W. Kühn, *Quel savoir après le scepticisme? Plotin et ses prédécesseurs sur la connaissance de soi*, 'Histoire des doctrines de l'antiquité classique' 37, Vrin, Paris 2009. ISBN 978-2-7116-1955-9. Price €50.

A long time ago, in his masterly *Notice* devoted to Plotinus' treatise v.3 [49] (Plotin, *Ennéades*, t. v. CUF, Paris 1931, p. 34. ff., curiously neglected by Kühn [= K.]), Émile Bréhier noted the parallel between the argument of v.3 [49], 5 and Sextus Empiricus' *M.* vii.310 ff. Sextus raises a number of objections to the view that intellect (*nous*) may know itself. In v.3 [49], 5 Plotinus picks up the Sceptical challenge and critically discusses some arguments which are closely similar (though not identical) to those in Sextus (indeed, Plotinus *may* have drawn these arguments from Sextus Empiricus, as K. appears to assume, but this is far from certain). However, what Plotinus intends to show is not merely that self-knowledge on the part of the intellect is possible, but that this self-reflexive knowledge coincides with knowledge in its full and true sense (here I follow K.'s convention and refrain from using capitals in designating Plotinus' metaphysical principles). K.'s imposing monograph takes v.3 [49], 5 as its starting point: this Plotinian chapter is here the focus of an analysis both unprecedented and difficult to match in its extension (one may usefully compare K.'s analysis with the discussion of the same Plotinian chapter in E.K. Emilsson, *Plotinus on Intellect*, Oxford 2007).

Through an exceedingly detailed line-by-line commentary, K. aims to develop an overall account of Plotinus' theory of knowledge as a response to Sceptical objections. To make an extremely long and complicated story short, Plotinus, according to K., (a) accepts and even extends the Sceptical arguments against the possibility of knowing external objects separate from the knowing subject (see K.'s in-depth commentary of v.5 [32], 1.50-68 at pp. 130-144) but (b) replaces this traditional account of knowledge with his own doctrine of the intellect's self-knowledge. According to Plotinus, it is not enough to claim that the intellect possesses its objects; rather, one should assume that the intellect and its objects are identical. Under such premises, objective knowledge coincides with the intellect's self-knowledge (pp. 121-130, with a commentary on the crucial lines v.3 [49], 5.21-28), which, in Plotinus' view, is invulnerable to Sceptical attacks. The intellect's perfect identity with its object entails that it knows itself as subject of knowledge (see v.3 [32], 5.10-15, pp. 62-77). K. extensively discusses the problem of how the intellect's self-knowledge may be seen to coincide with the intellect's knowledge of the ideas (see the third part of the work, pp. 198-311, where K. focuses on the final lines of Plotinus' chapter: v.3 [49], 5.31-48). Indeed, Plotinus argues that the intelligible being essentially 'knows' (v.3 [49], 5.33: see pp. 212-215, where K. parallels Plotinus' view with that of Plato, *Soph.* 248 e-249 a); since both the ideas and the intellect are identical with the activity of knowing (see e.g.

p. 199: 'aussi bien l'objet de la connaissance que son sujet s'identifient à l'acte de la connaissance'), they should be assumed to be identical. Thus, the intellect knows itself as both knowing subject and intelligible being. This view, however, presents a number of difficulties, which K. elucidates in detail. In particular, he points out that in his discussion Plotinus uses 'knowing' according to two different meanings, which he does not really mutually distinguish: a transitive meaning, whereby the activity of knowing refers to a separate object, and an intransitive one, whereby 'knowing' is compared to 'living' (pp. 236-240; 293).

Plotinus' epistemology, as K. remarks, is nothing but his theory of the intellect. K. aptly opposes Plotinus' approach to that of ancient philosophers who emphasize the processual character of knowledge and connect it with research (see Xenophanes' fr. 18 D.-K. quoted at p. 12). No doctrine of the sort is to be found in Plotinus, who instead conceives of discursive reason (i.e. reason that focuses on external objects) as something merely dependent on the perfect and self-directed thought of the intellect. It is worth quoting some of K.'s remarks: 'Plotin semble être le premier théoricien du savoir qui fasse l'économie d'une méthodologie. L'épistémologie de Plotin, c'est la théorie de l'intellect. Cela signifie que Plotin se borne à expliquer ce qu'est le savoir parfait par essence et non pas achevé au bout d'un cheminement rationnel. Une fois établi en théorie le savoir parfait qui serait aussi à l'origine du monde sensible, Plotin se contentera d'observer que la connaissance discursive en dépend' (p. 13). An appropriate discussion of the intellect's perfect knowing activity is thus a prerequisite for any account of knowledge. Interestingly (albeit not uncontroversially), K. argues that the intellect's dependence on the one does not play any significant role in Plotinus' account of knowledge (see pp. 19-24; 301-309, where K. focuses on such famous Plotinian passages as vi.7 [38], 16 and v.1 [10], 7). As I see it, Plotinus' radical top-down approach, which regards an adequate account of the intellect as a preliminary condition for dealing appropriately with the lower 'levels' of knowledge, is the same as that which characterizes other parts of his philosophy, such as his ethics and natural philosophy.

