

Stephen R.L. Clark, *Plotinus. Myth, Metaphor, and Philosophical Practice*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016. Pp. xxi + 344. ISBN 9780226339672.

This book deals with various aspects of Plotinus' philosophy, and emphasizes the protreptic and pedagogic character of his writings. It begins with an introductory section laying down some methodological principles, including a few remarks on metaphor in general and on Plotinus' conception of dialectic (Part I *Prolegomena*, pp. 1-42). There follows an analysis of the function and meaning of several metaphors and images to be found throughout the *Enneads* (Part II *Metaphorically Speaking*, pp. 43-145; we will go into this later). Next comes a historical and philosophical discussion of some aspects of Plotinus' worldview, namely his attitude towards myths, spheres and circles, magic charms, invocations of demons and gods, statues of gods and virtues, heavenly bodies, and the metaphor of waking up (Part III *The Plotinian Imaginary*, pp. 147-230). The subsequent section contains a psychological and phenomenological interpretation of Plotinus' metaphysical principles—not only the One, *nous* and soul, but also nature and matter (Part IV *Understanding the Hypostases*, pp. 231-278). The final chapter asks what way of life could sensibly be prescribed to present-day readers in accordance with the principles of Plotinus' philosophy (Part V *The Plotinian Way*, pp. 279-298).

As is said in the *Preface* (p. ix), the idea for this book originated in 2002 with a research project on Plotinus' use of metaphor. Clark has since co-edited two collections of essays¹ and authored a number of studies² which served as a preparation for this book. Recent scholarship is properly discussed. The bibliography is rich and covers an impressively wide spectrum of subjects. However, earlier scholarship on images, metaphors, and myths in the *Enneads*, such as the valuable works of Vincenzo Cilento³ and Rein Ferwerda,⁴ remains necessary for the study of these topics.

1 P. Vassilopoulou and S.R.L. Clark (eds.), *Late Antique Epistemology: Other Ways to Truth*, Basingstoke, UK, Palgrave Macmillan 2009; M. Chase, S.R.L. Clark, and M. McGhee (eds.), *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, New York, Wiley-Blackwell 2013.

2 Listed on pp. xix-xx.

3 V. Cilento, "Mito e poesia nelle *Enneadi di Plotino*", in *Les Sources de Plotin. Dix exposés et discussions* (Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique, V), Fondation Hardt, Vandoeuvres-Genève 1960, pp. 245-310.

4 R. Ferwerda, *La signification des images et des métaphores dans la pensée de Plotin*, Groningen, J.B. Wolters 1965.

Clark agrees with Pierre Hadot's contention that Plotinus' writings are to be conceived of as "spiritual exercises"⁵ aimed at changing the life of the reader, rather than as a collection of theoretical arguments supporting a doctrinal system. This view is taken to imply that a genuine understanding of Plotinus' oeuvre requires us not only to place it in its historical context and analyse its arguments, but also to be willing to follow its instructions and advice (cf. pp. ix, 20). Clark shares Sara Rappe's view that the pedagogical or psychagogical function, though common to all of Plotinus' writings, is especially proper to their non-argumentative sections, i.e. "the symbols, ritual formulae, myths, and images".⁶ He also agrees with Gregory Shaw's closely related view that the mathematical images used in the *Enneads* are meant for a "theurgic" use.⁷ Both philosophical arguments and metaphorical images aim to bring about a change in the readers' soul. However, philosophical arguments appeal to the readers' rationality, whereas metaphorical images require them actively to use their imagination while following a set of instructions given in the text.⁸ Two important consequences of this are spelled out in the book. First, Clark emphasizes that Plotinus' images and metaphors deserve to be studied in their own right, as forming a set of spiritual exercises, and should not be downplayed or dismissed as merely performing an ornamental or explanatory function with respect to the argumentative sections. Second, he reminds his readers that Plotinus' philosophy, as a way of life, has to do not only with strictly rational practices such as dialectic or philosophical discourse, but also with a broader set of spiritual practices revolving around the role of active imagination.

Clark's chosen method of interpretation might be described as working on three distinct levels. (1) On a basic level, he quotes passages from the *Enneads* and situates them in their historical context by comparing them with other texts representative either of the earlier philosophical tradition or of the broader cultural milieu of the Roman imperial age. (2) On a higher level, Clark offers some speculations about Plotinus' intentions, beliefs, and habits which cannot be entirely justified by referring to the extant sources. For example,

5 Cf. P. Hadot, *Plotinus; or, the Simplicity of Vision*. Translated by Michael Chase, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press 2002, p. 22, cited on p. x.

6 Cf. S. Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2000, p. 3, cited by Clark on pp. x-xi.

7 Cf. G. Shaw, "Eros and arithmos: Pythagorean Theurgy in Iamblichus and Plotinus", *Ancient Philosophy* 19, 1999, pp. 121-143, cited on p. x.

8 The exemplary case of an image fitting this description can be found in v 8 [31], 9 (quoted on p. 180). See John M. Dillon, "Plotinus and the Transcendental Imagination", in J.P. Mackey (ed.), *Religious Imagination*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press 1986, pp. 55-64, in part. pp. 58-9; and S. Rappe, "Metaphor in Plotinus' *Enneads* v 8.9", *Ancient Philosophy* 15, 1995, pp. 155-170, both referred to by Clark.