As the title indicates, this book is a collection of observations that concentrate on the middle books of the Republic. Two-thirds of the volume is devoted to a series of five lectures on the middle books, given by the author at the University of Macerata in April 2000, and the collection is completed with three related pieces on, respectively, the cave, the idea of the good as a first principle, and the knowability of ideas and principles in Plato.

If any single theme unites the observations, it is Szlezák’s rendering of the ἀγαφας δόγματα thesis. For Szlezák, the Socrates of the Republic is a philosopher in possession of wisdom, who is nevertheless not in a position—not among present company, that is—to formulate his knowledge, because the degree of philosophical maturity of his interlocutors Glaucon and Adeimantus is less than would permit such communication.

If the ‘unwritten doctrine’ school has been oft criticized for trafficking in pure speculation, Szlezák deftly turns such criticism back against interpretive traditions that go back to Schleiermacher. The aporetic structure of the dialogue, for the latter, indicates an indirect argument that is a challenge to the reader, not a series of set conclusions, but a means to aid the reader toward philosophic knowledge. This, so Szlezák, is but an ‘invitation to read between the lines’ (eine Aufforderung zum Lesen zwischen den Zeilen: 21), and Schleiermacher confuses the role of oral philosophical discussion, according to this view, with the dialogue. The platonic dialogue is not philosophical aporia inviting reflection, but an unambiguous assertion that philosophical insight can be communicated only in person and orally.

There are moments where Szlezák’s interpretation conveys an aura of Socrates as Zen master, or of the traditional Islamic interpretation of Plato as a link in a wisdom tradition, where insight can
be communicated exclusively by personal transmission from master to disciple.

Yet this is not Szlezák’s view. The doctrines are not unwritten for reasons of mysticism. Szlezák repudiates the view that insight into the highest principles, into the essence of the good itself, cannot be communicated, and so must be expressed in images, seeing in this view evidence of the imprint of Wittgenstein’s ‘unspeakable’. (The result of modern currents that ‘unter dem Endruck [sic] des von Wittgenstein thematisierten “Unsagbaren” die wahrheitserschließende Kraft der Bilder und Metaphern in die Mittelpunkt rückt:’ 47.) Szlezák might well have traced this further to the neoplatonic interpretive tradition that makes Being and the Good transcendent.

Citing *Rep.* 533-4, Szlezák asserts that the metaphors in principle can be unpacked, that the dialogue unambiguously implies that Socrates possesses understanding of the nature of the Good and would be able to discursively clarify it. (‘der Text ist völlig eindeutig darin, daß Sokrates von seiner “Ansicht” auch direkt reden könnte’: 47.)

Insofar as Szlezák does not adopt a mystical interpretation of Plato, it is not clear that he can consistently distinguish his position from some that he rejects. Why write a dialogue that depicts only conversations between Socrates and interlocutors who are not up to the task? If the insight that Socrates possesses is to be gained by rational argument (and if in principle anyone could be a philosopher), then there should be nothing peculiar to oral as opposed to written communication that would prevent depiction of true doctrines in a dialogue among those already philosophically accomplished. And the dialogue, as it is, should be just as instructive to the reader who does not yet possess Socrates’ level of insight as it is to Glaucon or Adeimantus. Which would mean that the dialogue would be in effect a problem for our, the reader’s, edification.

Szlezák shows throughout both a careful and thoughtful reading of the text. He is quite persuasive in his rejection of any reading that would make first principles transcendent. This only makes it all the
more difficult to claim special status for oral as opposed to written communication. In answer, the Republic provides Szlezák’s only real key: in the written dialogue as in the ideal state, the μέγιστα μαθήματα are reserved exclusively for those qualified. A premature communication of doctrine not metaphorically reconstituted for easier digestion would be counterproductive. (‘Die vorzeitige Mitteilung ist allemal kontraproduktiv’: 52).

The parallel, however, appears to be faulty. In the ideal state (which, Szlezák argues, is intended as a realizable ideal, not fictional utopia) education in philosophy too early is dangerous, because the immature might put its methods to use for purposes other than the pursuit of good and truth. If, on the other hand, Glaucon and Adeimantus are not ready to go the longer path, there is no suggestion in the text that exposure to philosophical truth rather than its image would corrupt the brothers.

The unwritten doctrine thesis has been one of those fundamental and unbridgeable divides in Platonic scholarship. Either one hails from Tübingen or Milan, or not. Szlezák is unlikely to convert any of the uninitiated in these pages, but that does not detract from the book’s overall worth. Apart from the main thesis, Szlezák develops a variety of points, arguing for the knowability of forms and principles, the identification of the Good with the One, discussing the use of image and metaphor in the dialogues, the nature of the causality of the Good, the relation of knowledge to the best state. All of Szlezák’s remarks show sensitivity to the dramatic structure of the dialogues, and he infallibly attends thoroughly to relevant passages. Even if not persuaded, the reader is sure to be profitably intellectually engaged by Szlezák’s reflections.

David Ambuel
University of Mary Washington
Fredericksburg, Va.