Certainly, Plotinus refutes Scepticism at a very high price: his ideal of intellectual self-knowledge may well be the result of an impressive philosophical effort, but it apparently fails to account for ordinary (and even scientific) 'mundane' knowledge (I would be more prudent than K. in comparing Plotinus' theory to contemporary accounts of self-knowledge [see pp. 258 and 425]; despite some resemblances, Plotinus' doctrine of the 'archetype' and divine hypostatic intellect shares very little, if anything, with contemporary views on human subjectivity). An interesting parallel may be drawn between Plotinus' anti-Sceptical strategy and that of Galen (see e.g. *Dig. Puls.* viii.781-783 K.). Galen tends to dismiss radical (or 'rustic', as he terms it) Pyrrhonism as an epistemically sterile attitude, which in

any case cannot consistently be pursued even by those who claim to be Sceptics (see R.J. Hankinson, 'Natural Criteria and the Transparency of Judgement: Antiochus, Philo and Galen on Epistemological Justification', in *Assent and Argument. Studies in Cicero's Academic Books*, ed. B. Inwood and J. Mansfeld, Leiden 1997, pp. 161-213). Plotinus' approach is philosophically far more sophisticated than that of Galen. Yet, one may object that Plotinus' theory of the intellect's self-knowledge is nothing but an auto-referential construction with no real explanatory power and actually philosophically more sterile than its Sceptical counterpart. While I am far from believing that Plotinus' contribution to the ancient theory of knowledge can simply be dismissed in these terms, an auto-referential tendency no doubt exists in his thought—and K. does an excellent job at bringing it out. From this point of view, one may well argue that Plotinus pushes ancient intellectualism to a point of non-return. The opening sentence of K.'s work may be seen to convey this perspective: 'avec Plotin le cycle de la philosophie antique se referme' (p. 7).

K.'s discussion—clearly based as it is on many years of work—is a model of rigour and erudition. His research stems from an admirable knowledge of both Plotinus' treatises and Greek philosophy as a whole. Parallels with Plato, Aristotle and Hellenistic philosophers are constantly drawn in this volume, which ends with an extensive chapter on Plotinus' predecessors ('Les prédécesseurs de Plotin', pp. 313-416). The section on Alexander of Aphrodisias alone ('La connaissance de soi selon Alexandre d'Aphrodise', pp. 361-395) has the size and depth of a substantial article. Often K. provides valuable suggestions regarding the text and the translation of Plotinian passages. His discussion of the secondary literature is rather detailed, despite some striking omissions. Even the scanty literature concerning the relation between Plotinus and the Sceptical tradition, for instance, is not fully recorded: as noted above, Bréhier's pioneering *Notices* are not mentioned by K., who also neglects D.J. O'Meara, 'Scepticism and Ineffability', *Phronesis* 45 [2000], pp. 240-251. As a matter of fact, K.'s footnotes record the (German) contemporary philosophical debate on subjectivity much more fully than, e.g. that on ancient Sceptical views on knowledge. If I am not mistaken, the whole book contains only two references to J. Barnes and M. Frede's papers on ancient Scepticism, at pp. 19 and 172; and works such as those of J. Annas, M. Burnyeat and G. Striker are completely neglected. K.'s rather idiosyncratic choices are not to be blamed in themselves, but would certainly require some justification: the reader of a massive work on Plotinus entitled *Quel savoir après le scepticisme?* is bound to expect an informed and up-to-date discussion of Plotinus' philosophy against the background of the ancient Academic and Sceptical debates on knowledge. But K. fails to provide anything of the sort. Furthermore, his references to previous scholarship on Plotinus are almost exclusively intended to emphasize shortcomings and

mistakes: again, this is a perfectly legitimate choice, but I suspect (or perhaps wishfully think) that the contributions made to scholarship on Plotinus so far are not as poor as K. would seem to suggest. K. also couldn't take account in his discussion of a couple of recent monographs whose focus partially overlaps with that of his own work: E.K. Emilsson, *Plotinus on Intellect*, cit., and P. Remes, *Plotinus on Self: The Philosophy of the 'We'*, Cambridge 2007.

