Book Reviews

Plotinus


Barrie Fleet’s book is the ninth volume in the series of translations with commentaries of selected tractates from Plotinus’s *Enneads* directed by Professors John Dillon and Andrew Smith. The series, by now widely known and much reviewed, was established in 2012 with Fleet’s translation of IV.8 [6].\(^1\) Both here and there his decades-long dedication\(^2\) to the study of Plotinus is conspicuous.

*Ennead IV.7* [2] does not exhibit the same philosophical depth and originality as other writings from the Plotinian corpus in which the soul is the main theme, like IV.3-5 [27-29], but may well reflect the philosopher’s teaching activities. Such feature, however, does not make the interpreter’s work easier, for it requires from him special attention to Plotinus’ usually unnamed sources and interlocutors. This is a task Fleet executes remarkably well in the 225 pages of his massive commentary.

On the other hand, the short introduction of this volume is somewhat frustrating, as it seems to have been hastily written, sometimes overlapping with the descriptive synopsis that follows the introduction. Fleet quickly locates Plotinus’ treatment of the immortality of the soul in the history of ancient Platonism, and explains that the philosopher’s aim in the tractate is to defend this fundamental Platonic tenet against materialist conceptions of soul held especially by Peripatetic and Stoic thinkers. Unfortunately, Fleet does not insert Plotinus’ discussions here in the broader frame of his psychology, putting the emphasis, as he says (p. 26), on commenting Plotinus’ text in the light of what he considers to have been the discussions held in the seminars described by Porphyry (*Life of Plotinus* 14, 4-7 and 10-14)—that is, to expound Plotinus’

---

1. It was reviewed by Suzanne Stern-Gillet (*IJPT* 8, issue 2, 2014, p. 234-236).
2. Fleet has also translated and commented on *Enn. I 11.6* [26] (Oxford, 1995).
replies to the commentaries on Plato and Aristotle that were read in the seminars, as well as his Platonizing appropriation of Stoic ideas.

There is not much to say regarding Fleet’s translation besides that it is fluent and in general reliable. He usually preserves the traditional renderings of philosophical concepts (theôría, energeia, hypokeimenon and so on), and uses a considerable part of the commentary to explain Greek words and their translations to readers who cannot read Greek. Sometimes, however, I found Fleet’s procedure confusing. The most serious case, I believe, is that of ousia, which he renders as i) “substance” (IV.7, 3, 9, p. 46), ii) “being” (5, 35, p. 51), iii) “true being” (85, 47, p. 66), iv) “real being” (14, 8, p. 74), v) “essence” (9, 15, p. 66), vi) “substantial being” (12, 7, p. 71). It is true that Fleet, when commenting on 3, 9 (p. 102), warns the reader that he is translating ousia as “substance” there; but he does not say a word about the other renderings. This is unfortunate for two reasons: first, while we are used to read “substance” and “essence” translating ousia, we normally expect other terms to be translating on, or even hypostasis in the case of vi); second, on the few times that to on and to einai appear in this treatise, Fleet also translates them as “true being” and “being”, as he does on p. 66 (9, 1-2), without warning his readers in the commentary. In fact, this page (roughly the translation of 85, 45 to 9, 15) makes for distressing reading: we find ousia translated as “being”, “real being”, “true being” and “essence”; to ontôs on as “truly existent” and “true being”; and to einai as “being”.

In his detailed commentary, as already mentioned, Fleet carefully scrutinizes Plotinus’ arguments, sources and opponents. He does so in a helpful way, quoting extensively translated passages from Plato and Middle Platonists, Aristotle and his followers, Stoic philosophers, and several others. Fleet has great ability to analyze and reconstruct complex arguments, and he does not spare it. There are few passages on which the non-scholarly reader would need more information than is provided. For an example in point, which also highlights the difficulties brought about by his multiple translations of ousia, I would mention Fleet’s comment on 11, 9-10 (p. 272-273)—“for either life is an essence, and soul is a being…” in his rendering, where both ‘essence’ and ‘being’ translate ousia. He quotes Mackenna’s, Armstrong’s, Bréhier’s, and Brisson-Pradeau’s translations in order to illustrate slightly different interpretations of the passage, and then adds that “a further difficulty is presented by the Greek word ousia, used twice in line 10. It can bear all of the meanings offered [by the four translators quoted]—essential reality, substance, reality; it can also mean, inter alia, ‘being’ and ‘essence’. To Plotinus, of course, it is just ousia, and so I have taken the liberty of translating the two instances differently here”. As one can see, no explanation whatsoever is provided, and the Greekless reader, I am afraid, will be entirely lost.
In my view, Fleet should have given a more accurate report of the most intriguing philological mystery in the Enneads: the absence of chapters 81-85 from Porphyry’s edition and their preservation in Eusebius’ Praeparatio Evangelica. Fleet mentions it very quickly on pages 24 and 234, in the latter passage incongruously pasting an extract cut from the first. In both pages he mentions John Dillon’s suggestion that these chapters have been included in a later version of the treatise which might have been part of Eustochius’ edition, but does not give bibliographical references to Dillon’s twice mentioned work, not even its year of publication. More importantly, he does not mention that there are several hypotheses trying to account for the mystery, all of which are discussed by Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé3 in an article that under no circumstances should have been neglected by Fleet.

There are very few typos in the book, but one of them is noteworthy: David Sedley’s Creationism and its Critics in Antiquity was published in 2007, not in 2004, an error already observed by Suzanne Stern-Gillet in her review of Fleet’s translation of Ennead IV.8 [6]. Unfortunately it remains uncorrected.

José C. Baracat Jr.
Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil
baracatjr@hotmail.com