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*Plato and the Post-Socratic Dialogue: The Return to the Philosophy of Nature.*  
By Charles H. Kahn.

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William H. F. Altman

Only once, in the crucial chapter on *Philebus*, does Charles Kahn cite his 1960 study of Anaximander (166n17),<sup>1</sup> but the power and significance of that single citation is immense: it is thanks to his mastery of the Presocratics that Kahn can make his case for seeing six of Plato's late dialogues not only as "post-Socratic" but also as a return to the Presocratics with whom Kahn himself began his extraordinary scholarly journey more than half-a-century ago. The citation comes shortly after this revealing passage:

In historical terms, then, the mixture of Limit and Unlimited points to a blend between Parmenides and Anaximander, and more generally to a union between Being and Becoming. Ultimately it will be this sort of mixed ontology that Plato has in mind, adding an intermediate blend to the simple dualism of the classical theory of Forms. In the immediate context, however, Limit points to a typically Pythagorean concern with number and ratio. For it is precisely by means of such mathematical concepts that Plato will forge this union between Being and Becoming (165).

For Kahn, two different roles for mathematics—one leading up to the Forms, the other down to the world of nature (xiv-xv, 158-59, 166, 194, and 202)—become a dividing line (significantly, Kahn calls the Divided Line "the Knowledge Line" on 74) between Plato's Socratic and post-Socratic dialogues. Although Plato's post-Socratic "revision of the sharp dualism between intelligible and sensible realms" (xv) reaches its natural τέλος in *Ti-maeus*, and more specifically in the χώρα (xv, 18, 58-9, and 187-95), *Philebus* is the central dialogue for Kahn's claims about Plato's "re-

turn to the philosophy of nature,” especially the often-repeated phrase γεγεννημένη οὐσία at 27b8-9 (xv, 5, 17-18, 56n3, 59, 175, 186, 194, and 203). Although Kahn claims at one point (157) that “nothing essential depends” on the chronological priority of *Philebus* to *Timaeus*, it is difficult to see how he could have sustained his basic argument without placing *Timaeus* last, after chapters on *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Philebus*.

Because Kahn will argue that the imitation of the Forms in the intermediate χώρα will be Plato’s solution to the problems of participation introduced in *Parmenides* (187-95 and 200-6), the first chapter—ably uniting the concerns of the six aporias of Part One with the eight deductions of Part Two—suggests that the Second Deduction (“a rich flotsam of philosophical insights” offering a “torrent stream of arguments good, bad, and ingenious” on 39) creates “the conceptual outline for a theory of nature” (41; cf. 42, 45, 46, 55-5, 58, and 115). In the second chapter, Kahn shows that *Theaetetus*, by excluding the Forms (see “the hypothesis of the *Theaetetus*” on 84; cf. 51 and 59), is Plato’s investigation of “empiricist epistemology” (47), offering “a brilliant account of the phenomenology of perception” (53), and that it naturally follows *Parmenides* because even though the earlier dialogue “may be seen as a preparation for physics . . . we would need some empirical data” (46). Particularly because it reconfigures Being to include both the things that move and those that rest, the “five greatest kinds” in *Sophist* (the subject of chapter three) “is a list of fundamental concepts required for any rational account of the natural world, that is to say, of a world admitting change” (115). A fourth (bridge) chapter entitled “the new dialectic: from the *Phaedrus* to the *Philebus*,” includes discussion of *Statesman* as well, and it should be noted that it is unclear whether it is the *Phaedrus*, *Statesman*, or *Laws* that is

the sixth of the six dialogues Kahn takes as his subject matter in the opening sentence (xi). But about the fourth and fifth there is no doubt: the titles of “the *Philebus* and the movement to cosmology”—this is the chapter that every serious student of ancient philosophy will most need to study—and “the *Timaeus* and the completion of the project: the recovery of the natural world,” speak for themselves. All of the chapters contribute to a powerful and unified vision, and abound with many felicities and flashes of insight,<sup>2</sup> although the chapter on *Philebus* is particularly important, and the chapter on *Theaetetus* somewhat diffuse. The book ends with an Epilogue on “Plato as a political philosopher.”