While that of K. is certainly an erudite piece of scholarship, his overall intention is clearly philosophical. As K. himself emphasizes (see 'Quelques remarques sur la méthode', pp. 26-35), his aim is to test Plotinus' theories against the standards of rational rigour. Indeed, one may well raise objections against K.'s criteria for distinguishing what is 'rational' from what is not. As I see it, K.'s list of 'non-rational' features at p. 27 is highly questionable. This includes, for instance, philosophers' dependence on previous tradition and their use of (what K. regards as) merely rhetorical means such as analogies. K.'s overall effort towards precision and conceptual clarity is certainly praiseworthy and often lays the basis for convincing interpretations. Yet, in my view, it is also potentially misleading, since K.'s appeal to 'rationality' may actually involve peculiar philosophical theses that are neither uncontroversial nor endorsed by Plotinus. Let me discuss just one example in some detail. At v.3 [49], 5.10-15 K. finds 'a certain idea about the form of self-knowledge'. According to this view, knowing oneself entails knowing oneself *qua* something (i.e., in the case of the intellect, knowing oneself *qua* knowing subject). This kind of knowledge entails that two different terms ('le "soi-même" et le "sujet connaissant"', p. 71) be identified. Thus, the intellect's self-knowledge necessarily requires a propositional form: see also v.3 [49], 10.35 and 13.24: 'se connaître soi-même consiste à se connaître comme étant quelque chose; cette connaissance ne saurait se concevoir que par le biais de l'énoncé' (p. 72). However, at v.3 [49], 5.12-15 Plotinus employs 'knowing' and 'seeing' interchangeably (see also ii.9 [33], 1.49-50), something which suggests that the intellect's self-knowledge has not a propositional but an intuitive character. Accordingly, self-intellection should be regarded as immediate and somewhat analogous to perception. The intellect's self-knowledge thus appears as *both* propositional (since according to Plotinus it has the structure 'knowing X *qua* Y') and intuitive (since it is compared to vision and opposed to discursive thought). As K. notes, this is impossible and Plotinus' stance implies a fatal lack of clarity on the crucial issue of the distinction between intuition and propositional knowledge. In fact, *according to K.*, intuition (both sensible and intellectual) cannot provide any identification of two terms, since it involves a mere juxtaposition of the perceived items ('l'ordre propre à ses objets est celui de la juxtaposition', p. 73). The structure 'knowing X *qua* Y' is inaccessible to intuition. As evidence in support of this view, K. refers to iv.2 [4], 1.15-17, where Plotinus argues that *aisthêta* are extended objects that occupy different

places. However, as K. claims, the same holds for different qualities that are in the same place, such as the shape (e.g. spherical) and the colour (e.g. red) of a balloon: perception is here limited to the information 'round and red'—'elle n'indique aucune articulation plus spécifique d'une de ces qualités à l'autre ou bien des deux à l'entité qui est ronde et rouge' (p. 73). This *complex* entity cannot in any way be grasped by perception. Similar remarks also apply to intellectual intuition and, according to K., in vi.3 [44], 18.7 ff., Plotinus actually compares sensible and intellectual intuition, for both are incapable of identifying anything complex. Both sensible and intellectual intuition consist in fact of different discrete individual acts and their discursive counterpart are judgements such as 'X is different from Y'. It is worth quoting again a couple of lines from K.: 'la sensation ne consiste qu'en des actes différents qui montrent chacun une qualité sensible sans en dire quelque chose. Quant aux actes de l'intellect, ce sont des simples intuitions [...] qui composent le mouvement de l'intellect, et c'est l'altérité inhérente à ce mouvement qui distingue un objet de l'autre. [...] non seulement la sensation, mais aussi l'intellect paraît entièrement marqué par la forme de l'altérité: étant donné qu'il ne dit rien de ses objets, on ne saurait expliquer comment il pense une identité ou un rapport d'attribution' (pp. 73-74). To sum up: according to Plotinus, the intellect's self-knowledge involves the identification of two terms according to the structure 'knowing X *qua* Y', which is only proper to propositional thought; but Plotinus also maintains that self-knowledge has an intuitive character and this cannot but involve mere juxtaposition, as Plotinus himself recognizes in vi.3 [44], 18. Hence Plotinus' lack of clarity and consistency: 'Cette intuition, parce qu'elle est intuition, risque de ne pas produire la connaissance que Plotin lui attribue' (p. 19).

