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NARBONNE, JEAN-MARC. *Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics*. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011. 152 pp. £69.17 (hardcover).

Plotinus (ca. 204-270 CE) has always been an object of interest for scholars interested in investigating the historical developments in ancient philosophy. In the past decade, about thirteen articles have been written on the subject and about as many monographs have been written. Recently, there has been an increasing interest from scholars of Gnosticism in the field of Plotinian studies.

Narbonne's (hereafter, N.) book is part of an ongoing project to reevaluate Plotinus's relationship with Gnosticism and to recognize that rather than a mere clash of ideologies, there was instead rather more of a dialogue between Plotinus and the Gnostics, leading to a mutual reevaluation of basic principles and a negotiation of philosophical ideas and concepts. N. notes in the Introduction of this book that this approach is in contrast to the earlier work of R. Hader, who in a 1936 article identified key treatises of the *Enneads*, namely 30-33, as treatises concerned with Plotinus' arguments against Gnosticism. Recently the suggestion has been made that Gnosticism was a fully developed system by the time Plotinus began teaching in Alexandria, predating Plotinus's own final write up of his philosophical ideas and therefore providing much more of a (negative) influence on the philosopher than had previously been thought. N.'s work springs from this assumption and attempts to demonstrate that Plotinus had in mind this ongoing debate over the Gnostic religion, sharpening his own metaphysical stance against that of his opponents. Thus, the argument is made that much more of the Plotinian corpus than treatises 30-33 betrays a concern with navigating Plotinus's philosophy through the straits of Gnostic teachings.

The book is made up of six "studies", four of which have previously been published and two that are original. The essays vary in length from ten (Study Five) to forty-two (Study One) pages. Four out of the five essays are directly related to the problem of evil—appropriate in that a majority of scholars believe it is on the subject of evil that Plotinus most strongly differed from his opponents, the Gnostics. The essays can be read in any order (many of the important central ideas are repeated), but the provided order is logical, coherent, and does a nice job of moving from large important issues to minutiae dependent upon the previously mentioned issues.

Due to the constraints of space, I will limit my summaries to some highlights within the studies that were of particular interest, and offer some evaluative comments of the work as a whole in the end.

The longest and the most complete essay, **Study One**, concerns the familiar philosophical conundrum of Plotinus's metaphysics of evil. The argument focuses on problems of interpretation surrounding a passage in Plotinus that suggests that the Good is responsible for the emanation of evil. Plotinus is the only philosopher who makes the claim that matter is both evil and generated (12). This is problematic, however, because Plotinus is seemingly a monist, positing only one source of all existence, the Good or the One. If matter is generated and the only generator available in the metaphysical schema is the Good, then it follows that the Good is responsible for the creation of evil---a paradox according to Neoplatonic logic since evil cannot originate in good.

Nevertheless, evil is a prevailing force in Plotinian cosmography, so we cannot simply ignore this comment as an oversight. N. spends the first few pages of the argument demonstrating in multiple treatises that Plotinus consistently stated that evil was both the main principle of evil, and also generated.

N. arrives at a clever interpretation of Plotinus that solves many of the apparent problems Plotinus faced, and may very well be the solution Plotinus attempted to write down in the first place. Responsibility for evil is reserved for an anterior principle of evil that originally was *part* of the good. Evil is present with the Good in some imagined philosophical *illo tempore*, but manages to escape from the

confines of its shared existence with the Good. Endowed with the principle of infinitude, Evil manages to “totally fall away from” or to escape from the One, breaking free of the shackles of order.

To help his readers better understand how all of this works in a concrete way, N. offers a pseudo-temporal narrative (pseudo, because, of course, all this occurs outside of time, and therefore the imposition of temporality is a somewhat paradoxical heuristic): T1) evil/matter is a part of the One. T2) Evil escapes from the One and “totally falls” down to the level of everyday existence. T3-?) The One emanates a series of levels of existence that eventually reach the same level of existence as matter/evil/infinity. At this stage, the bottom level of the emanation from the One meets with matter/evil/infinity and is subsequently corrupted by it. N. calls the movement of evil from the One in T2 a “differentiated flow,” while he refers to the movement of the normal levels of existence as a “cascading flow.” It is this simple use of language that is for me the most valuable part of the argument. N. offers a “schema” modeling the movement, but this schema suffers from its lack of iconicity and the fact that it shows the two different flows as separate actions, when they should be visually represented as stemming from the same Source.

