

Reviews

Plotinus. Myth, Metaphor, and Philosophical Practice

By Stephen R.L. Clark University of Chicago Press, 2016,

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These are good days for English-speaking readers of Plotinus. Complementing Hilary Armstrong's complete translation with facing Greek text in the Loeb Classical Library series, we now have a magnificent commentary by Paul Kalligas on *Enneads* 1–III (Princeton, 2014), and the fast developing series of translations and commentaries on individual treatises, edited by John Dillon and Andrew Smith for Parmenides Press. In the introduction to their series, the editors express their conviction 'that Plotinus has something to say to us today'. Stephen Clark has written an extraordinary book that sets out to do exactly that.

Plotinus is about the Neoplatonist's recourse to myth and metaphor, but it is also about us, modern readers with our parochial concerns, and it is especially about what, under the tutelage of Stephen Clark, we might do to transform the way 'we must reason and imagine our way to a proper understanding and appreciation of reality' (296). Plotinus, as Clark rightly says, was protreptic in the intention of his images – drawn especially from geometry, art, mirrors, dance – and Clark himself is protreptic in the ways he challenge his readers' minds and values with the help of Plotinus. His ambition is immense; for as I follow the threads of Clark's discursive and digressive pages, I take him to be Plotinus's accomplice, as it were, in conducting a spiritual journey that traverses literature, thought, and religion ranging over the past two millennia.

Clark has been publishing prolifically and versatily for the past four decades. Even in his first book, *Aristotle's Man*, Plotinus was in his sights, and this latest monograph draws in thoughts that he has presented in such earlier works as *Biology and Christian Ethics*, *God, Religion and Reality*, *Philosophical Futures*, and *Ancient Mediterranean Philosophy*. Here in *Plotinus*, we are given a cornucopia of references that include besides Plotinus and many Greek and Roman authors, all manner of others, including poets, Christians, Buddhists, sociologists, psychologists, and numerous quotations from G.K. Chesterton, on whom Clark has also written a book. This dizzying array does not make for easy assimilation, but it is all of a piece with Clark's characteristic breach of conventional boundaries in his philosophical ventures.

In approaching *Plotinus*, I have found it helpful to keep in mind the following passage from the first paragraph of *Aristotle's Man*:

Reviews

Words have determinable sense only within a complex of unstated assumptions, and all interpretation must therefore go beyond the given material. Understanding of another's philosophy is an aspect of the interpreter's own philosophical growth, and the result should not be, because it cannot be, assessed as matching or missing an unknowable and possibly non-existent 'original version', but as an intelligible and (hopefully) plausible way of seeing the world that is developed by meditation on the chosen traditum.

Plotinus conforms quite closely to Clark's early authorial principles, making it a book that is disarmingly self-referential (see xv–xvii). In the case of *Aristotle's Man*, that was a very bold undertaking. Plotinus, though infused with Aristotle, is a philosopher whom newcomers may find more approachable by meditating on salient passages than by reading complete *Enneads*, or, as Clark says in his preface (xv), by having 'the texts tested against our own experience of the world and the evidence of other – seemingly similar – traditions'. Moreover Clark's *Plotinus* has a modesty and geniality that were absent from the numbered and austere paragraphs of *Aristotle's Man*.

A primary requirement for understanding Plotinus, as Clark reiterates throughout, is to appreciate the dynamic unity the *Enneads* seek to establish between thinking and being. The Plotinian knower is not an observer of extrinsic substances or a theorist of truths that obtain independently of being thought. Clark, so I read him, wants us to internalize 'the Plotinian way' (as he terms his final chapter) and what it can mean for us here and now as embodied selves. The nub of his book is the idea that getting inside Plotinus is best initiated not by analysis of the philosopher's metaphysical categories, but by investigation of what we might call his poetics. Accordingly, 'Understanding the hypostases' (Soul, Nous, the One, to which Clark adds Matter and Nature) is reserved to near the end of the book, and preceded by its two principal parts entitled 'Metaphorically speaking' and 'The Plotinian Imaginary'.

To enable us to explore Plotinus's 'metaphorical landscape', Clark selects expressions from the *Enneads* that have resonance in any language and culture (e.g. nakedness, solitariness, drunk and sober, dance, remembering and forgetting). Rather than explore Plotinus's contexts in depth, Clark proceeds by wondering what such images evoke not only there but also in other ancient and later contexts. So, in the case of 'naked and alone', he muses on notions of purity, the discarding of conventional opinions and passions, modern nudity, concentration in contrast with multitasking, Buddhist self-recognition,

and finally asceticism in company with St. Francis of Assisi. Turning to dance, Clark first writes about the image's application in the *Enneads* to cosmic harmony and what Plotinus calls 'the life that is artistic', and then digresses into Lucian's disquisitions on pantomime, followed by Indian beliefs about divine incorporation, and early Christian worries concerning demonic possession.

Readers will have to decide for themselves how such an assemblage of allusions contributes to Clark's project as described in the first paragraph of this review. Plotinus as author and thinker disappears from the text intermittently, only to resurface with such disconcerting questions as to whether he himself stripped or danced. Clark hopes, I think, that his wide-ranging reflections on the metaphorical landscape will help popularize the notoriously difficult *Enneads* by selecting such quotidian images for free association, without worrying too much about 'whether or not the universe is as [Plotinus] argued that it was' (297). Plotinus, he likes to say, 'might be right', but what primarily interests him in this remarkable book is the availability of 'even his most metaphysical utterances to be given a therapeutic and this-worldly reading'.

To show how that project might work is the book's principal achievement. It is most effectively conveyed in 'the Plotinian Imaginary', where Clark reflects on how spheres and circles, charms, and stars are put to work in the *Enneads* as guides to the world's intelligible structure and the normative life of the soul. As Plotinus himself writes, 'Bodies are hindered from communion with each other by bodies' but 'we lift ourselves up by the part (i.e. soul) that is not submerged in the body and by this join ourselves at our own centres to something like the centre of all things, just as the centres of the greatest circles join the centre of the encompassing sphere, and we are at rest' (*Ennead* VI.8.9). With such evocative imagery Plotinus seeks to rouse his readers and waken what he calls 'another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use' (*Enn.* 1.6.8). Clark calls the last chapter of the Plotinian Imaginary, 'waking up', and that call aptly captures the general tone and focus of his book. Commenting on Plotinus's injunction to gather the visible universe into a shining sphere, and then remove its physical dimensions, he writes: 'The corporeal world is that of our present experience, but depends, so Plotinus thinks, on the intelligible, where nothing is at odds with anything but all together make the living world. *Imagining* this world is locating the real world in ourselves [for each of us is an *intelligible universe*] or rather, it is elevating our own awareness to a level that can grasp the world, if only in

Reviews

imagination, in the hope that this will bring us close enough to God (i.e., the divine intellect).’ (185)

Clark’s feeling for Plotinus’s theism makes this book much more than a scholarly monograph. For what he intuits, perhaps better than anyone else I have read, is the humanity of that theism and its accessibility to consciousness at every level and every perspective. Clark makes us aware of our own awareness, the relativity of where we find ourselves, the impossibility of imagining a world composed of lifeless matter, or one in which beauty exists only in the eye of the beholder. Philosophical readers might prefer a book that was more direct and focused in its approach to the text, while neophytes would have benefited from a more straightforward introduction accompanied by longer excerpts of Plotinus, especially from *Ennead* 1.6 on beauty, and fewer excursions into other authors. But anyone willing to work patiently with Clark’s study will marvel at the author’s flare for getting inside the creativity and imagination of Plotinus and making his philosophy speak to our, or indeed to any, time.

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