Although Kahn certainly builds here on his studies of the Presocratics and his pioneering work on the verb “to be” (66-7 and 95-8), his latest book’s relationship to his 1996 classic *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* is naturally of paramount concern. From the start, he refers to it as “a sequel” (xi), and in explaining the book’s “Epilogue” at the end of his Preface he writes: “Instead of promising a third volume to deal with these topics, I offer here an Epilogue to take some account of Plato’s concern with moral and political philosophy in his latest period.” It seems not unlikely that this sentence marks the abandonment of a three-volume project, and betrays the inevitable melancholy that must accompany it. The fact is that this new book suffers by comparison with the earlier work: despite the complexity of the issues with which it must deal, it is not only shorter in length, but its bibliography is less than half the size. But most saddening was that despite the case Kahn builds for reading *Phaedrus*, *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Philebus* as preparation for “the return to the philosophy of nature” in *Timaeus*, he mentions only in the Preface his brilliant discovery, central to the first volume, of “prolepsis” and “proleptic intentions,” and

does so only to register the point that “today I would formulate my view more cautiously, to avoid the impression that Plato never changed his mind, or that he knew where he was going from the start” (xiii). The paradox at the heart of these two volumes is that both share—each within its own domain, and both in the teeth of an entrenched and disjunctive scholarly orthodoxy—a brave commitment to continuity. In both cases, Kahn takes a series of dialogues, first “the Socratic,” now “the post-Socratic,” and attempts to show that Plato had a much clearer conception of where he was going than we thought, and that the end of each movement was already somehow implicit from the start. *This is what Kahn does.* What Kahn cannot do is work his integrative magic on the two disparate parts of his own project: not even Hegel could create a third volume synthesizing these two, and the fact that there will be no third from Kahn follows directly from his attempt to accomplish this synthesis in the second. There can be no question but that Kahn’s Plato has changed his mind: the problem is that he still hopes to show that Plato didn’t change it all that much. After all, Kahn’s brilliant configuration of the interplay of Limit and Unlimited in *Philebus* in terms of both Anaximander and Parmenides aims to blend the Socratic Plato of “the normative trio”—Kahn’s apt phrase for the Good, Beauty, and Justice (xiv, 158, 174, and 181)—with the Presocratic Plato of natural science. But this synthesis requires not only a new and opposite direction for mathematics, but the abandonment of dualism in the service of “immanent form” (5, 14, 17, 186, 194, and 199–200), a vigorous attack on what Aristotle called the *χωρισμός* (18 and 46), an otherwise strong shift in the direction of an Aristotelian Plato (169, 186, and 193–4), the disharmonious embrace of a One that must also be Many (22–3, 104n5, and 202), and the mixing, blending, and

even the union of Being and Becoming (xv, 31, 55, 74, 105, 165, 169, 186, 202, and 203).

Considered not in the context of his own previous achievements, but simply as a landmark in the Anglophone reception of Plato, the most striking feature of Kahn’s new book is that he takes Plato’s “Unwritten Doctrines” seriously (28–31, 42, 104n5, 204, and 206); indeed there is a sense in which his argument depends on them, especially since the section in which the lost lecture on the Good finally appears (206) is followed only by a “supplementary note” and the Epilogue. On the one hand, this follows from the rather more Aristotelian Plato that emerges from Kahn’s pages, and although he does not cite recent work by Sarah Broadie and Mary Louise Gill, there are many points of intersection with their approaches. Among the proponents of the Unwritten Doctrines, Kahn cites only Kenneth Sayre (28n45), but for those sympathetic to “the other Plato,” Kahn’s work is an even more significant indication of the prospect of further Analytic-Tübingen/Milan syncretism precisely because he is not in direct dialogue with the school. In the same vein is Kahn’s indirect dialogue with Jacques Derrida, whose work on the dualism-destroying implications of the *χώρα*, while never mentioned here, is tacitly supported if not confirmed. But Kahn’s reluctance to extend the bibliographic hand to these various approaches is probably prudent, since he must be aware that some would prove dangerous allies: after all, Kahn’s project aims to blend traditional Platonism—the Forms remain intact if not separate—with natural philosophy. One supportive scholar whom Kahn does not cite is Mitchell Miller.

