reinterpret other early philosophers and texts that display interests similar to those of Empedocles, to 'rethink early Greek philosophy primarily as a philosophy of humans rather than of nature' (3).

Ferella rejects Catherine Rowett's attempt to dismiss the tradition that sees Empedocles as the author of two poems, but argues that *Purifications* is a collection of heterogeneous and brief sayings, whereas *On Nature* is the more substantial philosophical and religious text. In this way, Chapters 1 and 2 are dedicated to showing that Empedocles' verses related to Empedocles' fault, punishment, exile, and rebirths (starting with B115 and the demonological fragments) are integral to the proem of *On Nature*.

Chapter 2 also argues that this new reconstruction of the proem makes clear that Empedocles aims to validate his epistemic suprahuman authority. Chapters 3 to 7 attempt to reconstruct a unified picture of Empedocles' thought, given the results from the first two chapters. Chapter 3, dedicated to the concept of *daimon* and rebirth, argues that in Empedocles' demonology he 'depicts himself as a divine guide and protector of human beings in this world and beyond' (19). Chapter 4 is dedicated to Empedocles' conception of godhood and divinity, crucial to Ferella's unitarian project. Chapter 5, in turn, explores the interconnection of religion and physics, focusing on the concept of rebirth and its compatibility with Empedocles' physical system. Moreover, Ferella argues that 'traditional readings that assert that Empedocles, in his physics, had no notion of the soul, are inherently wrong' (244), and that Empedocles holds a traditional notion of the soul. In Chapter 6, Ferella investigates the connection between knowledge

[5] *Reconstructing Empedocles' Thought*. By Chiara Ferella. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp. viii + 403. Hardback £105.00, ISBN: 978-1-009-39257-0.

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of the nature of things, the transformation of the mortal into the divine nature, and one's release from rebirth, as well as how knowledge demands purifications and training of the mind. Chapter 7 is dedicated to the cosmic cycle and how it accommodates the doctrine of rebirths. The volume closes with an epilogue that serves more as a concluding chapter and appraisal of the advantages and limitations of the reconstruction.

Another commanding book about early Greek philosophy is *On the Gods & the World: Orpheus & the Presocratics in the Derveni Papyrus* by Vojtěch Hladký.[6] A shorter version was originally published in Czech in 2011, but this English version seems to have gone through substantial revision. The volume is prefaced by Greek text and translation of the Derveni Papyrus (credited to Vojtěch Hladký and Anna Pilátová), an introduction, an analysis of the opening columns (Chapter 2) and the Orphic Poem (Chapter 3), an analysis of the commentary of the poem (Chapter 4), and a chapter with the author's general conclusions, plus the usual indexes. The volume offers a careful and attentive interpretation that argues, to the extent that is possible in a multi-layered and incomplete text, in favour of a philosophical background for the Derveni treatise, rather than an Orphic religious text. More precisely, Hladký argues that the author of the treatise 'was probably a late Presocratic philosopher with a distinctive Anaxagorean background [. . .] remarkably close to what little we know about the philosophy of Archelaus of Athens' (276).

The 2019 Symposium Hellenisticum, held in Cambridge and dedicated to Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, has borne fruit in the form of the publication of an all-star volume edited by Charles Brittain and James Warren.[7] Contributors include Rachel Barney, Raphael Woolf, Nathan Gilbert, Sharon Weisser, Tad Brennan, Georgia Tsouni, and Julia Annas. James Warren also contributes two chapters: one introducing the *Tusculan Disputations* (not so much the rest of the volume), where he emphasises Cicero's difficult but extremely productive year of 45 BC, and its connection with the content and aim of the *Tusculans*, and Chapter 5, dedicated to pain, shame, and manliness in *Tusculan Disputations*, Book 2. It is difficult not to see as a bit of a mystery (and a shame) the absence of the other editor, Charles Brittain, as a contributor of a chapter to this fantastic volume. But I imagine his invisible hand behind the putting together and improving of the drafts.

There is little to criticise in this volume. Perhaps my only complaint is that many of the authors dedicate some pages to introduce, summarise, and comment on the aims and general structure of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* (including Chapters 1, 2, 6, 7), which for someone reading the volume back to back creates an experience close to the retellings of the binding of Isaac in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, or Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* (1950), where the reader has to decide which version is more like the truth.

All the chapters are exemplars of well-written and meticulous scholarship. But there are two I enjoyed more than the rest. One of them is Chapter 2: 'The Aims and Argument of the *Tusculan Disputations*' by Rachel Barney. It gives an elegant and sympathetic

[6] *On the Gods & the World: Orpheus & the Presocratics in the Derveni Papyrus*. By Vojtěch Hladký. New York, Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. lxxiii + 334. Hardback £108.00, ISBN: 978-0-19-287315-6.

[7] *Cicero's* Tusculan Disputations. Edited by Charles Brittain and James Warren. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2025. Pp. ix + 203. Hardback £95.00, ISBN: 978-1-009-58605-4.

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assessment of Cicero's work, helping us 'disentangle the multiple purposes and strategies at work in the *Tusculans*' (12). The chapter helps us see more clearly that the *Tusculans* offer four interconnected dimensions: as formal exercises to refute proposed theses; as psychotherapy to overcome fear and suffering; as moral edification aimed at showing that virtue is essential to a happy life; and as an exhibition of philosophy's powers. Barney also shows how the *Tusculans* manage to be eclectic, in the sense of picking and choosing the strongest theory topic by topic, ecumenical by emphasising common ground wherever it exists, and ultimately compatible with Cicero's scepticism. And above all, Barney concludes, 'it is the credo of a patriotic pragmatist, motivated directly by his most powerful pre-philosophical commitments' (33).

The other chapter I enjoyed, perhaps for its honest appraisal, was Julia Annas' '*Tusculan Disputations* 5'. The chapter highlights that the second part of *Tusculans* 5 sits awkwardly with the general project developed in the previous books. Annas is unimpressed by Cicero's eclectic approach, contending that: 'The arguments in this section are peculiar, some conflicting aggressively with more careful arguments in the main part of the book' (165). A little later she acknowledges that: 'Studying Book 5 in depth has led me to admiration, but also to frustration, about the way in which Cicero has brought his ambitious five-book work to its completion and culmination' (165). In the end, she ponders whether the second part of Book 5 might be intended as 'a light-hearted coda', 'deliberately presented as insouciant about the way it proceeds', but concludes that: 'This would leave readers worrying about it in the role of humourless pedants. I would be, as one of the humourless pedants, annoyed if this were the best explanation. However, it would at least save Cicero's reputation as a writer always in control of his material' (188). Maybe the readers of the volume, like me, would be inclined to cut Cicero some slack after learning more about the context of the composition of the *Tusculans*, the sceptical method at work in the background, and the multifaceted aims of the text.

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Greek history

I commence this review with an extremely important book from a methodological point of view. Greek history has long been split between a traditionalist study of events through diachronic political narrative and the study of economic, social, and cultural history through synchronic analysis. The latter has also been shaped by a structuralist approach focusing on clear and unbridgeable status distinctions. The book by Vincent Azoulay and Paulin Ismard is formally about the events surrounding the political crisis

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