

[Platone], Assioco. Saggio introduttivo, edizione critica, traduzione e commento a cura di Andrea Beghini, (Diotima. Studies in Greek Philology, 4), Baden-Baden: Academia Verlag 2020. Pp. 395.

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How can we be both happy and aware of the fact that one day we will die? And how can we overcome the unhappiness caused by the fear of death? These are some of the crucial questions addressed in the pseudo-Platonic *Axiochus*. Indeed, one of the most astonishing and intriguing features of this dialogue is the interweaving of themes and incompatible theses from different philosophical traditions. Held together within a consolatory framework, these arguments bring about Axiochus' evolution from his initial fear of death to complete acceptance of it. A comprehensive and accurate analysis of this enigmatic dialogue is now offered by Andrea Beghini (henceforth B.). His book, *[Platone], Assioco* (Baden-Baden: 2020), consists of a critical edition and a new Italian translation, with an extensive introductory essay and a thorough commentary. A wide-ranging bibliography and an index of names and subjects complete the work. This study is part of a recent revival of studies on the *Axiochus*¹ and introduces innovative elements both on the critical-textual level and in the relation to the dialogue's chronology and structure.

The critical edition (p. 169-183) is based on a survey of 37 manuscripts and is the most extensive collation available to date. It significantly improves upon the two currently authoritative editions, that by John Burnet (1913) and that by Joseph Souilhé (1930). This new edition largely confirms the stemmatic reconstruction by Levi A. Post (1934), while better defining the relationship between the manuscripts at each level of the stemma. The text mostly relies on A (Parisinus gr. 1807, saec. IX, post med.) and Vv (V: Parisinus gr. 2110, saec. XIV; v: Laurentianus plut. 11.13, saec. XIV), whose variants are fully recorded. The work also has the merit of taking the indirect tradition systematically into account, with particular attention to Stobeus. Based, as

it is, on a new critical edition, B.' translation represents a step forward compared to the two previous Italian translations,² both of which relied on Burnet (1913).

As regards the date of composition and the authorship, B. places the *Axiochus* within the framework of the sceptical Academy. More precisely, he argues that the dialogue was composed between 88 and 45 BC by an Academic author belonging to Philo of Larissa and Cicero's circle. He does not rule out that Philo himself may have written it (p. 84-85). Characterised by complex spiritual dynamics, in which pessimism, scepticism and faith coexist, the dialogue would reflect the last phase of the Academy, i.e. the end of an era and a metamorphosis within the Platonic tradition (p. 85).

B.'s hypothesis is supported not only by linguistic evidence, but also by Pseudo-Plato's methodological approach, which is labelled as "empirical-pragmatic" (p. 67). In an attempt to console Axiochus and banish his fear of death, Socrates resorts to different arguments, whose soundness is not assumed *a priori*, but concretely shown in their effectiveness. In other words, the main arguments against the fear of death – the insensibility of the soul and its immortality – are evaluated not on the ground of their truth and logical strength, but on that of their practical outcomes and consolatory efficacy. In this sense, Axiochus' endorsement of the second argument is not primarily rational, but rather intuitive and instinctive (p. 67-72, on this point see also p. 86, 231, 312, 314). In this context, B.'s remarks on the *modus operandi* adopted by Pseudo-Plato in composing the dialogue are also interesting. The author presumably collected arguments from various sources, and then rearranged them into the argumentative-conceptual sections of his dialogue (p. 39). Such a way of proceeding – as B. suggests – would fit well

with the hypothesis of a work written within the sceptical Academy, whose chief aim was not to demonstrate any specific thesis, but rather to test the persuasiveness of different philosophical views on a certain issue (p. 40). This hypothesis, according to B., would also explain the striking proximity between the *Axiochus* and Cicero's *Tusculanae*, both of which may be traced back to Philo of Larissa's school. More specifically, both the pragmatic-empirical method and the moderate scepticism attested in Pseudo-Plato and Cicero would stem from Philo (p. 75-81). On the basis of a close analysis of the several continuities between the *Axiochus* and the first book of the *Tusculanae*, B. rules out both Cicero's direct dependence on Pseudo-Plato and their derivation from a common source (p. 30-38, see also p. 72-81). Rather, the proximity between the two works would be due to the fact that they reflect the same cultural *milieu* (p. 75, 81).

