VIEWS ON PLOTINUS

ALTMAN, William H.F., *Plotinus the Master and the Apotheosis of Imperial Platonism*. Pp. xxviii + 444. Lanham, Boulder, New York and London: Lexington Books, 2024. Cased, £112, US$145. ISBN: 978-1-66694-439-6.

GERSH, Stephen, *Marsilio Ficino as Reader of Plotinus: The* Enneads *Commentary*. (History of Metaphysics: Ancient, Medieval, Modern 5.) Pp. xvi + 558, figs. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2024. Cased, €219. ISBN: 978-90-04-70111-3.

STOCK, Wiebke-Marie, *Plotinus on What We Think We Are*. (Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition 34.) Pp. viii + 186. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2024. Cased, €129. ISBN: 978-90-04-67864-4.

STRÓŻYŃSKI, Mateusz, *Plotinus on the Contemplation of the Intelligible World. Faces of Being and Mirrors of Intellect*. Pp. xii + 368. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Cased, £100, US$130. ISBN: 978-1-009-49486-1.

doi:10.1017/S0009840X26102649

Altman's *Plotinus the Master and Apotheosis of Imperial Platonism* is a long and convoluted book. It has seven chapters: (1) 'Plotinus the Master'; (2) 'Porphyry the Disciple'; (3) 'Porphyry's Successors'; (4) 'Imperial Platonism and the Gnostics'; (5) 'Pierre Hadot and the Real Plotinus'; (6) 'Plotinus and Plato's One'; (7) 'The Rhetorical Apotheosis of Imperial Platonism'. The chapters follow a pattern: four sections discuss different aspects of the topic of the chapter; there is Plotinian exegesis, where a Plotinian text is scrutinised, and there is a Platonic exegesis, where the same is done to a relevant Platonic text; finally, each chapter has a section called 'Between Apollonius and Julian', which offers general historical reflections. The book has a massive bibliography and a general index, but no index of passages cited.

The aim of the book is to dethrone Plotinus, who in Altman's view has undeservedly come to enjoy a far too elevated status among scholars in recent decades. In particular, Altman condemns Plotinus' interpretation of Plato, which is misguided in his view. Apart from his reading of Plato, he dislikes Plotinus' philosophy (as he sees it), and, apparently, he does not like the person either: he presents Plotinus as a courtier at Gallienus' court in Rome. Politically, the doctrine of the supreme One signifies the absolute power of the emperor. Thus, the term 'imperial Platonism' in the book's title is not merely used in a chronological sense, but also includes a set of political, metaphysical and cosmological allusions.

Altman goes out of his way to make Plotinus' character and motives suspect. In general, he seems to follow the principle that where Porphyry is silent in the *Life of Plotinus* the void may be filled with speculation showing Plotinus in a bad light. He even tries to make

The Classical Review (2026) 76.2 379–387 © The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Classical Association. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X26102649 Published online by Cambridge University Press

suspect the fact that most of Plotinus' friends were absent at his deathbed in Campania, as if they no longer esteemed him (p. 108). There is, of course, a myriad of other possible explanations, the simplest one being that Plotinus preferred to end his life this way in relative solitude. And, according to Porphyry (*Life of Plotinus* 2), at least one of Plotinus' close friends was with him, the philosophical doctor Eustochius, whose presence Altman mentions, but then goes on to speak as if Plotinus died alone (pp. 107–8).

Altman also claims to be shocked by the positive reception Plotinus has received in recent decades and undertakes to give an explanation of it. In his view, a conference of Plotinus scholars in Vandœuvres (Genève) in 1957 was a decisive event in the rise of Plotinus' reputation. He suggests in the preface (p. xvi) that something about the social and political climate in the post-war period may partially explain why the minds of intellectuals had a weak spot for an authoritative master of the mystical kind. The main explanation, however, is to be found in Plotinus' seductive rhetoric that he employs to persuade students of self-contradictory claims, which the book sets out to expose (pp. xvi–xvii and *passim*).

