Plotinus

Ennead V.5: That the Intelligibles are not External to the Intellect, and on the Good. Translation with an Introduction and Commentary by Lloyd P. Gerson.

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The book under review belongs to the series directed by John Dillon and Andrew Smith, the aim of which is to make Plotinus accessible to the Greekless reader in the form of reliable translations accompanied with philosophical commentaries. Gerson chose a text that is highly demanding even by Plotinian standards, for some of the arguments are fairly compressed and the Greek syntax is not without flaws either. It starts with a problem of interpreting an important passage in the *Timaeus* and then discusses the structure of the Intellect and its relation to the One.

The short introduction gives a useful overview on the structure of the treatise and its affiliations. It divides into two parts. The first (chs. 1-3) exposes a problem in the interpretation of *Timaeus* 39e6-9. Plato delineates the work of the Demiurge in imposing arrangement and intelligibility on the pre-cosmic chaos and determining that 'this world should contain the same kind and number of things that intellect sees are contained in the Living Animal' (39e8-9). It is unclear how Plato conceived of the relation between the Intellect/Demiurge and the Living Animal. Are they the same or not? As is well known, Plotinus opts for their identity. Gerson sketches the historical development leading to Plotinus' position and points out the principal reason for holding that the intelligibles are not external to the Intellect; the Intellect's thinking must be infallible. It is supported by two arguments, that if there is no infallible thinking truth will not exist and that if infallible thinking does not exist our thinking will not be possible either. The second part (chs. 4-13) is given over to the One and the Intellect's relation to it. The One is necessary to explain the existence of Intellect and intelligible beings. Gerson points out that the perfect simplicity of the One follows from its explanatory primacy. If it is above $\text{o}\upsilon\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha$ (with reference to *Republic* 509b8), it lacks even the basic distinction between existence and $\text{o}\upsilon\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha$. Furthermore, because it is above $\text{o}\upsilon\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha$, it is not limited in any way. For this reason, it is everywhere and there is nothing which does not partake in it in some way or another.

The short synopsis guides the reader through the main stages of Plotinus' argumentation. The translation is accurate and reads well. It differs from Armstrong's and McKenna's translations not only in wording but also in constructing the sentences. Gerson takes issue with them and the new French

translation by Dufour¹ repeatedly and explicitly in the commentary. Usually, the translation of the key terms follows well-established patterns. The most important exception is the way Gerson renders εἰδωλα; it is translated as ‘reflected representations’, which in my view appropriately renders the meaning of this difficult term.

On certain points we might raise some questions on the way Gerson translates certain sentences and terms, and suggest alternative renderings. The first and perhaps the most important is the translation of οὐσία by ‘essence’. It is clear that in some passages the term can be translated in that way, whereas elsewhere it is not so obvious. In 6.5-6 we read that τότε γάρ τι δεῖ τὴν οὐσίαν εἶναι (‘For the essence must be “this something”’). The sentence may reflect on Aristotelian notions, which may justify translating οὐσία as ‘substance’ (admitting of course that it is not always the most fortunate translation of the Greek term, to say the least). In 5.13-4, discussing the nature of a kind of Platonic ideal numbers, Plotinus uses the term twice. These numbers seem to be, not only the essences of the other type of numbers, but also their paradigms. In both cases, the emphasis is on the independent existence of οὐσία (see also in 4.33). Moreover, the expression ἐνέργειαν εἰς ὑπόστασιν οὐσίας in 3.23-4 may also refer to an activity towards the existence of substance, that is, towards an independent, higher order, existence. Another important point is the translation of terms signifying the processes of cognition. In 1.19 we read that οὐκ αὐτὸ τὸ πρᾶγμα ἢ αἴσθησις λαμβάνει (‘not the thing itself that sense-perception receives’). The verb λαμβάνει may not necessarily refer to a reception, but to a kind of activity. For Plotinus, sense-perception is an emphatically active phenomenon; it is a κρίσις, as he says elsewhere (e.g., IV 6. 2, 17). Here, too, he may want to express that the sense does not grasp the thing itself in the process of sense-perception. Similarly, the translation of ἄθρόα προσβολῇ in 7.8 as ‘in an instant impression’ may suggest that προσβολή is a receptive process, which may not be the case. Plotinus uses the term elsewhere, too. Most importantly for present purposes, we find it in two treatises chronologically quite close to V 5 [32]. In III 8 [30] he closes the discussion of the activity of the Intellect with the words ‘συννόει μᾶλλον τῇ προσβολῇ συνεῖς’ (10.33-4), referring to a direct intuition. In II 9 [33], 1.35 he also uses the term to describe the activity of the Intellect. On the other hand, the translation of προσβαλεῖς μὲν ἄθρόως ὁ προσβάλλων in 10.7-8 as ‘who are approaching it, approach it comprehensively’,