The proposed interpretation of Plotinian metaphysics in Study One is wholly convincing. The suggestion that the Gnostics catalyzed Plotinus’s development of his own philosophy seems plausible and is further supportable by the other studies, especially Four.

Study Two moves from the broad notion of the world soul to the individual soul and explores the question of how the soul achieves reascent to the divine realm. N. notes that the notion of *homousios* was first introduced into the zeitgeist by the Gnostics who used it to describe the elect status of their own souls (59). Plotinus’s innovation was to transfer this “Gnostic consubstantiality [...]” onto a scale that encompasses all human beings. (60).

Study Three combines the previous themes of Study One and Two and focuses on the interaction between the individual soul and matter. Here, Narbonne focuses especially on how the soul can be affected by matter, despite its being something of a divine being. Narbonne focuses especially on analyzing the causal relationship between the soul’s fall and the soul’s weakness.

According to the final form of Plotinian metaphysics, the soul is an undifferentiated form that nonetheless possesses a periphery. It is at this periphery that the soul encounters forces external to it, namely matter, which results in the corruption of the soul at this boundary. In keeping with the overall goal of his project, N. notes that Plotinus’s doctrine of the soul underwent changes in response to the all-too-similar claims the Gnostics were making about the origins of evil. Previously in Study One, N. argues against the theory of partial causes (defended especially by O’Brien and Hagar), which stated that the soul was responsible for the creation of evil insofar as it had a desire for evil. Having demonstrated that evil possesses a will and a desire to thwart the Good by moving in ways contradictory to the ordered movement of creation (i.e. the differentiated flow vs. the cascading flow), Narbonne is prepared to demonstrate that the soul responsibility for evil falls to matter.

Before arriving at this final form of his thought, Plotinus makes statements in several places that appear as though he sees the soul responsible for evil. For example, in Treatise 5 (V 9, 2, 19-20), Plotinus curiously points to the existence of “an ugly soul,” which would seem to suggest that there are in fact two souls and would place evil’s origin in a lower hypostasis and not in a great escape from the one, as we saw above. In Treatise 6 (IV 8), Plotinus suggests that the soul’s extension actually causes it to “lose its wings” and become embodied, thus forgetting its beneficent origin. Perhaps the most damning is Treatise 10 (V 1, 3-5), where Plotinus declares, “The beginning of evil for them [i.e., souls] was audacity and coming to birth and the first otherness and the wishing to belong to themselves.” Here especially it would seem that the soul’s selfishness is what condemns it to evil. And thus evil begets evil. In the same vein as this argument, N. goes on to trace back the source of some of these seemingly contradictory positions to views held by Plato. So, for instance, the existence of an “ugly soul” may correspond to the notion of an evil World-soul in *Laws* 896e5-6, and the loss of wings may be a retelling of the *Phaedrus* 246 c, 248 c.

In the end, however, Plotinus was forced to reevaluate his position with respect to Plato and come down on the hard side of an anti-Gnostic position. The soul is corruptible, but this does not make it inherently evil. N. marks Treatise 33 as the turning point in Plotinus’s thought on the relationship of evil

with the soul. It is in this Treatise especially that Plotinus takes a polemical stance, extending his discussions on the nature of evil to a critique of the opponents of his teaching, whose arguments corrupt those who are easily swayed by them, just as matter corrupts the soul that ventures too close to the material realm. N.'s historical narrative here is convincing.

Study Four returns to the topic of study two, the re-ascent of the soul to the divine source. Here, however, the chief question under discussion is whether the individual human soul unites with the One, or whether it unites with the next lower hypostasis, the intellect. Plotinus affirms the former in his earlier treatises and the latter in his later. The problem then is that in the former case, the soul becomes a little too strongly identified with the One, or God, and such a doctrine potentially inflates the ego. According to Plotinus, his opponents (the Gnostics) have just such an arrogant, audacious view. He, in turn, is forced to distance himself from his previous notion of the soul uniting with the one "alone" (9 VI 9, 11, 51; N. 97). N. notes that in a critical passage critiquing the Gnostics in Treatise 33, Plotinus writes that "ascent towards the supreme principle is only possible for a man *as long as he is guided by intellect* (*dunatai de eis hoson nous agei*, line 51)—which is precisely the novelty which Plotinus introduces in Treatise 38" (N. 103, emphasis his). Thus, according to N., it is out of a desire to dissociate his own views from the Gnostics that Plotinus reevaluates the path of ascent for the individual soul and makes that soul much more dependent on and subordinate to the divine intellect., "In the case of the ascent of the soul, as in that of the reality of evil, Plotinus' amended teaching precludes all possible confusion of his teaching with those of the Gnostics.

