PLOTINUS’ ON PROVIDENCE (ENNEAD III 2-3): THREE INTERPRETATIONS

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It is my intention to offer a revised interpretation of three passages in Plotinus’ treatise On Providence (Ennead III 2 and 3, number 47 and 48 in the chronological order). The texts are cited from the editio maior of P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzer.

III 2 (47) 1, 30-33: ἀλλ’ ἡ πάσα ζωή αὐτοῦ καὶ πᾶς νοῦς ἐν ἐνί ζώσα καὶ νοοῦσα ὀμοῦ καὶ τὸ μέρος παρέχεται δὸν καὶ πάν αὐτῷ φύλον οὗ χωρισθὲν ἀλλο ἀπ’ ἀλλού οὐθέ ἐτερον γεγενημένον μόνον καὶ τῶν ἀλλων ἀπεξερωμένον.

The translations of τὸ μέρος ... φύλον as given by the most important translators of Plotinus’ Enneads are: a) ‘(intellect) makes the part the whole and all (i.e. the totality of the νοοῖς) bound in friendship with itself’), (Armstrong, similarly Cilento, Harder, Ficino, MacKenna); b) ‘(intellect) makes the part the whole, and every part is united with itself’ (Bréhier); c) ‘the part makes the whole bound in friendship with itself’ (Müller); d) ‘the part reproduces the whole, and there is in the whole a perfect harmony’ (Bouillet).

I am convinced, however, that none of these translations is correct. The expression δὸν καὶ πάν should be taken as a qualification of τὸ μέρος, for the following reasons. First of all, we have in this


way a meaningful positive counterpart of the preceding negative qualification οὖν ἰδέ ἀσθενής τῷ μερισμῷ (III 2 (47) 1, 28) of the Nous. Secondly, the word μέρος need not be mentally repeated after πᾶν as it has been done by Bréhier. Thirdly, there is no change of object of παρέχεται: τὸ μέρος is object of παρέχεται throughout the passage. Fourthly, as Matter 4) correctly points out (though in a different connection), the expression ὁλον καὶ πᾶν became a common distinction ever since the discussion in Plato’s Theaetetus 203 e ff. Finally, as far as the interpretation is concerned, τὸ μέρος παρέχεται ὁλον καὶ πᾶν refers to the fact that in the realm of Nous every part is the whole and all parts of the Nous, cf. Ennead V 8 (31) 4, 23 and III 2 (47) 14, 15.

So the punctuation and translation of this sentence should be as follows: ἄλλ’ ἡ πᾶσα ἥ ζωή αὐτοῦ καὶ πᾶς νοῦς ἐν ἐνι ᾧ ωσα καὶ νοοῦσα ὁμοῦ καὶ τὸ μέρος παρέχεται ὁλον καὶ πᾶν, αὐτῷ φιλον, οὐ χωρισθέν ὁλο ἀπ’ ἄλλου, οὖθε ἐτέρου γεγενημένον μόνον καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀπεξενωμένον: ‘but the whole life of it (intellect) and the whole intellect live and think) all together in one and make the part the whole and the all, friends with itself’, one part not separated from another, and not having become merely other and estranged from the rest’.

III 2 (47) 9, 15-18: ἐπεὶ οὐδ’ αὐτοὶ ἐπεμελήθησάν ποτε, ὅπως ἀρχοντες ἄγαθοι γένοιντο τῶν ἄλλων, ὅπως αὐτοῖς ἦ ἐπιμελοῦμενοι, ἄλλα φθονοῦσιν, ἕνα τις ἄγαθος παρ’ αὐτοῦ φύτηται.

In this sentence Plotinus explains why ‘it is not lawful for those who have become wicked to demand others to be their saviours and to sacrifice themselves in answer to their prayers, nor, furthermore, to require gods to direct their affairs in detail, ... or good men ... to be their rulers’ (III 2 (47) 9, 10-15, transl. Armstrong).

The text as it has been transmitted is, however, problematical. A partial solution is offered by Beutler 7), who reads ὅπως αὐτοῖς

6) I.e. the whole and the all of the Nous. The expression αὐτῷ φιλον is the positive counterpart of the preceding negative qualification ἐστε ἐκάστου (i.e. every part of the Nous) μὴ ἄποσπασθέντος τοῦ ὅλου (III 2 (47) 1, 29-30).