A crucial distinction between 'Plato the Teacher' and 'Plotinus the Master' plays a pivotal role in the book. Altman's Plato the teacher is a shrewd educator: he writes long passages and even whole lengthy dialogues full of intentionally fallacious reasoning and false doctrines that serve as traps that students are supposed to see through and learn from. Every dialogue Plato wrote with characters other than Socrates leading the discussion belongs to this class. This means that none of what Timaeus and the strangers from Elea and Athens say counts as a reliable source of Plato's own meaning. Even words put into Socrates' mouth are not exempted: the digression in the *Theaetetus* containing the famous reference to ὁμοίωσις θεῷ (176a–b), where Socrates exhorts people to flee from this region and assimilate to god, is not to be taken to mean just that. Rather, this is a falsehood presented as a test 'contrived by Plato the Teacher' (p. xiv; see also ch. 1.3). Likewise, the celebrated claim in *Republic* 6.509b that the Good is 'beyond being', which is extraordinarily important for Plotinus, is not seriously meant (see especially ch. 3.6).

By contrast, Altman's Plotinus is 'a master' in the sense of 'a guru', which for Altman means a person of great authority who is taken to possess the Truth. This Truth, however, cannot be plainly expressed in ordinary sentences but rather must be divulged by means of contradictions and rhetorical devices. The disciples listen in awe and try to persuade themselves that they follow. Needless to say, this contrast is a caricature. There is nothing in Porphyry's account of Plotinus or in the *Enneads* that gives support to this portrayal of Plotinus. On the contrary, the little evidence we have suggests that Plotinus preferred discussion to lecturing (cf. his response to the visitor Thaumasius in *Vita Plotini* 13).

According to Altman, Plotinus' doctrine of the first principle is erroneous. In particular, this applies to the identification of the Good with the One and to the doctrine of the Good as beyond being. Something called 'one' is never an ontological principle in Plato (p. xxi; ch. 6.3). Plotinus would point to the second part of the *Parmenides*, in this case especially the first hypothesis, but Altman apparently sees this text as a mere dialectical exercise and the statement that *the one* invoked is ineffable he takes to be a joke (p. xv). It is a joke because a great deal has just been said about this *one*. Altman seems oblivious of the fact that almost everything that has been said about this *one* is of the form 'the one is neither F nor not F'. Arguably, if all that can be said of this *one* is of this form, nothing can be asserted of it, and it is indeed unspeakable.

Altman also states that Plotinus fails to respect the absolute separation or cleavage between Being and Becoming, the *Kluft* as Altman calls it. It is not altogether clear what the unbridgeable cleavage is supposed to be, but at the very least it involves the denial of any causal impact of Being on Becoming. Imperial Platonism seeks to bridge the *Kluft* at both the cosmological and the political level. Plato does the same in the non-Socratic dialogues,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X26102649 Published online by Cambridge University Press

but this is a false doctrine for students to learn from, according to Altman. Plotinus too is regarded as massively guilty of *Kluft*-bridging due to his acceptance of non-Socratic dialogues as sources of Plato's views. According to Altman, most of what historically has passed as Platonism, the whole Neoplatonic tradition and its Christian and Islamic repercussions as well as the teachings of Plato's heirs in the Academy, is best discarded as an unpalatable distortion of the true views of Plato. None of these pay due respect to an unbridgeable *Kluft*. This raises the question what is meant by Platonism.

How successful is Altman's attack on Plotinus? Is it likely to open the eyes of scholars of ancient philosophy to Plotinus' alleged mistreatment of Plato and his other supposed faults? For various reasons, the following ones being among the most important, we do not think so.

(1) The largest parts of the book are criticisms of Plotinus' interpretations of particular Platonic passages. The majority of the criticisms presume Altman's views on Plato, which reject a large portion of the Platonic corpus as a legitimate source of Plato's views. Hence we are convinced that the underlying concept about Plato the teacher is misconceived.

(2) Altman is right that Plotinus regularly cites Plato out of context. Plotinus is to be seen primarily as a philosopher addressing philosophical questions current in his day. Plotinus is convinced that Plato was fundamentally right, and he approaches the issues with this as the point of departure. The outcome is a system that is fundamentally Platonic, however questionable we may find his take on individual Platonic passages. According to Altman, virtually every follower of Plato in antiquity (excepting the Academic sceptics and some Sethian Gnostics) was an imperial Platonist. Altman's so-called 'imperial Platonism' is simply Platonism.