K. appears to take the thesis according to which perception, unlike propositional thought, is *completely* unstructured as a sort of uncontroversial philosophical truth. This, however, is questionable to say the least. Just to take a couple of examples, the radical separation between perception and discursive thought is not endorsed by some contemporary accounts of knowledge, which instead emphasize that perceptual (in particular visual) and discursive elements in human cognition are so intertwined that any rigid separation between the two is impossible (see e.g. V. Giardino and M. Piazza, *Senza Parole. Ragionare con le immagini*, Milan 2008, which includes an excellent account of visual elements in mathematical reasoning: see pp. 61-97, 'Prove di sguardo. Immagini e matematica'). Apart from this, K.'s view cannot even explain such obvious everyday facts as a dog's capacity to identify a human being as its master (unless indeed one assumes that dogs have access to propositional thought, or that, say, Odysseus' recognition by Argos is not real). To get back to ancient philosophy, one may well note that K.'s understanding of perception as completely unstructured (which appears as an extremely

radical—and indeed disputable—interpretation of what we find in Plato, *Theaet.* 184 b ff. or in Aristotle's account of 'proper sensibles' in *An.* ii.6, 418 a 11-19) was not shared for instance by Empiricist doctors, who regarded perception and memory as a sufficient basis to establish such a complex and structured art as medicine, without any need to appeal to reason as a distinct cognitive faculty. To cite just another among many possible examples, K.'s exceedingly narrow idea of sense-perception is hardly compatible with Aristotle's penetrating account of the behaviour of irrational animals: see *Metaph.* i.1.980 a 27 ff. and *HA* viii.1.588 a 24 ff. Indeed, K.'s opinion is in no way shared by Plotinus, who is happy to equate perceptions with judgements made by the soul (see iii.6 [26], 1.1-2; iv.3 [28], 23.19 ff.) and plainly regards perception as capable of grasping *complex* objects (e.g. a face) as wholes: 'For there is not one perception of the nose and another of the eyes, but one and the same perception of all together' (iv.7 [2], 6.7-8, transl. Armstrong; note that in 6.6 Plotinus claims that the soul has a single perception of many qualities in one thing: *pollai peri hen poiôtêtes*; see also iv.4 [28], 1.23-24; iv.5 [29], 3.32-36). Thus, in my view, K.'s statement that intuition merely grasps its objects according to the 'order of juxtaposition' is nothing but a (questionable) philosophical thesis ('l'impossibilité de se représenter un acte intuitif qui identifie ce qu'il a distingué', p. 75) with no textual basis in Plotinus. Significantly, in v.3 [49], 3.1-2, Plotinus claims that perception gives *dianoia* the imprint (*ton tupon*) of such a complex object as a human being (v.3 [49], 3.1: 'sense-perception sees a human being')—and there is simply no reason to render *tupos* as 'silhouette' (as K., p. 74 appears to do). K.'s view corresponds not so much to that of Plotinus, as to that of Alcinous (*Did.* iv, 155.42-156.5; 156.8-10), who claims that perception is only capable of discriminating single qualities (e.g. white), while their aggregate (*athroisma*—e.g. fire or honey) can only be judged by what Alcinous dubs *doxastikos logos*. However, Plotinus' view is considerably different from that of Alcinous (see the valuable discussion in E.K. Emilsson, *Plotinus on Sense-Perception. A Philosophical Study*, Cambridge 1988, p. 123, unfortunately neglected by K.). Finally, *pace* K., vi.3 [44], 18.7 ff. does not provide any evidence in support of his view. Here I cannot offer a detailed interpretation of this chapter, which is devoted to some thorny issues concerning the status of qualities and *differentiae*. I will limit myself to noting that Plotinus' aim here is only to outline the way in which perception and the intellect are capable of grasping the *difference* between several issues (i.e. immediately, without any proposition such as 'X differs from Y in virtue of Z'). Identity is simply *not at issue* in this text, which cannot therefore be invoked in support of the view that intuition is incapable of grasping identity. To the best of my knowledge, neither in vi.3 [44], 18 nor elsewhere does Plotinus ever suggest that intuition (both sensible and intellectual) is *only* capable of grasping differences and cannot but juxtapose its objects, as K. seems

to maintain (see p. 74: 'les objets de l'intuition intellectuelle se caractérisent en se rapportant les uns aux autres par la seule altérité—ce que j'ai appelé l'ordre de la juxtaposition').

K.'s work clearly makes for very (or perhaps excessively) demanding reading. The author is not sympathetic to Plotinus' distinctive *Breviloquenz*: the volume is exceedingly thick and prolix, and its style often complicated and unnecessarily convoluted. This, however, should not prevent willing and patient readers from taking up the challenge of the book, which remains a valuable contribution to the interpretation of Plotinus' philosophy.

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