

Christoph Helmig, *Forms and Concepts: Concept Formation in the Platonic Tradition*, Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2012, pp. 395, € 109.95, ISBN 9783110266313

Dmitry Biriukov, Università degli Studi di Padova

The book of Christoph Helmig discusses the acquisition of knowledge and universal concepts in the context of the Platonic tradition; it consists of seven chapters. This study derives its inspiration from Proclus' doctrine of the acquisition of knowledge. It would not be incorrect to say that the book constitutes an expanded commentary on that doctrine. In the understanding of the Author, the notion of "concept" refers to an inner-mental entity that is to some extent stable, permanent, objective, shareable, and universal (p.15).

The historical development of the topic of knowledge acquisition in ancient philosophy, suggested by Helmig, has important differences compared to many previous studies. Helmig argues against the widespread opinion that the Neoplatonists harmonized Plato and Aristotle in respect to their theories of concept formation, and adopted the Aristotelian empirical way of concept formation as a first stage of the process (pp.23-24, pp.33-35, p.336). Two main models of concept attainment are identified in this work: one, that refers to the empirical theory of Aristotle, the Peripatetics, the Stoics and the Epicureans, takes sense perception as a faculty underlying the genesis of the whole process of concept attainment. The other, Platonist, based on inner intuition and recollection. The former is further subdivided into i) a merely empiricist way of attainment (the Stoics, Epicurus) and ii) an inductive way of formation-construction (Aristotle, Alexander of Aphrodisias). Instead, for the latter, sense perception is considered the mere trigger of the recollection process (p.35).

Speaking of the empirical theory of concept attainment, the Author identifies three ways of concept attainment: abstraction (*aphairesis*), induction (*epagōgē / epagein*), and collection; the two latter are close but not identical. Speaking of abstraction, Helmig distinguishes between abstraction of matter (*aphairesis^M*) and abstraction of a form from matter (*aphairesis^F*).

On what concerns Plato's doctrine (pp.39-86) Helmig analyzes limits as well as errors of recollection as well as concepts that

elude it. On what concerns Aristotle's doctrine (pp.87-140) abstraction and induction are discussed respectively in connection with mathematical objects and physical ones. Considering Alcinous' doctrine (pp.141-154), Helmig argues against the view that Alcinous was a philosopher who combined Plato and Aristotle in his teaching on concept attainment. The Author attempts to re-open the discussion concerning Alcinous' theory emphasizing the importance of his conceptualistic view according to which the principles (*archai*) of all things are contained in the soul. In this sense, Helmig explores the notion of *doxastikos logos* in *Didascalikos IV* showing its connection with the topic of recollection and its integration into the Platonic tradition, on the basis of M. Baltes' findings.

In his treatment of Alexander of Aphrodisias and Porphyry (pp.154-184), Helmig starts with a criticism of the view of I. Mueller, according to whom these philosophers were mere abstractionists. Despite the fact that Alexander often spoke of the universals as entities depending on mind and posterior to sensible particulars, one may also find some passages which suggest that Alexander thought of the universals (*koina*) as, in a sense, preceding their sensible instantiations. Helmig cites the passages from the *De anima* and *De intellectu* of Alexander which speak of *aphairesis*^F and claim that universals exist potentially (*dunamei*) in things and are actualized by the mind. Helmig notes that this assertion may be understood in at least two different ways. The first understanding implies that the universals potentially exist in things as a statue exists in a block of wood. According to the second more preferable understanding, the potentiality of the universals consists of their potential ability to be thought about, and the universals already exist in the sensible particulars as entities endowing matter with forms. If this is the case, universals may function in the same ways which are usually associated with forms. If we follow the second suggestion that the form is inherent in the sensible particular, yet only as individual and not as universal form, we may add that later a similar position appears in the philosophical and theological treatises of John Philoponus.

Considering the Neoplatonic interpretations of Alexander's teaching on universals, the Author reaches the conclusion that the Neoplatonists misrepresented Alexander's doctrine, and further he goes on to discuss whether they might have misunderstood it. According to the Neoplatonists, Alexander

believed that universals were posterior to particulars, and that universals could disappear with the disappearance of particulars. However, in several texts Alexander argued that the common element (*koinon*) was prior to the sensible particulars in the sense that, if what is common were done away with, none of the things that fall under what is common would exist. Helmig thinks that when Alexander speaks about commonness as being prior to the particulars, he adopts an argument of the Aristotelian type concerning the eternity of species. As a result, Helmig concludes that although the Neoplatonists simplified the position of Alexander, we cannot say that they misunderstood it.

With regard to Porphyry, the Author argues against the understanding of his epistemology as the combination of Plato's and Aristotle's, as well as with portraying Porphyry as an abstractionist/conceptualist philosopher. Drawing attention to the fact that Porphyry's *Isagoge* and a short commentary on Aristotle's *Categories* are both writings of exegetical type, Helmig points out that they do not necessarily represent Porphyry's own beliefs. Then Helmig turns to Porphyry's commentary of Ptolemy's *Harmonics* and shows that Porphyry shared the view on the twofold function of the *logos* – epistemological and ontological – where *logos* was at the same time the innate knowledge and a causal principle. Helmig concludes that this position is in agreement with the Neoplatonic views.

