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Barrie Fleet, *Plotinus. Ennead IV.8: On the Descent of the Soul into Bodies. The Enneads of Plotinus with philosophical commentaries*. Las Vegas; Zurich; Athens: Parmenides Publishing, 2012. Pp. 209. ISBN 9781930972773. $32.00 (pb).

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This is the first volume of a new series of translations and commentaries on the individual treatises of Plotinus' *Enneads*, edited by John Dillon and Andrew Smith. This series is the first of its kind in English, and thus constitutes a major contribution to English language scholarship on Plotinus and late ancient philosophy. Similar to the French series published by Les Éditions du Cerf, this series provides detailed discussions of individual treatises. The present volume consists of an introduction to the series by the editors, and an introduction, translation, and commentary of *Ennead* IV. 8 by Barrie Fleet.

In the introduction to the series, Dillon and Smith draw attention to two features of Plotinus' writings that are crucial to understanding the *Enneads* as a whole: first, the treatises are not systematic expositions of Plotinus' own metaphysical system but rather explorations of particular issues raised in interpreting Plato and other philosophical texts read in the school; second, the treatises are written in such a way that they invite the reader to engage in the lively debate and spirit of inquiry that Plotinus encouraged in his school. These features are especially relevant in the case of IV. 8, since Plotinus is dealing with an issue of particular concern for Platonists and he does so in a conversational manner with objections raised, entertained, and answered,—but only after careful scrutiny of Plato's writings,. Fleet's translation and commentary does a masterful job of exemplifying these features. In particular, the translation renders Plotinus' prose smooth and engaging without sacrificing accuracy. This is no small feat due to the density of Plotinus' writing, and his lack of concern for spelling and grammar.1

In the introduction to the treatise, Fleet discusses three background questions in light of Plato's doctrines and Plotinus' understanding of these doctrines. The questions are: first, what is the nature of soul; second, what is the nature of the soul's ascent; and third, what does the soul achieve at the end of its ascent? Fleet's discussion of these questions sets up his interpretation of the famous opening lines of IV. 8: "the picture presented at the start of IV.8 is of the human soul becoming assimilated to Intellect and engaging with the One by a sort of contact and timeless apprehension. That is the point from which the 'descent into bodies' begins" (42). Fundamental to

Fleet's approach is his view that "[k]ey to *our* interpretation of Plotinus' text is an understanding of *his* interpretation of Plato's texts" (14). It is for this reason that Fleet devotes a significant portion of his introduction to explaining Plato's teaching on these questions and Plotinus' interpretation of them. Particularly helpful is the contrast Fleet highlights between the descent of the soul in the *Republic* and in the *Phaedrus*. In the former, the cave dweller (or philosopher-king) is forcefully compelled to return to the cave (or affairs of the state) after achieving a vision of the Good (*Republic*, 514a-520e). In the latter, the soul of the philosopher is not forcefully compelled to descend but rather is carried back to earth by the unruly nature of his own soul (*Phaedrus*, 246a-248e). This provides a helpful background to the problem Plotinus faces in IV. 8 in characterizing the soul's descent as both necessary and voluntary. Fleet's interpretive approach fits IV.8 especially well since it relies heavily on doxographical use of Plato, and Plotinus' own view is formed largely by his understanding of Plato's view. However, it does have its limitations. The commentary tends to explain Plotinus' views by tracing them vertically back to Plato instead of horizontally across the *Enneads*, and it tends to over-emphasize the sources of Plotinus' thinking and under-emphasize Plotinus' own originality. I will provide two examples of this in the remainder of the review.

Fleet's interpretive approach is at its strongest in his commentary on chapter five, where Plotinus argues that there is no discrepancy between the voluntary and involuntary nature of the descent. Fleet prefaces his commentary with a very helpful discussion of the strands in Plato's thought that Plotinus is carefully interweaving. According to Fleet, *Republic* (519c-520d) and *Timaeus* (29dff, 41ad, and 69aff) suggest the descent is involuntary; *Phaedrus* (245d-246a and 246dff) suggests the descent is voluntary; while *Republic* (614b-621b), *Gorgias* (523e-527a), *Phaedo* (81d-82b), and the remainder of the *Phaedrus* myth place the voluntary and the involuntary side-by-side or one after the other. It is because of discrepancies such as these that Plotinus tells us "[i]t is clear that [Plato] does not always speak with sufficient consistency for us to make out his intentions with any ease" (IV.8.1, 28-30). The key to understanding Plotinus' solution to these apparent inconsistencies, according to Fleet, is teleology. Souls are compelled to descend to fulfill the Demiurge's plan of creating a cosmos that is perfect and complete in its embodiment of the Ideal Living Creature, but in so doing, souls discover that they want to descend to play their part in organizing and structuring the physical world. He writes, "[t]hey are compelled to descend, but it is in their nature to agree to the compulsion, whereby it acquires a voluntary component" (154).

