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Continuum's *Guides for the Perplexed* are described by the publisher as 'clear, concise and accessible introductions to thinkers, writers and subjects that students and readers can find especially challenging.' The three works reviewed here fit that description admirably, and would fit well into reading lists for introductory undergraduate courses. The authors have adopted different strategies for reducing their fields to manageable proportions. Holowchak and Vella have provided systematic treatments accompanied by generous quotation from primary sources, thus allowing the reader, even without further study, to get an overview of their subjects' main themes. Press's work, on the other hand, whilst it is both a valuable corrective to other over-systematic introductions and a helpful accompaniment to the reading of the actual Platonic dialogues, does not provide, on its own, such an overview of Plato's doctrines. It is, in compensation, perhaps the intellectually richest of the works under review.

Holowchak's book concentrates on the philosophers of the period of Roman Stoicism, with a particular emphasis and extensive quotation from the works of Seneca. As a result, it concentrates very much on the ethics of Stoicism, with only brief consideration of other aspects such as cosmology and logic. As well as providing an
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introduction to the ideas of the classical philosophers, Holowchak is concerned to present Stoicism as a suitable way of life in the modern world. Such an approach is likely to engage both undergraduates and general readers. The book is accordingly dotted with helpful maxims from the Stoics on how to live well, in addition to the application of Stoic principles to modern cases.

Holowchak begins with an introduction setting out the historical background, the strategy of his book, and the key features of what he calls 'canonical Stoicism'. One of the main drawbacks of his approach is the downplaying of differences between authors and periods in the construction of this imagined 'canonical Stoicism'. Even if, due to the restrictions inherent in an introductory work, a focus on the main shared elements of Stoicism is understandable, a greater acknowledgment of the differences within the movement, of the possibility of different scholarly interpretations of those views, and an encouragement for students to explore these complexities beyond the present work would have been welcome. The following two chapters explore the principles of Stoicism under the headings, 'The Stoic Sage' and 'The Stoic Progressor'. Here, Holowchak's emphasis on the practical application of Stoic ethics leads him to abandon the ideal of the attainment of moral perfectionism in favour of an emphasis on moral progressivism: that one strives daily towards the ideal of the sage without ever achieving it. In practical terms, there is much to be said for such a strategy: it does justice to the practical and therapeutic emphasis of the Roman Stoics such as Epictetus, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, whilst also fitting in more easily with a modern sensibility which distrusts claims of moral perfection. Nevertheless, this relatively quick abandonment of a position which was already much criticized in antiquity by opponents of Stoicism is slightly troubling: what precisely are we missing in denying the possibility and importance of perfection?

The remaining chapters deal with concrete applications of Stoic principles. As already noted, Holowchak makes great use of modern
cases in his discussion of Stoic ethics. We have, for example, the case of the $34 million lottery winners who died as result of alcohol and drug abuse to illustrate the need for Stoic equanimity in prosperity, as well a discussion of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* to illustrate the same quality in adversity. For an academic audience in particular, the discussions here would benefit from the introduction of some more critical discussion. If Holowchak is suggesting that Stoicism is viable as a substantive modern ethic, it needs to be subject to the same sort of questioning that any other modern ethical position faces. The Stoic emphasis on equanimity and at least a guardedness in particular commitments is certainly vulnerable. Does such a strategy impair the full possibilities of human flourishing, particularly in personal relationships?

Any single volume introduction to a wide area is liable to be criticized for not being a different book. Holowchak has written a clear, engaging treatment which, taken as a whole, can be recommended both as an academic introduction to classical Stoic ethics and as a guide to its possible resurrection as an approach to modern living.