(3) Altman shows few signs of having attempted to engage fully with Plotinus' thought. A good example (out of many) is Altman's failure to see that, when applied to the realm of Intellect, motion and becoming do not imply real change (see especially pp. 268–71).

Altman is too focused throughout the book on trying to prove that Plotinus either misunderstood this or that Platonic passage or was a deceitful master-mystic uttering incomprehensible sentences meant to describe his personal experience of the union with the One to gullible students and followers. The result is that Plotinus the philosopher largely escapes his notice. Altman's views contrast starkly with a nice aspect of Stock's book: the latter brings Plotinus close to earth, presents a philosopher of language and communal conversation. Perhaps Stock's Plotinus too is an overstatement, but it relies on a more systematic reading of the source texts.

Altman is right that interest in Plotinus has increased immensely over the past 70 years or so. What people have increasingly come to see is that Plotinus is an interesting philosopher in his own right and a shrewd commentator on the previous Greek philosophical tradition. It is not the mystical side of Plotinus that attracts most attention. Nor are current scholars overly concerned whether his every interpretation of Plato can stand scrutiny. Thus, in so far as the book aims at setting contemporary admirers of Plotinus straight, it by and large misses the mark.

Strózyński's *Plotinus on the Contemplation of the Intelligible World: Faces of Being and Mirrors of Intellect* is the direct antithesis of Altman's book in that the author is obviously an admirer of Plotinus. Moreover, Strózyński appreciates aspects of Plotinus that Altman abhors: Plotinus' appeal to metaphors and in general his style of writing. As the title of Strózyński's monograph indicates, contemplation takes centre stage; but because he holds that contemplation is omnipresent in Plotinus, it touches on much of the Plotinian world. He even goes further than claiming contemplation to be omnipresent; he says that 'Plotinus philosophy as a whole is contemplative. Everything in it contemplates and everything is contemplation' (p. 352; cf. p. 7) Given this, it should not come as a surprise

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X26102649 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that Strózyński finds it necessary to discuss the lower levels of Plotinus' world in addition to Intellect, which is the sphere where contemplation is usually seen to take place primarily. The book is divided into three parts, 'Descent and Fall', 'Soul' and 'Intellect', each of which contains several subsections, in addition to an introduction and a brief conclusion.

A central idea in the book is the distinction between a first-person and a third-person perspective in Plotinus' thought. The latter is the system of hypostases as seen from the outside, whereas the former is reality, including the metaphysical hierarchy, as experienced by individual subjects. The third-person perspective is the perspective of science and conceptual thought, the first-person perspective that of contemplation. In the introduction (pp. ix–xv) Strózyński names many forerunners who recognise the first-person view in Plotinus without however making it a cornerstone of their interpretations in the way in which he does. In this connection it is somewhat surprising that he omits mentioning P. Kristeller's distinction between 'gegenständliche Sicht' and 'aktuelle Sicht' in the *Enneads*.

The book's focus is on the first-person perspective, which, according to Strózyński, comes to light in a great number of passages that involve intuition (as opposed to conceptual, rational thought), mythological thinking and mysticism. This does not only apply to the accounts of Intellect and the One; 'contemplation' is pervasive in Plotinus' thought according to Strózyński. Behind the first-person perspective is the idea of metaphysical experience, an idea for which Strózyński sees Jacques Maritain and Hans Jonas as precursors (pp. 9–11). Strict conceptual thought and a first-person, subjective experiential perspective are always intermingled in Plotinus. The contrast with Altman's account is striking: where the latter sees Plotinus as trying to generate awe in students by descriptions of his mystical experiences full of rhetorical trickery and contradictions, Strózyński finds Plotinus' greatest virtue as a thinker. He welcomes metaphors and even myths, believing that some, if not all, metaphysical topics must be addressed by such means.

