

L.P. GERSON: *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*. Pp. xiii + 462. Cambridge: CUP, 1996. Hardback, £40.00 (\$59.95). L.P. GERSON: *Plotinus*. Pp. xiii + 338. London: Routledge, 1994. Paperback, £16.99.

The recent outpouring of English language scholarship on Plotinus continues unabated. Specialised commentaries on individual tracts of the *Enneads* (Atkinson on V.1, OUP, 1983 and more recently Fleet on III.6, OUP, 1995) have given way to more general works such as O'Meara's *Introduction to the Enneads* (OUP, 1993) and L.P. Gerson's monograph on Plotinus in the *Arguments of the Philosophers Series* for Routledge, (see below). With MacKenna's masterful translation now available in Penguin (abridged by J. Dillon) it now seems an opportune time for CUP to include Plotinus in its *Companion* series.

L.P. Gerson, the editor of the *Plotinus Companion* acknowledges that Plotinus (P) must be understood in the context of a long and weighty philosophical tradition and structures the sixteen contributions to that end. We are given first, by the editor, a brief context for and outline of P.'s philosophy. The first essay by M.L. Gatti expands on P.'s place in the philosophical tradition and shows that he was as much an innovator as an exegete of Plato. The following three essays (Bussanich, O'Meara and Blumenthal) attempt to present a coherent picture of the metaphysical structure of his world and our place in it. The next six essays (Corrigan, Wagner, O'Brien, Smith, Emilsson and Rappe) focus on specific philosophical problems which emerge from his metaphysics. There follows three essays (Clark, Leroux and Dillon) which concern themselves more with our ontological status as human beings and how we might be expected to live in P.'s world. To non-specialists this will probably be the most interesting part of the book. One essay (Schroeder) is devoted to P.'s use of language before the collection terminates with two final essays (D'Ancona Costa and Rist) which attempt to assess the later history of Neoplatonism and its clash with Christianity. Overall, the scope of the volume is impressive, beginning as it does with P.'s philosophical sources and concluding with P.'s influence on Augustine. Yet the reader should not be misled, most of the book is devoted to explaining what exactly it is that Plotinus is saying in the *Enneads*.

Every complex topic presents its own special difficulties when one tries to give a somewhat simple view of it. P. is no exception. Apart from linguistic difficulties, his Greek is notoriously difficult; there is also the problem of finding a consistent point of view on any particular topic. A.H. Armstrong pointed to the 'tensions' in P.'s thought while S. MacKenna, according to E.R. Dodds, was blunter when he wondered 'how much of the obscurity in the *Enneads* was due to the subtlety of the thought and how much to the general human idiocy from which philosophers are not immune'. All the more difficult then for a team of specialist scholars to keep the arguments simple and clear. By and large they are successful. In most cases the topics assigned to each of the specialists is in an area that they have worked on for a number of years. The reader thus benefits in that s/he receives heavily considered opinions on various aspects of P.'s philosophy.

This is particularly true of essays two to four where P.'s metaphysics is examined. A description of the One, Intellect and Soul is presented and the derivation of Intellect and Soul from the One is assessed. Blumenthal's essay on Soul and Intellect is particularly lucid and thus very helpful for the beginner. It should also be noted that in general the contributors quote reasonable amounts of the text which gives the reader an opportunity to assess the strength of the arguments presented. Bussanich in particular, in his essay on the One, allows the reader to witness the sometimes forced exegesis necessary to allow P. to maintain a consistent argument. The order of these three essays is

also clever in that O'Meara and Blumenthal's essays complement well Bussanich's account of the One in that they focus on what the One produces.

The next six essays examine specific issues in the *Enneads*. The essays by Corrigan on 'Essence and Existence', Wagner on 'The Nature of Physical Reality', Smith on 'Eternity and Time', Emilsson on 'Cognition and its object' and Rappe on 'Self-knowledge and subjectivity', are well written accounts but are perhaps overly detailed for a book of this sort. O'Brien is an exception here in that his essay seems to me, at least, to be pitched to just the right level. His account of 'Matter and Evil' displays a long acquaintance with this topic and the reader benefits from a clear and lucid consideration of the evidence.

