

An Interview with Professor E.K. Emilsson

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Eyjolfur K. Emilsson is Professor of Ancient Philosophy at the University of Oslo. He lives with his wife, an architect, and their teenage son in a converted eighteenth century farmhouse in Oslo. I took advantage of a holiday in Norway to visit him with a view to discussing Plotinian matters in general and his own interest in the *Enneads* in particular. Although informal, the conversation was of such a level of interest that it seemed worth summarising the main points for the benefit of readers of this journal.

Suzanne Stern-Gillet: How did you come to Plotinus?

EKE: By a somewhat circuitous route. I entered the University of Iceland in Reykjavik in 1973 as a student of philosophy and French language and literature, but quickly switched off from French to Classics, where I felt much happier. My study of French, although brief, gave me a useful working knowledge of the language in which so much has been published on Neoplatonism.

SSG: When did you decide to specialise in ancient philosophy?

EKE: Pretty much at the end of my undergraduate around 1976 studies as I was working on my undergraduate dissertation on Plato's ethics, which included a translation of the *Gorgias*. Previously, I had some notion of becoming a painter, but, in the end, ancient philosophy won. But I still like to paint.

SSG: How and why did you develop an interest in Plotinus?

EKW: I entered the program in classical philosophy at Princeton in 1977. My hope at the time was to be supervised by Gregory Vlastos and work on Plato's ethics. As it turned out, Vlastos had left Princeton when I arrived and had been replaced by Michael Frede whom I had never heard of. I soon learnt that this was not such a bad replacement. At the time, Michael somewhat discouraged his graduate students from concentrating on Plato and Aristotle for their doctoral theses on the ground that the chances of coming up with something new and interesting in the course of two years' work or so were dim. I was by then happy to take that challenge. Michael suggested various authors and topics in the later Classical tradition, none of which struck a chord with me. At that point, Plotinus's name was mentioned. "Had I read any of the tractates?" Michael asked. I had not and, rather than dismissing the suggestion out of hand, I went to the library, borrowed a copy of the *Enneads* and read tractate III 6 [26] (*On the Impassibility of the Bodiless*).

SSG: Although it is often said that the systematic nature of Plotinus' thought makes any tractate as suitable a point of entry into his philosophy as any other, III 6 [26] does not seem an obvious place to begin reading the *Enneads*. The argument is intricate and, on the face of it, highly counter-intuitive. Why did you choose it?

EKE: As I recall it, there was at once an immediate fascination mixed with frustration, but fascination was by far the stronger reaction and I agreed on sense-perception in Plotinus as a doctoral topic.

SSG: Was the dissertation the basis of your first book, *Plotinus on Sense-Perception: A Philosophical Study* (Cambridge, 1988)?

EKE: It was. In the meantime, however, I had returned to Reykjavik and taken a temporary position at the University there. It was then that I embarked on the translation of the *Republic* into Icelandic. My translation of the *Gorgias* was already published. Both translations, I am glad to say, remain in print to this day, and have actually been reprinted a few times.

SSG: When did you come to Oslo?

A.: In 1993 I was offered a lectureship at the University of Oslo for a semester, a lectureship that was extended until I secured a full-time permanent appointment and was finally made a full professor in the *Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas*—well, it was called *Department of Philosophy* during my first years there.