Strózyński supplies the above distinction with three metaphysical principles that he sees at work in the *Enneads* and on which he relies in his interpretations. There is what he calls the microcosmic principle. This principle turns out to be the same as the unity of all souls, which Plotinus argues most directly for in an early treatise (IV.9) and appeals to in a number of later treatises: all souls are the hypostatic soul, which is as a whole in the individual souls and makes them in some sense one soul. The second principle is what Strózyński calls the imaging principle, by which he means that the same beings exist at different levels of the hierarchy. That is to say: a lower level functions as a mirror of the level above, showing less perfect images of its content. The third principle is 'the triadic intertwining of loving and knowing with selfhood' (p. 37). We cannot find anything that looks like a definition of this principle, but Strózyński evidently has in mind Plotinus' idea that a lower, potential level has a kind of desire and knowledge of its higher source; it gains itself by satisfying this desire, and at the same time its lower part becomes fecund and generates another level. Needless to say, Plotinus, followed by many scholars, often describes this backward-looking stance in terms of conversion (*epistrophē*) and consequent filling. Strózyński has little to say about conversion as such.

The book is indeed full of ideas. Moreover, despite the fact that Strózyński's writing is not always easy to follow, he manages to convey a distinct vision of Plotinus' thought. A great deal of this vision is familiar and well known, but the total impression of Plotinus' philosophy one is left with is different from that commonly given in overview works of his thought. What is distinctive about it is Strózyński's sweeping claims about the universality of contemplation in Plotinus' world. He even seems to entertain the idea that physical matter is not quite void of it (p. 49). Every true being – this certainly includes not only items at the level of Intellect but also every soul – is a person and contemplator, endowed with both

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X26102649 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cognitive and desiderative capacities. Thus, the notion of contemplation Strózyński operates with is broader than contemplation in Plotinus is generally taken to be. There is contemplation not only in and of Intellect, but also by souls of items at the level of souls and of intellect. He distinguishes between two kinds of psychic contemplation: at the level of the imagination (*phantasia*) and at the level of reason (*dianoia*). In the former kind 'we experience a sort of expansion of our self in which we feel ourselves permeating the whole of the sensible world', whereas in the latter 'we find ourselves to be present everywhere in a completely non-localised and non-extended way' (p. 226).

We have reservations about several of Strózyński's claims that he uses to build up his vision, often without much argument. Nevertheless, his vision is in many ways impressive and stirs readers to further thinking. Rather than note many points we might take issue with, we focus on one issue: the distinction between the first-person view and the third-person view.

This distinction coincides at least to some extent with the well-known distinction between discursive and non-discursive or intuitive thought. This is, however, not quite the same distinction: there is a first-personal experience at the level of the imagination, which Plotinus would not count as non-discursive thought, even if it is true that his accounts of non-discursive thought are full of perceptual metaphors. There are other differences: Strózyński's first-person view emphasises that the first-person view is all about direct experiences as opposed to something objective, argumentative, verbal and conceptual. There are too many things at once here. Sometimes one gets the impression that the important distinction is that between *direct* experience of the things and indirect experience by means of images of the things. That, however, does not square well with psychic first-person experiences, which must be of images as opposed to the things at the level of Intellect.

Secondly, it is true that Plotinus not infrequently asks readers to use their power of imagination. In most of the cases that Strózyński cites the imaginings are supposed to help us grasp the nature of the intelligible realm. We are to imagine something from the sensible world or even that whole world and deprive it in our imagination of some or all of its material and corporeal features. This is the standard procedure for instance in *Ennead* VI.4–5, from which Strózyński cites a number of passages in Part 2, which is about psychic contemplation. These imaginings are clearly meant to have a cognitive function and help us understand the intelligible world. What we are supposed to understand is something that is objectively the case according to Plotinus. Then the question arises: what is essentially first-personal or subjective about such imaginings as Plotinus describes or about contemplation generally? Surely, these imaginings and contemplation generally in Plotinus have an objective content. They are first-personal or subjective in the trivial sense that, in order for there to be contemplation, there must be a subject who experiences it. But the same is true of scientific understanding or reasoning: there must be an experiencing subject in order for there to be any such thing.