Vella's book on Aristotle attempts to provide a systematic overview of the whole of the Aristotelian *corpus*. It is not, however, quite true, as claimed on the back cover, that it considers 'all Aristotle's key works'. Vella concentrates on the *Posterior Analytics*, *Metaphysics*, *Categories*, *On the Soul* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, using them to treat the themes of scientific methodology, substance, nature, soul and *eudaimonia*. As the absence of any consideration of Aristotle's more empirical works might suggest, this is a portrait of Aristotle as systematizer, the developer of a methodology of knowledge in the *Posterior Analytics* which applies throughout the *corpus* and is used by Vella to organize his own explorations. Accordingly, after an introductory chapter setting out some brief historical background and an explanation of the organization of the guide, the first chapter proper presents a picture of knowledge as
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tidily organized into different spheres, and, within those spheres, demonstrated in syllogisms by deduction from axioms. Although Vella notes, rightly, that this is a picture of the presentation of an achieved knowledge rather than how that knowledge is achieved in the first place, he nevertheless suggests that ‘completed sciences will all exhibit a demonstrative character as well as aspirations to necessity and universality’ (20). Opinions will vary on how helpful an understanding of the corpus this is. Certainly, it provides a convenient theoretical background for an introduction, the systematic nature of which can be held to reflect the systematic nature of the subject matter. My own view is that Aristotle is better regarded as a far less systematic thinker, and that setting up within the reader expectations of finding a system in fact gets in the way of an appreciation of the rich diversity of his thought. Vella does not entirely ignore the unsystematic aspects of Aristotle’s thought, noting, for example, that his works are probably edited collections of lecture notes which may combine material from different periods of his intellectual development (6-8). However, little is made of this in the actual discussions of the works. For example, in the treatment of the Nicomachean Ethics, despite mentioning a tension between competing versions of the good life within the work, Vella quickly explains this tension away as the result of differing emphases on aspects of human nature (132-3). Whatever one finally makes of this suggestion, readers would have been better served by at least some mention of the variety of scholarly views in this area, and particularly of the possibility that the complex textual history and development of Aristotle’s own position over his career have resulted in irreconcilable views being contained in the one volume.

Vella’s book provides a clear and systematic account of some key elements in Aristotle’s philosophy, together with extensive quotation from the original texts. Despite its overly systematic treatment of the corpus, it thus provides a useful addition to introductory works in this area.
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If, at times, Vella’s guide to Aristotle is slightly reminiscent of the systematization of the mediaeval schools, Press’s guide to Plato might be caricatured as presenting a post-modern Plato. It must be quickly added that such a description should not be taken as suggesting that the work in any way suffers from opaque language or lack of rigour in philosophical thought: as with the other titles under review, clarity of language and purpose is evident throughout. However, Press does emphasize the polysemous and open nature of Plato’s texts, and the consequent need for a variety of approaches in order to do justice to them. For Press, the ‘dialogues individually and as a group enact a conception of philosophy as a path or way to wisdom rather than as a doctrine or system of beliefs, knowledge of which or belief in which is thought to contain wisdom. The emphasis is on proceeding in a direction rather than on the destination to be reached’ (173). As a result, Press’ book presents a manual on how to read Plato rather than a summary of the results of such a reading. Indeed, the direct examination of Plato’s theories – or, to be more precise, in Press’s terms, ‘persistent themes’ – takes up only one short chapter.

The book is divided into four parts. After an introductory chapter explaining the strategy of the work, part I deals with the historical and intellectual background to the dialogues. There follows the second and by far the greater part of the book, some 100 pages, devoted to elements in the dialogues which contribute to the deliberate arousing of perplexity in the reader such as the use of myth, irony and, most importantly, the dialogic form itself. Part III deals with the permanent features within the shifting patterns of Part II, but even here, the emphasis is on abiding aspects such as the masking of the author within the dialogues and teaching by enactment rather than the discussion of any theoretical content. Part IV contains a practical example of how to read a passage in Plato, using Meno 70A-74B as a case study. Here, Press suggests a three stage approach. The dialogue should be first read to discover and assess the lines of argument in the dialogue. It should then be considered with

Prudentia 39.2 (2007), pages 51-155

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a focus on ‘contextual, literary and dramatic elements and details’ (188). The third and final reading should then try to integrate the first two readings, paying particular attention to the way in which the literary-dramatic features can intensify, clarify, counterbalance or invert aspects of the argument (192). Summaries of the most important dialogues follow, together with a glossary of key Greek terms in transliteration.

Press’ work is, as a whole, intriguing and challenges many of the preconceptions with which Plato is often read, particularly within philosophy departments. Its chief failing as an introduction, however, is a lack of engagement with the texts as philosophical arguments. For beginners, there is no alternative to grappling with the details of the arguments within the dialogues, as Press himself recognizes in his first ‘logical’ stage of reading a dialogue (186-8), and this guide provides insufficient help in this area. Moreover, Press is oddly blind to the almost certainty of some form of development in Plato’s views over the dialogues, dismissing this developmental approach in three short paragraphs (51-2). Unlike the other two guides under review, it cannot therefore be recommended to a reader wishing to gain a general acquaintance with the key ideas of a school or author within the space of one work. It can, however, be wholeheartedly recommended as a necessary corrective to other works which emphasize an engagement with Plato as the author of explicit philosophical theories.

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