Fleet's interpretive approach succeeds in explaining Plotinus' interpretation of Plato's view and sheds a great deal of light on Plotinus' own view. However, Fleet does not fully explain what a voluntary action is for Plotinus, and as a result leaves partially unexplained why souls would agree to the compulsion and want to descend. I suspect the reason why he does not discuss voluntary action in detail is because this would require him to discuss the opening chapters of VI. 8, *On Free Will and the Will of the One*, and he appears to prefer limiting his discussion of passages outside of IV.8. However, given Plotinus' notion of the voluntary differs significantly from Aristotle's, one would expect a discussion of this (e.g., VI.8.1, 32-45). Recognizing that voluntariness involves not only acting according to our will and knowing the particulars of a situation (e.g., who one is murdering) but also knowing the universal

(e.g., that murder is wrong) would help explain why souls would agree to compulsion in the first place. In other words, the reason why the descent of souls acquires a voluntary component is because they recognize not only that they are descending to organize bodies (knowledge of the particular) but that is good for them to do so (knowledge of the universal). For voluntary actions in Plotinus are oriented towards the Good (VI.8.4, 15-19 and 27- 40, VI.8.7, 1-6).

Fleet stresses throughout his introduction (pp. 17, 25n11) and commentary (p. 185) that the basis for Plotinus' claim that part of our rational soul remains in the intelligible world may have its roots in Plato. The locus classicus for Plotinus' famous doctrine of the undescended soul occurs at IV.8.8, 1-3.

> Furthermore – if I may venture to state my convictions more clearly against the opinions of others, as I must – not even our own soul sinks in its entirety, but there is always some part of it in the intelligible world.

In the commentary Fleet lists several other passages where Plotinus reiterates this doctrine (IV.3.12, 1-3; II.9.2, 5; VI.7.5, 26; V.1.10, 13ff) and claims that *Timaeus* (41d-42e, 69c3) may be the source for this view, where Timaeus states that the demiurge creates the immortal soul and that the immortal soul is made from the same mixture of the world soul so that it could be said to operate in a similar manner. However, Fleet makes no attempt to explain this doctrine within Plotinus' own philosophy. I find this rather unfortunate since it is equally likely, if not more likely, that Plotinus reached this peculiar doctrine on the basis of his own phenomenological experience. In my view, Armstrong was right when he wrote that "it was experience which was most important in determining Plotinus' adoption and maintenance at least of his most distinctive doctrine, that which separates him and Porphyry clearly from all other Platonists, the doctrine of the higher self which does not descend" and "[h]is whole-hearted acceptance and distinctive personal development of the basic Platonic position seems to me likely to have been due to his own experience more than respect for tradition or satisfaction with his own reasonings" (191).2

It is all the more unfortunate that Fleet doesn't address this since the opening lines of this treatise contains one of the finest passages in the *Enneads* regarding personal experience.

> I often wake up from my body into my true self, so that being within myself and outside all other things I enjoy a vision of wonderful beauty. It is then that I believe most firmly that I am a part of the nobler realm, living a life of perfect activity; I have become at one with the divine, and being securely established in it I have entered into that higher actuality, setting myself above all the rest of the intelligible world. But when, after being at rest in the divine, I have started my descent from intellection to discursive reasoning, I wonder how on earth it is that even now I am descending, and how on earth it is that my soul has come to be in my body, since it has been revealed to be what it is in itself, despite being in body (IV. 8. 1, 1-10).

In the commentary Fleet does briefly discuss how the ascent reveals the true nature of the soul and that this process begins by turning inwards, but he does not elaborate on the role of experience. It is here where I think Fleet's interpretive approach runs into problems since explaining these passages is not simply a matter of finding their sources in Plato but explaining how Plotinus reaches these doctrines within his own philosophy. For Plotinus has a much richer notion of self, inwardness, and consciousness than Plato, and he relies heavily on his own personal experience in verifying traditional claims of Platonism and advancing his own philosophical views.

Finally, a comment on presentation. The book cover is attractive and eye-catching, the pages are durable, and the print is bold and easily readable. Some editorial mistakes are to be found. For example, on p. 107 the reference to Atkinson is listed as 1993 but on p. 117 is listed as 1983 (the bibliography lists the original publication date as 1983 then reprinted with corrections in 1985). On pp. 147 and 157 the reference to Sedley is listed as 2007 but in the bibliography it is listed as 2004 (the original publication date was 2007). On p. 53n19 DK is cited but DK does not appear on the Abbreviations page. Readers unfamiliar with Diels' *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* would likely find this puzzling.3

Despite my concerns with Fleet's interpretive approach I think this volume is an excellent introduction to the series and will be of use to students and scholars alike. I can't help but write that my undergraduates who recently wrote papers on Plotinus' account of the descent of the soul would have benefitted greatly from Fleet's commentary, as well as from the synopsis of the individual chapters that precedes the translation. Parmenides Publishing's decision to publish this series and their ongoing commitment to making ancient philosophy accessible to a broader audience are to be commended.

Notes:

1. Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, ch. 8.
2. Armstrong, A. H. "Tradition, Reason, and Experience in the Thought of Plotinus" *Plotino e il Neoplatonismo in Oriente e in Occidente*, 1974, 171-194. Reprinted in *Plotinian and Christian Studies*. London: Variorum, 1979
3. Diels, H. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th ed. Revised with additions and index by W. Kranz. Berlin, 1952.

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