As just noted, these imaginings are meant to have a cognitive function. Given that, how can Strózyński deny that they are conceptual? He says about items at the level of reason that the 'what it is' 'is the unfolded image and expression of [the original Form in Intellect], namely its propositional or mathematical *logos*' (p. 176). The question arises how the experience of grasping a 'propositional or mathematical *logos*' can be a non-conceptual experience. The same can be said about the quasi-perceptual experiences at the level of the imagination. In these cases, what we imagine quasi-sensually comes with the knowledge of the content: if we picture a house in our imagination, we are fully aware that it is a house that we picture, and the concept is an essential part of the experience. We suspect that there is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X26102649 Published online by Cambridge University Press

some confusion involved or at least unresolved aspects around the distinction between the first-person view and the third-person view.

In a startling manner Plotinus often starts his inquiries by posing problems for a collective: who *we* are, how *we* speak about the One, what *we* perceive with, or, for instance, whether *we* should separate ourselves from the body. One of Plotinus' most famous doctrines is his philosophy of self, of which this 'we' (*hēmeis*) is a central part. Stock's book, *Plotinus on What We Think We Are*, offers an analysis of this notion. She shows how Plotinus distinguishes a real or ideal 'we' from a more everyday one, thereby envisaging a project that is not purely descriptive but strongly normative: what we are and what we should strive to be differ, though they remain subtly connected. This project is not entirely new – nor confined to Plotinus – and has been succinctly captured by A.A. Long, some time ago, as the most important question in ancient philosophy: what to make of oneself?

The most attractive aspect of Stock's book is the carefully chosen methodology. She begins from what she calls everyday language, collecting all occurrences of *hēmeis* systematically. The topic thus becomes the 'we' in the different ways in which Plotinus uses it to refer to ourselves. The results of this analysis are then related to the Platonic idea of what we truly are. After introducing this approach, each chapter examines one central cluster of usages: 'we' as an individual (Chapter 2), 'we' as an ethical subject (Chapter 3), contexts in which 'we' is given a context or location (Chapter 4), and contexts in which it denotes the subject of, or is related to, consciousness (Chapter 5). Stock then turns to different ways of understanding the 'we' either as dual – everyday and rational, body and soul (Chapter 6) – or as multiple, involving many elements stretching from Intellect to functions shared with other living beings (Chapter 8). Between these comes a chapter on 'we' as it refers to philosophers or subjects of inquiry (Chapter 7). There is little, indeed virtually nothing, on self-reflexivity. This sometimes prevents a fully comprehensive picture of selfhood from emerging, but it is a consistent consequence of the decision to focus on *hēmeis* and to leave reflexive expressions aside.

Stock does not select one or two ways of talking about the 'we' as the correct ones but instead presents them as complementary. In what is perhaps a surprising move she questions Plotinus' intention of creating a system: 'In my view, the aporetic character of the works and the importance of teaching show that the main purpose of Plotinian works is not to construct a system' (p. 14). She reaches this conclusion by appealing to the dialogical character of the works (which incorporate series of answers to what were plausibly real questions and counter-arguments from those attending Plotinus' classes) as well as to Porphyry's depiction of the teaching situation. Parts of the text in both Plato and Plotinus, she contends, are there to train students, which makes it difficult to know when an argument or view is presented as a mere exercise and when it is offered as a definitive answer. Moreover, Stock helpfully reminds us that Plotinus believed that understanding an *aporia* already constitutes progress in knowledge (IV.3.1–4).

While we agree on the dialogical–dialectical nature of many treatises, there is a danger of overstating the point. The idea that *aporiai* are helpful for understanding is well known from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* B, but Aristotle also famously maintains that raising *aporiai* goes hand in hand with recognising when and through what the inquiry reaches a conclusion (995a34–b2). From the mere use of *aporiai* it cannot be inferred that a given philosophical project is, for example, unsystematic. There also seem to be different degrees of dialogical–dialectical character in different texts: Plato is clearly more dialogical–dialectical in some works – especially those that end in explicit *aporiai* – than in others (such as the 'middle dialogues' like the *Republic*), whereas Plotinus, after aporetic openings and inquiries, often seems to present, towards the end of a treatise, a view or at least a vision of his own. While Plotinus' philosophy may not be systematic in any strict sense (depending on what exactly

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X26102649 Published online by Cambridge University Press

one means by 'systematic'), it certainly has distinctive features and principles that recur in many contexts and are used both to formulate and to solve philosophical problems. As regards, however, this elusive entity of the 'we', we grant that Plotinus may well be reluctant to make decisive statements.