1 In *Plotin. Traités 30-37*. Traductions sous la direction de Luc Brisson et Jean-François Pradeau. Paris: GF Flammarion, 2006, 129-183.

reflects on the active nature of προσβολή. Lastly, let us raise two smaller points. In 1.36 we read that τὸ νοητὸν καὶ ὁ νοῦς εἰ ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ, translated as 'whether the intelligible and Intellect are identical'. But I do not think that Plotinus here suggests strict identity. Rather, it seems that he only suggests that they may have the same container or substrate. In 4.27, on discussing numbers and their constituents, the monads, Gerson switches to 'ones', which might be confusing since the argument is still about the possible relation between monads and the One. In any case, the ἑτερεαὶ ἐκείναι seems to refer to the monads and the term 'ones' does not have any Greek equivalent in the text.

The commentary is to the point, thorough and informative with ample references to the predecessors, mostly to Plato, which is obvious. It informs the reader about textual and interpretive problems alike. To take but one sample of each kind, Gerson reports (p. 139-40) views on the subject of the sentence in 5.22-5 and insists with good reasons that the best candidate is οὐσία. In interpretive matters, he argues (p. 96-7) persuasively that in the difficult argument for the presence of the intelligibles in the Intellect (1.65-8) Plotinus presupposes that being precedes knowing in the sense that the knowing subject, the Intellect, does not produce being by simply knowing it. Thus knowing is not a constitutive act. The Intellect makes being to be known by its desire for the Good/One. Gerson agrees that the argument does not demonstrate the internality of being; it only proves the internality of the intelligible, that is, truth, a property of being. But, he adds, the property of being cannot be present without being itself being present. There are a very few points in his interpretation which may be disputed. Again, it will suffice to take one sample. On explaining the object of Intellect's contemplation in 8.11 Gerson argues (p. 156-8) that in the clause πρὸς τὸ καλὸν βλέπων [scil. νοῦς], ἐκεῖ ἑαυτὸν πᾶς τρέπων καὶ διδούς ('it [the Intellect] is looking at what is beautiful, inclining and giving itself over completely to what is in the intelligible world') τὸ καλὸν cannot refer to the One. Instead, it is a collective term and refers to all the Forms. Gerson adduces four reasons to defend the claim. In ch. 3 Plotinus identifies it in the same way. Second, the word ἐκεῖ nowhere refers to the One exclusively. Third, the passage is filling in the previous claim about the 'process' of moving from cognition of form to something 'beyond knowledge'. Fourth, in line 13 the words 'as it nears it' (ἐγγὺς ὄντος αὐτοῦ) make no sense if Intellect is already contemplating the One. It may well be so, but one may then query the reference of τὸ καλόν. If it refers to all the Forms and the Forms are within itself, as we know it from ch. 1, then what is the relation between ἐκεῖ and ἑαυτὸν? To what does the Intellect incline and give itself? If it inclines towards itself as bearer of Forms then ἐκεῖ may refer to itself, too, which may be problematic.

The book closes a short but adequate bibliography which meets the claims of the Greekless reader, and two indices, of ancient authors and names and subjects. To conclude, in my view, the volume does not only fulfill the expectations raised on the series, but also sets a fine standard for any work of this genre.

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