



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2022

**Review of: Thomas Alexander Szlezák, „Platon. Meisterdenker der Antike“,
Verlag C.H. Beck, München, 2021**

Ferber, Rafael

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-221155>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Ferber, Rafael (2022). Review of: Thomas Alexander Szlezák, „Platon. Meisterdenker der Antike“, Verlag C.H. Beck, München, 2021. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 60(4):687-688.

Book Reviews

Thomas Alexander Szlezák. *Platon: Meisterdenker der Antike*. Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2021. Pp. 779. Hardback, €38.00.

Since 1976, when Thomas A. Szlezák held his inaugural lecture as a private lecturer (*Privatdozent*) at the University of Zurich entitled “The Dialogue Form and Esotericism: On the Interpretation of the Platonic Dialogue the *Phaedrus*” (“Dialogform und Esoterik. Zur Deutung des platonischen Dialogs *Phaidros*”), the now-emeritus professor at Tübingen has advocated a particular interpretation of the Platonic dialogues and especially of the *Phaedrus*: namely, that what is referred to in the latter dialogue—without further explanation—as “more valuable” (*timiōtera*) than what is set down in writing corresponds to Plato’s “so called unwritten doctrines” (Aristotle, *Physics* IV.2, 209b14–15), or for Szlezák, “unwritten positions ascribed” (116–17) to Plato. This expression ‘more valuable’ does not merely refer to occasional oral help provided by the author in order to better understand his writings, but rather to those Platonic views that were transmitted in unwritten form, whose contents go beyond what is found in the written *Corpus Platonicum* and that specifically concern the principles of his philosophy. Having collected a large portion of his scholarly output in his *Essays on Greek Literature and Philosophy* (*Aufsätze zur griechischen Literatur und Philosophie* [Baden-Baden: Academia Verlag, 2019]), Szlezák now presents here a “summa” of his research in three parts for a broader public: (1) Life, (2) Works, and (3) Plato’s thought. Additionally, there are two appendices: one on the *Seventh Letter* and another dedicated to the concepts of irony and register.

In the first part of the book, Szlezák claims, among other things, that the “unforgettable” Socrates, as we know him from the early and middle dialogues, is a “creation of Plato” (43). Szlezák rightly notes that Socrates understood his philosophical activity—that is, his activity of “examining himself and others” (*Apology* 28e5–6)—as a service to the God (*Apology* 23c1), and that Plato’s *Apology* was not written immediately after Socrates’s trial in 399 BC, but “years later,” as Nietzsche had already concluded (“The *Apology* is such a masterpiece, that it can only be attributed to a fully mature author” [*Lecture Notes*, WS 1874/75–WS 1878/79, *History of Greek Literature I and II*, in *Nietzsche Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), II-5:196–97]). Szlezák sees the Platonic Academy as a cross between a private university and a life community oriented toward free research. Plato’s three Sicilian voyages are recounted at length, along with his relationship to Dion, who was “the great love of Plato’s life” (84).

In the second part of the book, Szlezák emphasises that “everything that Plato published” was “preserved for posterity” (95). However, Plato should not be understood solely on the basis of his written publications, but also on the basis of the “unwritten positions ascribed” (116) to him. In an extended interpretation of the *Seventh Letter*, whose authenticity according to Szlezák can be assumed in the absence of proof to the contrary, Szlezák interprets the famous claim that what Plato is seriously concerned with is not sayable, unlike other doctrines, in a twofold sense: on the one hand, the “transmission of the spark” (187) is not sayable; on the other hand, the “dialectical thought-processes leading to the illumination of understanding” (187) should not be communicated (in writing), because they would then also be accessible to readers who have neither the character traits nor the intellectual capacities necessary to understand them.