As a theme, the 'we' touches not only on psychology and moral psychology, but also on ethics, metaphysics and epistemology more broadly, and thus demands wide-ranging engagement with much of the existing scholarship on Plotinus. This wealth of interconnected themes and secondary sources inevitably presents challenges for any author. How does one avoid recounting philosophical debates that are tangentially relevant to the theme but properly belong to other, familiar discussions? How does one do justice to an already extensive body of secondary opinions? Stock presents much of the secondary literature in the introductory chapters, reserving the notes for primary sources, textual issues and explicit disagreements. This choice gives precedence to the sources but also makes it harder to track developments and debates in scholarship.

Let us highlight briefly Stock's original contributions to individual debates. A longstanding debate concerns Plotinus' ambivalence towards embodiment. Are human bodies necessary evils and punishments for souls, or are they their beautiful 'houses'? Is the soul not essentially independent of the body, such that it would be best if it never descended at all? Stock usefully stresses that embodiment is something the soul needs for its perfection and reminds us of passages where the realisation of the soul's powers requires embodiment (e.g. IV.8.6.6–16). Remaining in the intelligible realm is clearly the better option, but it is less clear that this would accord with the soul's amphibious nature (pp. 81–2).

In much existing scholarship memory is associated primarily with the life of embodied selves, whereas Stock underlines its importance for any project of self-ennoblement and locates it, crucially, in the higher soul as well. Memory acts in two ways and in two senses: on the one hand, it can take as its object ordinary things in the sensible realm and thus drag the soul downwards (or, alternatively, upwards); on the other, it can entertain its memories either with or without emotion. Moreover, even when memories are not within conscious reach, they can still affect a person's ethical orientation. The soul, Stock strikingly concludes, 'becomes what it remembers' (p. 102).

Some of the book's main tenets are well known from previous scholarship. The originality of the study emerges in the emphases generated by the chosen methodology. If *hēmeis* is interpreted as an expression of the dialogical, inquiring community, then it is not a descriptive notion applied from outside, but, as Stock says, '"we" are investigating ourselves' (p. 148). A further intriguing emphasis concerns the methodological starting point in everyday language and expressions. Viewed through this lens, Plotinus appears to be, as Stock writes, 'not only a speculative metaphysician or mystic, but a philosopher of "common sense"' (p. 148). Scholars familiar with the *Enneads* are likely to recognise this voice of Plotinus – perhaps, in the end, a more pervasive one than that of his occasional spiritual ekstasis.

Within the study of Neoplatonism one of the fields in which groundbreaking work is being done currently is the area of Neoplatonic influences on medieval and Renaissance thought. A central figure as regards the study of Renaissance Neoplatonism is Gersh, whose English translation of Marsilio Ficino's *Commentary on Plotinus' Enneads* from 1492 – the first critical edition and the first English translation of the whole work to become available – is currently being produced and coming out with Harvard University Press. The volume at hand is a kind of companion to the translation. And herein lie both its greatness and the problems as regards its assessment: the volume is a product of Gersh's intimate relationship with the original text and as such a massive, invaluable piece of scholarship with which future scholars of Ficino will be approaching the original texts. To assess its scholarly

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X26102649 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contribution, one would need to either have his translations fully available or be as well acquainted with the original text as Gersh is. We will restrict our comments to what the volume contains, communicate some of the central interpretative features of Ficino as a reader of Plotinus, as revealed by Gersh, as well as make some minor critical comments on the presentation.