It is now worth dwelling on B.'s innovative view of the dialogue's structure (p. 42-67). After identifying twelve thematic sections into which the dialogue is articulated,³ B. carefully examines the points of transition between them and highlights a number of textual anomalies, including the abrupt passage from section 8 to section 9, and from 9 to 10 (see *Ax.* 370b1, 369b5). It is noteworthy that B. explains these and further textual problems not by postulating lacunae, but by arguing that the *Axiochus* is an unfinished work (p. 46). According to B., Pseudo-Plato first worked on each thematic section separately, without being able to put the finishing touches to the junctions between them. For this reason, the sections sometimes seem to be poorly juxtaposed. More generally, this reading allows B. to reject the view that Pseudo-Plato was an incompetent writer. As a result, the dialogue should not be dismissed as a literary work of poor quality, but simply

regarded as somewhat flawed in its structure inasmuch as – being unfinished – it could not be refined in detail (p. 42-48).

Moreover, B. suggests that a number of argumentative inconsistencies in the dialogue (p. 48-51) may be due to textual disorder and may be overcome by moving section 9 (369b5-370b1) between sections 3 and 4 (at 365e2), thus obtaining the order 1), 2), 3), 9), 4), 5), 6), 7), 8), 10), 11), 12). In this way, the argumentation would develop as follows: a) argument of the soul's insensibility (sections 3 and 9); b) first argument for the immortality of the soul (sections 4-5); c) Prodicus' *epideixis* on the miseries of corporeal life (sections 6-8); d) second argument for the immortality of the soul, which proves to be persuasive (sections 10-12). The main advantages of this rearrangement are that: i) the two passages of the dialogue in which Socrates defends the Epicurean thesis of the soul's insensibility (sections 3 and 9) are joined together in a consistent way; ii) the sequence from 4) to 12) is more coherent (although not entirely without problems) once section 9 is moved above; iii) Axiochus' "conversion" occurs gradually and seems more realistic (see p. 51-57 for further advantages of this rearrangement).

An additional remarkable feature of this book is its thorough exploration of sources. Besides Philo of Larissa and Cicero – already mentioned above – B. detects in the dialogue a rich variety of sources, including Homeric reminiscences, Platonic eschatological myths, the Ancient Academy, Hellenistic philosophies, comedy, scientific and medical literature, consolatory repertoires, moralistic writings ascribable to the "Cynic-Stoic diatribe", and forensic oratory (see p. 30-42 and commentary, *passim*). Finally, the book contains extensive and detailed information on the several topographical and historical allusions made in the dialogue.

As far as historical information goes, a number of anachronisms are appropriately noted.

All things considered, B.'s hypothesis on the dialogue's chronology turns out to be well supported and generally persuasive. Also convincing are B.'s strategies in reconstructing and rearranging the text, which significantly improve the dialogue's argumentative structure. Nonetheless, some issues leave room for further investigation. How are we to reconcile the view that the *Axiochus* was written in the sceptical Academy with the dialogue's epilogue, which does not sound sceptical at all? Secondly, why did Pseudo-Plato choose precisely Prodicus as a source for his consolatory arguments? What is more, how are we to explain Prodicus' being credited with two incompatible theses, i.e. the souls' insensibility and its immortality? And how, if at all, should we distinguish Socrates' view from Prodicus' reported arguments? Although addressed in B.'s reconstruction, such questions may be worthy of further examination and discussion.

In conclusion, this book stands out for its methodological rigour and philological accuracy. Moreover, it devotes much attention to the dialogue's lines of arguments and consistency. All in all, not only does it provide a much valuable analysis of the *Axiochus*, but surely represents a pivotal contribution to the wider field of pseudo-Platonic studies.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 See Döring-Erler-Schorn (2005), esp. the contributions by Erler (p. 81-95), Joyal (p. 97-117), and Tulli (p. 255-271); Männlein-Robert (2012), Irwin (2015), Menchelli (2016) and Beghini (2021). For further recent publications both on the *Axiochus* and on pseudo-Platonica in general, see Donato (2021).
- 2 Sillitti (1966), and Aronadio (2008).
- 3 *Axiochus*, 1) 364a1-364c8; 2) 364d1-365c7; 3) 365d1-365e2; 4) 365e2-366b1; 5) 366b2-366c5; 6) 366c5-367b7; 7) 367b7-368a7; 8) 368a7-369b5; 9) 369b5-370b1; 10) 370b1-370e4; 11) 371a1-372a3; 12) 372a3-372a16.