Although Kahn does cite both Harold Cherniss and G. E. L. Owen, he never refers to their debate about the chronological relation between *Timaeus* and *Sophist*, and this omission is significant. To state the obvious first:

Kahn is following Cherniss on the crucial question: the *Timaeus* is late, so Plato returns to what looks very much like the separation of Being and Becoming even after “the critical period” (cf. 86). On the one hand, Kahn’s choice need not surprise anyone: as early as 1968, in a review of Gilbert Ryle’s *Plato’s Progress*, he recorded his rejection of “an infanticidal Plato” while writing: “it will not do, I think, to say that the Forms or Kinds which survive after Parmenides’ criticism are mere concepts, deprived of their former support in an ontology of intelligible Being.”<sup>3</sup> But in his interpretation of both *Parmenides* and *Sophist*, the problem of the dangerous ally rears its head (68): Kahn relies heavily, and in the case of *Sophist*, almost completely, on the work of Michael Frede (*passim* in first three chapters, but see especially 24n38), whose approach to the verb “to be” in the late Plato might be said to out-Owen Owen’s own. For this reader, the Kahn-Frede alliance blurs rather than resolves the sharpness of the issues that originally divided Cherniss and Owen, and the result is not the carefully argued compromise effectively championed by Lesley Brown—whose unpublished translation of *Sophist* Kahn was able to use (xv)—but a not always satisfactory *mélange*. When confronted by inconsistencies in *Timaeus* (177-9, 200, 199-200, and 213),<sup>4</sup> Kahn must write: “to give Timaeus a consistent view we must draw a distinction that Plato does not provide” (193; cf. 172, 192, and 199). And even though Kahn’s readers are offered some superb cosmological speculations (202), we are left wondering why Plato would entrust to Parmenides—whose attitude toward cosmology was ambivalent at best (cf. 50-1, 177, and 187)—the task of preparing “a schematic outline for an essentially mathematical account of the natural world” (42). But such is the simultaneously post-Socratic and pre-

Socratic τέλος that emerges triumphant in Kahn’s insightful but not altogether worthy sequel to his magisterial *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*.

## END NOTES

1 All parenthetical page references are to the book under review.

2 A few of these should be mentioned: Kahn’s use of “the default case” (10, 26, 116, and 120), the link between “the late learners” of *Sophist* with the first deduction in *Parmenides* (21-7), his advice to Neoplatonists (30), his remarks on the connection between *Parmenides* and *Philebus* (2, 8, and 45), his use of the term “anti-Platonic” (49 and 72), his telling phrase “author-reader complicity” (52), his many insightful remarks about Democritus beginning on 61, the juxtaposition of *Phaedrus* 249b and Kant (62; cf. 195), a brilliant and original discussion of elements (83), a crystal clear—and critical—reprise of the contrast between the “durative-stative” and “mutative-kinetic” in the Greek verbs “to be” and “to become” (97), the implications of 113n13—which introduces the troublesome relationship between “the linguistic and ontological levels” (cf. 115, 156, 164, 170, and 188), the interesting observation about the Stranger’s argumentation on 116n16, the illuminating discussion of the alphabet (133 and 154-5), a perceptive discussion—practically unique in taking the context into account—of Collection and Division in *Phaedrus* (135-6), the use of “complex unity” and “structured plurality” on 139, the structural anomaly of the (Socratic) sixth definition of the *Sophist* (140), suggestive comments about the Eleatic Stranger (146-7), the splendid use of the *langue/parole* distinction (155-56), the whole of chapter 5, the discussion of creation in Time in *Timaeus* (178), the marvelous use of “inconcinnity” (179), the luminous account of the Receptacle, especially on 190-1, the revealing comment about the Receptacle’s gender (192), the rehabilitation of Aristotle’s account of Plato’s “mathematics” along with the illuminating remarks on the history of philosophy on the same wonderful page (205), the summary of the Presocratics on sensation (208-213), and finally the two notes about James Lennox, who apparently can document Aristotle’s unacknowledged debt to *Philebus* (186n16 and 194n23), and who should be encouraged to do so in print without delay.

3 *Journal of Philosophy* 65, no. 12 (June 1968), 364-375, on 374.

4 Given the dualism-denying phenomenology of perception he celebrates in *Theaetetus* (90-93 and 114), the most important of these inconsistencies for Kahn is the account of what appears in the Receptacle before “the power of sense-perception” has emerged (192-3 and 206-13).