The book opens with an introduction to the text under consideration, its motivation, its place within Ficino's work as well as Ficino's s stance towards Plato and Aristotle, and the potentially relevant engagement with Plotinus before Ficino. In this scholarly gem we read how Cosimo de' Medici commissioned Ficino to translate Plato as a part of his 'kind of Academy', in order to penetrate the Platonic 'mysteries' (p. 3). We also learn how Pico della Mirandola some 20 years later encouraged Ficino to translate even Plotinus. Gersh lays out the central features of Ficino's exegesis of the *Enneads*. The commentary is an intertextual work that connects the *Enneads* particularly to Christian materials. Plotinus' philosophy is a central part in a programme that, according to Ficino, is 'an instrument of divine providence to bring philosophers who have strayed doctrinally back towards the true religion' (p. 4).

What makes Plotinus especially suited to be the vehicle of a return to religious philosophising is his dialectical-rational methodology: this involves an inclusion but also unveiling of the mysteries of Plato and the Hermetic tradition, thus embodying a co-existence of religion and philosophy. A central accomplishment consists of bringing into a philosophical system what is in Plato sometimes concealed in narratives, myths and merely suggestive rather than explicit argumentation. To be able to use Plotinus and Christian materials together, Ficino had to work with an interpretative assumption that Plotinus' central doctrines were not incompatible with the Faith and that some of his ideas were 'tentative approaches toward something that Christian believers acquired through revelation' (p. 75).

The book proceeds by showcasing how this kind of interpretation happens and what its challenges and results are through a part on analogy and Trinity, then one on soul as well as the Intellect, good and evil, reversion and ascent to Beauty and to the One or God. The third and last part deals with matter, *ratio* and Spirit.

One of the key notions for understanding what Ficino is doing is what Gersh calls 'the logic of analogy' (p. 75). To simplify, this concerns the idea that non-Christian and Christian dogmas can signify the same not literally but analogically. This interpretative move follows, on the one hand, the path of Plotinus, who uses the same terms on separate levels of his metaphysical system and must thereby hold that they signify in some sense same or similar things, but refer to distinct beings on different levels. On the other hand, the logic of analogy goes back to medieval developments of analogical terms between purely univocal and equivocal terms. The chapters dealing with this complicated notion are highly interesting but also at times somewhat impenetrable, without good knowledge of the Aristotelian and Platonic species and genera system, and univocal and equivocal predication as well as its medieval developments.

One central motivation for the application of Platonists by Ficino was a dissatisfaction with the Aristotelian conception of the soul. Either the soul is individual but not immortal (Alexander of Aphrodisias), or if it is immortal, it is not individual (Ibn Rushd, lat. Averroës). Here Platonism offered views that were much more promising from the point of view of Christian doctrines. In the long middle part of the book the author analyses the soul from a point of view of its place and role in the system of procession and descent as well as reverting back towards God while through all this maintaining its individuality. Besides revealing a conception of the soul palatable to a Christian, Gersh also discloses Ficino attacking one strand of Platonism, namely the theory of the transmigration of souls.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X26102649 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The book's intended readership are clearly scholars well versed in Neoplatonism and the history of philosophy. While this is a well-motivated choice, the volume is a challenging read. Gersh thematises the differences between Plotinus and Ficino, but it is occasionally difficult to see whether he takes Ficino to be authentically describing Plotinus or producing a novel view. For example, in explicating the difference between the Neoplatonic generation of the world and the Christian God's creation, Gersh highlights the former as producing the world from a substratum and the latter *ex nihilo* (p. 136). While this is the right picture of the demiurgic creation in the *Timaeus*, and true of the Plotinian Intellect, it is hard to see what exactly, in Plotinus, is the substratum from which the One creates, given that it overflows from its own absolutely simple nature.

This volume will be an indispensable tool for future studies on Renaissance scholarship of nearly any intellectual kind, be that philosophy, art and aesthetics, culture or theology. The level of detail and erudition is remarkable. Gersh reveals how astute a reader of Plotinus Ficino is, and how a careful look at his commentary will help widening our understanding of the interpretative possibilities as regards many parts of the *Enneads*. To end with an analogy: as the Neoplatonists are to Plato and Aristotle, so Ficino is to Plotinus.

University of Oslo EYJÓLFUR K. EMILSSON
e.k.emilsson@ifikk.uio.no

Uppsala University PAULIINA REMES
pauliina.remes@filosofi.uu.se

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X26102649 Published online by Cambridge University Press