The next three essays by Clark, Leroux and Dillon focus on the position of the human being in the philosophy of the *Enneads*. Clark discusses the technical aspects of the relationship between body and soul. In an interesting discussion, he attempts to isolate what we are and how we are related to body. He does give due attention to the idea of a guiding 'daimon', a much neglected topic in most work on P., but does not in my opinion, treat sufficiently the area of human consciousness. We exist at whatever conscious level we choose to operate on. Leroux's essay ties in well with this topic in that it is concerned with just this idea: how free are we? How free is our actual descent into body? Leroux rightly notes that this is a problem inherited from Plato, made more difficult by the addition of vocabulary from Aristotle's *Ethics*, such as, voluntary and involuntary, willed and not willed. Interesting material indeed. This is valuable background for Dillon's critique of P.'s ethical theory. This is a stimulating essay on a much neglected aspect of P.'s philosophy. Dillon makes many valuable points, but fails in my view to reconcile the ethical theory that one finds in the *Enneads* with the ethical theory practised by P. We have a vivid description of the way P. acted from Porphyry's 'Life of Plotinus' but this *modus vivendi* does not tally with the prescriptions in the *Enneads*. If the main task of the philosopher is to return to the One, why should s/he bother with anyone else? Yet P. certainly did.

The final two essays look at P.'s impact on later philosophy and the subsequent development of Neoplatonic thought. D'Ancona Costa pursues a narrower focus than Rist when she examines later problems associated with the causality of the First Principle. Proclus is her main interest here. Rist's essay roams further afield as he presents a masterful survey of P.'s influence on later Christian thinkers. Interestingly enough he concludes that the specific influence of P. on Greek Christian thought down to the late fourth century was rather limited. This changed however with the arrival of Augustine, a figure that Rist has recently written about at some length, (*Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized, CUP, 1994*). Augustine's sources for Neoplatonism and its subsequent impact on his thinking are clearly presented.

On the *Companion* then I finish on a note I sounded earlier, that is, its strength lies in the fact that the contributors are specialists who are able to clarify the main problems and present the issues in a clear manner. On a critical note, I am uncertain what 'unwritten writings' means on p. 24 and I noticed misprints on pp. 98, 254, 275, 286, 300 and 396.

In contrast to the *Companion* L.P. Gerson's *Plotinus* in the *Arguments of the Philosophers Series* is definitely not for the beginner. Gerson admits (p.225) "that this is a difficult book" and sensibly tries to apportion some of the blame for this to P. He fails to make clear where he contributes to this difficulty himself. In my opinion, it lies in his use of an unnecessarily wide range of difficult vocabulary. 'Asymptotically' (p.201) was one of a number of words that drove me to a dictionary. This serves only to obscure P.'s already tangled thought. That aside, the reader of this book will

find him/herself suitably rewarded. Gerson presents a very stimulating analysis of P.'s philosophy, supporting his arguments with substantial notes. These are conveniently located at the end of the book (pp. 227-293) which helps preserve the fluency of the text itself.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part generally concerns itself with the structure of P.'s metaphysical hierarchy while the second part focuses on the place of the human being in that structure. This book on P. is not a systematic treatment of the usual kind but rather a selection of particular topics thoroughly discussed. Gerson's stated objective has been to focus on the philosophy of P. and as a result the book presents a series of highly specialised essays concentrating on what he considers are the most *philosophically significant arguments*. By his own admission he has omitted the more exotic areas in the *Enneads* but in a series entitled *Arguments of the Philosophers* this is a reasonable approach. The result is a fairly eclectic study of P. and anyone looking for a general appraisal of the life and work of the man from Lycopolis should look elsewhere.

Having chosen his parameters, Gerson delivers a heavily considered view of the important philosophical issues at the heart of the *Enneads*. Although he acknowledges that P. is primarily a Platonist and not simply an anti-Aristotelian, he suggests that much can be gained from reading the *Enneads* as 'a paradigm of anti-Aristotelianism' (p.225) and thus he explores P.'s philosophy as Platonism reconstructed in the light of Aristotelian critique. Gerson suggests that P.'s very originality lies in this reconstruction of Plato in the face of criticism from other philosophical schools. Chief amongst the critics was Aristotle and Gerson believes P.'s school studied the commentaries on Aristotle in part for what they could tell him about Plato. What is beyond doubt is that even although P. sought to interpret Plato in the light of Aristotelian criticism he had no compunction in using Aristotelian ideas to help structure that revision. Because Gerson believes that P. was helped in his understanding of Plato through the criticisms of Aristotle, in many instances his methodology consists in beginning with an assessment of P.'s response to Aristotle's critique of Plato.

Because of its subject matter, essentially the three hypostases, the first part of the book is reasonably technical and the non-specialist will probably find the second half of the book more accessible. In this second section Gerson tries to establish the place and role of the human being in P.'s ontology. The technical vocabulary in this section might be less daunting but Gerson demonstrates that it is still quite difficult at times to establish with certainty P.'s position regarding the endowed self. The strength of this book lies in Gerson's insistence on the necessity of understanding P.'s place in his philosophical tradition but, for the general reader, this is also its weakness.

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