There are a number of typos in the book. Page 56 has "Be that at may..." Page 79 has "However, is not yet clear..." An egregious typo on page 100 makes a critical sentence unreadable: "It is now borne up by an no less than the Intellect itself." Another typo on this page is more amusing "...and goes so far as tom reintroduce the critical..." However, none of these, with the exception of that critical sentence on page 100, are particularly distracting.

Given the title, one would have perhaps liked to have seen more attention paid to the question of just who the "Gnostics" were (especially, since this has become such an important question in scholarship on the Gnostics right now [see, e.g. Williams 1999, King 2005, and Brakke 2011]), and given the disproportionate cost to the size of the book, a discussion on the theoretical problems inherent to any study of this kind would have been a welcome addition. The problem becomes all the more clear when N. conflates Gnostic, Hermetic, and Chaldean writings, as if these are all representative of the same belief system against which Plotinus posits his own philosophy (109-110). In deference to N.'s project, the ruminations explored here provide a necessary and sometimes overlooked position in the ongoing dialogue about Gnosticism., arguing as he does that the Gnostics were an actual group present in Plotinus's classroom. This argument deserves consideration from those who would argue the minimalist stance in Gnosticism scholarship (e.g. King).

Another problem is N.'s tendency to editorialize. Three times in the book he provides asides that evaluate the philosophy of Plotinus as if Plotinus's philosophy was qualitatively better than the various ancient philosophical schools/religious beliefs with which he was in conflict. Case in point: In a discussion on the use of philosophical exercises to achieve awareness of the divine, N. notes, "The advantages of this approach, over that which Iamblichus and other Neoplatonists will put forth remain, in my opinion, considerable (62)." And again, "What the Gnostics obtain only through tested rituals following a path laid out by semi-fictitious characters, is now offered to them in the first person, in a sober and reflective manner (70)." And finally, "The Plotinian texts, indeed, relate an odyssey of the soul that is as vibrant and palpitating, more so perhaps, than that which is conveyed to us in hermetic and Gnostic texts, yet free of the style of oracular revelations which is particular to these earlier texts. In Plotinus, the resort to myth is mostly illustrative or corroborative in purpose: it is designed to supplement the reasoning, but never supplant it." The chief problem with these passages is that they are evidence of a somewhat outdated dichotomy. It is nothing new to say that Plotinus was more 'philosophical' and 'rational' than the theurgists and the Gnostics (see e.g. E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*), but in so doing, we not only unfairly and unnecessarily impose on ancient philosophers the standards of modern philosophy, a discipline that

itself is somewhat difficult to define, but we even make the methodological error of transitioning abruptly from (to borrow a useful terminology from Umberto Eco) interpretation to use of text. N. places himself in the rather difficult position of acting as an apologist for the historical Plotinus, revitalizing his ideas within a modern philosophical context. The overall tenor of N.'s argument, as suggested by the title, however is to confront the historical Plotinus, and in order to do so, we must recognize the differentiation between the ideas of Plotinus and those of contemporary society. These differences are of such a degree that it seems to me impossible to make such evaluative statements about the worth of Plotinus's philosophy. Moreover, this inattention to the historical context of philosophy obscures our own comprehension of Plotinus, twisting the textual Plotinus to fit a modern rationalist's mold. Indeed, such a contention of qualitative difference makes N.'s own argument somewhat more difficult, since if Plotinus felt he had to articulate his conceptual arguments in dialogue with the Gnostics, he must have felt that these Gnostics held arguments that were to some degree similar to his own. Furthermore, as N. himself notes, Plotinus relied heavily on his own highly subjective personal experiences of unity with supracosmic being, and given the nature of his opponents and the ultimate topics of discussion in his school (including the question of ontological evil), it is worth considering that he actually employed the methods of a cult leader than a "sober," "reflective," "rational" academic method. To speak of "advantages" in this context strikes me as very odd. N. is, however, not to blame for these mistakes; rather, he merely replicates the artificial separation currently present in academia, which makes it nearly impossible for scholars to write on the history of philosophy without reflecting on the problems of the historical embeddedness.

Apart from these minor criticisms, the book puts forth some very interesting, cogent, and well-argued points. No doubt, the arguments presented here will call into question earlier edited editions and commentaries on the *Enneads*. The book is well written and deserves to be read by anyone with even a passing interest in Plotinus's philosophy.