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Critical Notice



Plotinian Studies in the Anglophone World

Eyjólfur K. Emilsson, *Plotinus*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017. ISBN: 978-0-415-33349-8 (pbk). £ 20.99.

E.K. Emilsson's *Plotinus* is a welcome addition to the number of introductions to Plotinus that are currently on the Anglo-American market. It fills a gap between O'Meara's user-friendly *An Introduction to the Enneads* (1993) and Gerson's philosophically sophisticated *Plotinus* (1994). Whether it will come to replace the two early introductions in English to which even the most seasoned of Plotinians like to return from time to time remains to be seen: Armstrong's authoritative *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus: An Analytical and Historical Study* (1940, reissued in pbk 2013) and Rist's engagingly written *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (1967).

One merit of E.'s book is that it works at different levels. To philosophy lecturers/professors in the Anglo-American world who want to introduce their charges to the philosophy of the *Enneads*, it provides a mostly dependable teaching aid. To philosophers desirous to enlarge—or to deepen—their understanding of the Platonic tradition, it provides a store of detailed arguments. To specialists in ancient thought, it gives a refreshing, if sometimes contentious, outlook on familiar themes. If E.'s *Plotinus* works at these different levels, it is mainly because it meets the expectations of philosophical audiences in the analytic tradition, as broadly conceived. In plain and unadorned prose, mostly devoid of technicalities, E. deals with the major strands of Plotinus' philosophy in a readily understandable order, giving pride of place to the dissection and reconstruction of the arguments of his notoriously difficult author while taking care also to record some of the scholarly and philosophical debates to which they have given rise. He excels at the task, especially when dealing with subjects on which he has made his reputation, Plotinus' metaphysics and epistemology. His occasional comparisons of Plotinus' views with those of

later authors, particularly Descartes, Leibniz and Kant, will be of considerable interest to philosophers. Given the inevitable limitations of space that even the most enlightened of publishers impose on authors of introductions, E. has wisely eschewed discussions of textual cruces and ambiguities. He takes the text of the *Enneads* as it is given in Henry and Schwyzer's *editio minor*, relies on Armstrong's translation, which he sometimes unobtrusively modifies, and, for the most part, follows the traditional Enneadic order. Although himself a published translator of several Platonic dialogues, E. has made his book entirely accessible to Greekless readers. For all these reasons, his *Plotinus* would usefully complement such introductions to Plotinus and Neoplatonism that take the form of readers: Dillon and Gerson, *Neoplatonic Philosophy: Introductory Readings* (2004) and Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus: a Practical Introduction to Neoplatonism* (2005), both of which are made up of introductory notes and comments on selected key passages (in English translation) of the *Enneads* and later Neoplatonic texts.

Having first provided his readers with basic information on Plotinus' life and times, E. devotes his second chapter ("The World according to Plotinus") to an overview of the ontology of the *Enneads*, in which he introduces the hypostases, their procession and emanation, the double-act theory, the principle of prior possession, the top-down concept of causation and the presentation of the soul's reversion to the higher hypostases as the ultimate goal of human life. Turning next to Plotinus' style and terminology, both of which are notoriously hard to get accustomed to, E. sets to work in earnest on making the most basic concepts of the *Enneads*, such as that of soul, understandable to his readers. No doubt because he is aware of the shadow that "Australian materialism"¹ still casts over today's philosophy students (as well as some, at least, of their instructors), E. anticipates their likely question: "is what Plotinus calls 'the soul' the same thing as what philosophers would later call 'the mind'?" To set them right, he makes two points. He shows first that in developing his own conception of the soul, Plotinus adapted, or reacted to, a concept that he had inherited from his philosophical predecessors; while Plato and later Platonists conceived of the soul as the principle of life (at both the individual and the cosmic level), Aristotle and the Peripatetics in general presented it as the form of body, inseparable though distinct from it, and Classical Stoicism defined it as a kind of corporeal entity. He explains next that while the soul, as Plotinus conceived it, is a multi-level hypostasis whose main emanative function is the generation and governance of the physical cosmos, it is not, even so, ineluctably turned downwards to the world of sense, but always remains part of the intelligible

1 See, e.g., D.M. Armstrong, 1968. *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*.