In the book's voluminous third part, Szlezák provides specific interpretations of Plato's metaphilosophy, anthropology, theory of the soul, ethics, politics, cosmology, discovery of the Forms, and theory of principles, and, finally, of Plato's views of myths, religion, gods, and the "God." In doing so, Szlezák draws attention to the so-called "passages of omission" (*Aussparungstellen*) (198–200, 210–17, 242–44 *passim*), which point toward the "unwritten positions ascribed" to Plato; he provides an imposing overview of Plato's thought; and he defends claims such as that the Platonic Forms have "change, life, soul and understanding" (*Sophist* 248e6–7)—that is, that the Platonic world of Forms is "a self-thinking, transcendent intellect" (474–75). But the dark side of Plato's politics is not overlooked either, such as not to raise the "disabled" children of the proposed ruling class.

It is impossible to do justice here to this extraordinary book. That said, it does raise a number of questions. First of all, the immense secondary literature, especially on Plato's thought, is only selectively referred to. For instance, why is there no mention, for example, of the competing interpretation of the *Seventh Letter* advanced by the Italian Plato scholar Luigi Stefanini (*Platone*, vol. I, 2nd rev. ed. [Milan, 1949, repr. Padova: Istituto Di Filosofia, 1991], chap. 3, xxxii), which enables the philosopher to reach not the truth, but only "truth-likeness" (*verosimiglianza*) (chap. 4, xlvi)? Furthermore, how is the "illumination" in the *Seventh Letter* to be understood? Since the Platonic *nous* is "always [connected] with true *logos*" (*Timaeus* 51e3), the "light" in the soul would have to be a "super-*nous*" (so to speak) that no longer knows "with true *logos*" or true propositions. However, the soul of the philosopher is also embodied, and, at least according to *Phaedo* 66e2–67a2, only arrives at the goal of ultimate understanding after death. Must the soul, then, not be disembodied in this life to reach this "light" while still alive? Is the best that the embodied soul, even that of the philosopher king and queen, can attain not the full truth, but a mere "approximation" to the truth, if *nous* is only "closest (*engytata*) in kinship and likeness" to the "fifth" item, that is, the Platonic Form (*Seventh Letter*, 342d1; cf. *Phaedo* 67a3)? The ideal city, too, can only be realized approximatively (cf. *Republic* 473a8). Whether Plato—who in the later *Philebus* refers to the Socratic "divination" about the Form of the Good (*Philebus* 64a3)—left his teacher so far behind him that he himself no more divines, but knows, and allows his embodied philosopher kings and queens to know, what his teacher did not, remains an open question, since no one can peer into Plato's mind. To modify Goethe's *Faust* (II, v. 9983): *Mit meiner Königin zu seyn, verlangt mich heißt*: Plato fervently desired to be with his queen and king, but did he ever forget the "unforgettable" Socrates and the Socratic interpretation of the Delphic oracle: "This one of you, O human beings, is wisest, who, like Socrates, recognizes that he is in truth worthless in respect to wisdom" (*Apology*, 23bc–4, trans. Brickhouse/Smith with modification)? Ultimately, we must ask the question of the extent to which the unwritten Platonic positions of the One and the Indefinite Dyad belong in a museum of philosophy or remain relevant for today and the future.

However we might answer these and other questions, Szlezák's book is a wonderful accomplishment that also introduces new (or at least unusual) elements to Platonic thought, for example, an interpretation of the Platonic world of Forms as "a self-thinking, transcendent intellect." His philological skill and lucid style are particularly commendable. Plato's admirers and specialists owe Szlezák a considerable debt of gratitude for the fact that he once again did take the "path of Eros" (cf. *Parmenides* 137a6) and completed this magnum opus. (I thank Ch. Jorgenson for helping me with my English.)

RAFAEL FERBER

University of Lucerne / University of Zürich

Matthew Duncombe. *Ancient Relativity: Plato, Aristotle, Stoics, and Sceptics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xii + 294. Hardback, \$70.00.

In this book, Matthew Duncombe argues that Plato, Aristotle, certain Stoics, and Sextus Empiricus each held a broadly "constitutive" view of relativity. According to constitutive