

Gerd van Riel, *Plato's Gods* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2013); vii and 137 pp.; \$153.00 (cloth), \$50.95 (paper), \$45.86 (ebook).

This interesting book attempts to retrieve “a general and systematized account of the gods in Plato” (1), something that is a difficult task because Plato nowhere provides such a thing. Van Riel sets out to disprove the prevailing Aristotelian interpretation of Plato, that a single metaphysical principle that underpins all should be identified as god. He posits that Plato’s metaphysics and theology are different, and that the gods are not metaphysical principles, but rather divine souls. Chapter 1, “Plato’s Religion,” discusses the *Republic* and the *Laws*, stating that while the state must protect the purity of religion it may not establish it, and processes like the appointment of priests is done “by lot, for it is thereby left to god to decide, though of course the candidates are screened for capability and purity” (8). Van Riel analyses the myth of Prometheus and allies the possession of fire with the religious attitude, which underlies social standards. That the Greeks did not possess a term equivalent to “religion” is noted, and it is argued that for Plato, piety and virtue stem from “the acceptance of the existence of the gods and the acknowledgement that we ought to orient ourselves towards that which is most divine in us” (16). For van Riel, Plato holds a traditional view of the gods and religion, and that humans should strive to imitate and emulate the gods (in opposition to the Aristotelian notion that god is intellect and human should seek assimilation to intellect).

Chapter 2, “Plato’s Theology,” discusses the tension in Greek mythology between cosmology and anthropomorphism, and Plato’s rejection of agnosticism and atheism (most clearly in the figure of the Athenian in *Laws* Book X), while being “very much aware of the limits of our understanding when it comes to grasping [the] true nature” of the gods (33). Van Riel notes that Plato moves between god and the gods without distinction, and that he does not reject anthropomorphism. Rather, he rejects atheism by pointing to order in the universe, asserting that this order entails the existence of a moral order, and that the gods are divine souls. In the case of celestial bodies (planets, stars and so on) this corporeality does not affect the status of the divine soul, but even in the case of anthropomorphic gods they are “pure soul[s], upon which the presence of a body

has no influence whatsoever" (51). It is observed that some interpreters think Plato's references to the traditional anthropomorphic gods are ironic; that he does not believe in them. Van Riel surveys a range of Platonic dialogues to demonstrate that this is not correct; Plato accepts the traditional gods, and in his theology "the gods have different modes of appearance" (59). That is, they may be linked to both celestial and humanlike bodies.

In chapter 3, "Theology and Metaphysics," van Riel argues that all interpretations of how Plato's theology and metaphysics fit together are either cosmological or metaphysical. His own view is a "cosmological" explanation, but with a distinct character. He repeats his rejection of Aristotelian metaphysics as a lens through which to read Plato; the "metaphysical monotheism" that emerges from "god" instantiating "the highest mode of being" (65). Van Riel thinks Plato is closer to the views expressed by "the tragic poets" and "traditional religious belief" (66). He investigates how *nous* (intellect) functions, and argues that "Platonic intellect is the activity of knowing the intelligible Forms *as performed* by rational souls" (75). Van Riel works mostly with the interpretations of Plato recently proposed by Stephen Menn, Michael Bordt, and Filip Karfik. Van Riel considers the role of the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*, who is called a "god" and who "operates as the maker and father of gods and souls," but is limited by time in this task, which "he hands over . . . to the gods" (86). Van Riel's analysis of whether intellect can exist apart from soul, the realms of Being and Becoming, the circles of the Same and the Different, and whether the Demiurge can be identified as Plato's supreme god, or Zeus, or intellect, is complex and requires careful and critical reading. He surprisingly ends up agreeing with the older interpretation of Francis Cornford (1874–1943); "the Demiurge is Reason that resides in the World-soul" (109). He clarifies that reason is present in the soul of any god, but that the World-soul "is the first and most important bearer of this intellect" (110).

This book is very interesting because it argues that Plato was a believer in the traditional Greek gods, and that he saw them as subordinated to the Good (meaning that their divine souls are of necessity good, they cannot choose to be otherwise). Van Riel does not see this as a reduction of the traditional gods or the identification of the Good and the Forms as higher gods. Rather, he interprets them as "structuring principles that impose themselves on *all* beings" (117). For Plato, then, the gods remain the gods, and it is they who reward and punish the human souls. This is an important book for those interested in

Pagan Studies because it rehabilitates ancient Greek ideas about the gods as valid and able to exist alongside the allegedly more sophisticated readings that were proposed by philosophers from the sixth century BCE onwards. *Plato's Gods*, though a short study, requires tenacity and concentration on the part of those not trained in ancient philosophy, but is a worthwhile object of study.

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