In the chapter on Plotinus (pp.184-204), Helmig builds up his argument by relying on the Emilsson's study on sense perception in Plotinus. Helmig discusses the Plotinian doctrine of *logoi* having a twofold, ontological and epistemological, nature. He analyzes Plotinus' teaching on sense perceptions as judgments (*kriseis*) and proves that these judgments are rational. Further, Helmig goes on to discuss the problem of continuity between the teachings of Plotinus and Proclus on the *logoi* as well as the divergence between the Neoplatonic theory of *logoi* and the Stoic conception of *logoi spermatikoi*. Finally, Helmig analyses Plotinus' conception of recollection, innate knowledge and awareness.

Concerning the criticism of the Aristotelian teaching of the universals by Proclus and Syrianus (p.205ff.), the Author concludes that the distinction between the three kinds of universals traditionally attributed to the Neoplatonists – universals *ante rem*, universals *in re*, and universals *post rem* –

is inaccurate as well as their respective connection with the transcendent forms, forms in matter, and abstracted universals in the soul. Helmig points out that the universals, according to the Neoplatonists, were only the forms on the level of soul and nature, whereas the transcendent forms, being absolutely simple and indefinable, were rather the causes of the universals on the level of the soul. Therefore it is more accurate to speak not of the three kinds of universals, but of the three levels on which the forms are manifested in their transcendent, “psychic”, and enmattered aspects. Helmig claims that for the Neoplatonists who stood in opposition to the concept of abstracted universals, the universals in the soul, attained by means of recollection, were not the universals *post rem*, but rather the universals *ante rem*, since the same universals were also the causes of the particulars.

Analyzing the concept of innate knowledge in Proclus (pp.263-299), Helmig points out that Proclus was the first among the Neoplatonists who distinguished between the *logoi doxastikoi* and *logoi of dianoia* which Proclus also called *logoi ousiōdeis* and which constitute the essence of the soul and its inner knowledge. Addressing the problem whether the psychic *logoi* differed from the common notions (*koinai ennoiai*), Helmig comes to the conclusion that Proclus used both expressions interchangeably. The Author shows that Proclus distinguished between *ennoiai* and the *koinai ennoiai*, where *ennoiai* were understood as preconceptions which still require to be developed and articulated, that is, which still had a need to retrieve the innate knowledge of the soul. Next Helmig discusses the triad of recollection: *forgetting – articulating – probolē* in the Proclean epistemology. Helmig dwells on the notion of *probolē* in Neoplatonic authors who, unlike Middle Platonists, introduced *probolē* as a step following articulation in the process of recollection.

Further, Helmig turns his attention to a crucial aspect of the topic of recollection in Proclus, which influenced Damascius, Simplicius, and Olimpiodorus, namely, the intentional movement of the soul towards itself (pp.299-333). The Author investigates the stages of recollection according to Proclus, and identifies three stages: attainment of the “later born” universals on the basis of the common elements in the sensible beings, advancement of the *logoi ousiōdeis* in the soul, and recollection of the transcendent forms. The notion of the “later born”

(*husterogenes*) as applied to the universals, which the Neoplatonists understood in the sense of *aphairesis*^F, was sometimes associated with the Aristotelian *husteron* (*De Anima* A1, 402b7-8) (= *husterogenes*^A) and was criticized by Syrianus and Proclus. Nevertheless, Hermias, Syrianus, and Proclus used it in a positive sense as a recollected factual concept (*husterogenes*^R). Helmig distinguishes several types of concepts in Proclus, corresponding to the different stages of recollection. The first type is *logoi ousiōdeis* or the *logoi* in the soul, which constitute its innate knowledge. Retrieving these *logoi*, which are the principles of all things, allows us to know the essences both of things and ourselves. The content of these *logoi* is not identical with the forms, but the *logoi* rather represent the unfolded forms. While the innate *logoi* are recollected through *dianoia*, the forms are comprehended by the intellect. The second type is the recollected concepts which are universals of the later origin (*husterogenes*^R); they are the images of the *logoi* in the soul and the objects of *doxa*. They allow us to recognize sensible objects. Finally, the third type represents the preconceptions (*ennoiai*) which we always possess and which we have no need of recollecting as long as we possess the *logoi*. Concerning the shortcomings of this study, we can mention the too limited range of authors and texts used by Helmig in his analysis. Thus, such an important Neoplatonic philosopher as Iamblichus received almost no attention in the study. Several important texts of Porphyry would also have deserved more attention as, for example, the *Sententiae ad intelligibilia*. As a whole, Helmig's book is a valuable study on the acquisition of knowledge and the problem of universals in ancient philosophy. The book allows the readers to follow the development of the theory of knowledge in the Platonic tradition. It also represents an important contribution to the study of the theory of knowledge and the problems of universals in the later Neoplatonic thought.