

# Bryn Mawr Classical Review

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**Bernard Collette-Ducic, *Plotin et l'ordonnement de l'être. Histoire des doctrines de l'antiquité classique, 36.* Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2007. Pp. 289. ISBN 9782711619467. €30.00 (pb).**

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[The reviewer wishes to apologize to the author and to the editors of the BMCR for the delay of the review.]

Collette-Ducic's book is the modified version of his doctoral thesis defended in 2004 at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. The inclusion of this young scholar's work in the prestigious J. Vrin collection founded by Jean Pépin and directed by Luc Brisson is a first sign of its high quality. Collette-Ducic has already published *Dialectique et hénologie chez Plotin* (Brussels, Ousia, 2002), a fine work too.

Plotinian scholarship sees a superb moment all around the world; several new translations and an astonishing number of great books and articles have definitely made Plotinus' *Enneads* a well known classic; and despite some very problematic issues of his philosophy - matter and evil, for instance -- we may say that Plotinus' thought, its sources, and its influence upon the history of ideas are sufficiently clear for us. He is not only well known but also, as far as possible, well understood.

Plotinus' thought is deeply marked by paradox, and the most striking one probably is that the cause of being must not itself be being nor have any of the determinations implied by being. It is a perennial paradox of Greek philosophy -- how can the multiple proceed from the unity? -- taken to the utmost consequences by Plotinus: the One is above determination and being, but it notwithstanding is the origin of all determination and being. At the other end, that is below the ordered being, there is the completely indeterminate matter that also lacks all determinations of being. Thus the syntax of being, i.e. its co-ordination, comes from indetermination and originates indetermination. This is the problem that permeates Collette-Ducic's book.

The book comprises three large parts minutely subdivided into chapters, sections, and subsections, being remarkable for its organization, clarity, and sense of development.

The first part, *L'indétermination comme condition de la détermination*, the most brilliant in my opinion, reflects upon the causal role played by the indeterminate One in the constitution of the intelligible and of the sensible realms, which are determinate and ordered. The One generates Intellect and gives to it an immense creative power; but, returning to the

One in order to be completed, it is not able to see the One as the absolute simplicity it is. There is a sort of creative failure at the origin of all determination: for, when Intellect tries to grasp the One, that is to make it an object of thought, it confers to the One the determination the principle does not possess. Being comes from such determination, and it may be said to be the One, not the One as it is in itself, but the One as seen by the limited visage of Intellect. The same happens to Soul when conferring determination to matter: it produces something wholly deprived of form<sup>1</sup> -- the absolute ugliness -- and cannot stand looking at it. Then, in a second move, Soul informs matter and produces the bodies. *Kosmos* (determination, order), therefore, is born from Intellect and Soul being unable to think the indetermination of the One and of matter.

The second part, *La détermination*, may be read as a small commentary on Plotinus' treatise on numbers (VI. 6 [34]), since this treatise furnishes almost all the passages that are sovery carefully discussed by the author. Having studied how is it possible that the intelligible determination come out from the indeterminate One, the author centers on being's determination, elucidating the proper characteristics of Intellect, firstly and more importantly, but also those of Soul and the sensible bodies, in so far as they still inhabit the realm of determination. The author explores the twofold role played by number: on one hand, number is that which manifests the perfect limitedness of the intelligible; on the other, it is that which rules the generation of the multiplicity of forms and ensures the necessity of such multiplicity, in opposition to a mere accidental and unintelligible multiplication. The second hypostasis, for Plotinus, is at once one and many; it is constituted by being, Intellect, and life. Treatise VI. 6 [34], the author believes, is the most relevant of Plotinus' writings for the understanding of this unique triad. The study of number's monadic structure in general is a first step to the comprehension of the internal multiplication of the second hypostasis: a multiplication that is not quantitative, but is a sort of progressive differentiation of a reality that, at its origin, has a virtual and indistinct existence.

In the third part, *l'indétermination au coeur de la détermination*, Collette-Ducic searches for the presence of indetermination inside the very domain of determination, that is, inside the second hypostasis. The main point of this section is to specify that determination does not entail limit to all aspects of Intellect. Indetermination, at this stage, appears as otherness and as totalization: the external otherness is Intellect's otherness relatively to the One, and the internal otherness is that of the Intellect's parts relative one to another. As unified multiplicity, a whole composed of its parts that is each one of them and whose parts are all parts and the whole, Intellect has to be thought through a complex dialectic. Therefore, the determination of being is not the imposition of a limit to its power of internal multiplication and to its capacity of being the totality it is.

I would have a few minor disagreements with the author, details that cannot maculate his contributions to the study of Plotinus and do not affect his main theses. I will mention only three.

The first regards Collette-Ducic's comments (pp. 246-7) on III. 8 [30] 8. 36-40, where Plotinus enigmatically speaks of Intellect's procession from the One comparing it to a circle and its elements (centre, radii, and circumference). As the author understands the passage, the expansion of the circle is an image for the internal expansion of Intellect: it is the centre, that is the place of origin, and the circumference represents the actualization of particular intellects. This interpretation is not uncontroversial, especially regarding lines 38-40; as I

prefer to understand these lines, the centre rather refers to the One.

I would also disagree with the author in regard to the existence of different grades of unity inside Intellect. He asserts (pp. 248, 254-5) that the processive movement of the second hypostasis conveys some sort of hierarchical structure within this hypostasis, there being therefore a life and a thinking of first grade, a second life and a second thinking of second grade, and third ones of third grade; the author quotes VI. 7 [38] 9. 15-18 in support of his interpretation. This passage has a close parallel in the *Enneads* (III. 8 [30] 8. 18-20), and both passages seem to me to speak of a gradation from Intellect down to Soul and Nature. Thus, contrary to him, I believe that a vertical distinction within the second hypostasis is hardly defensible.

Lastly, the author claims (p. 38, note 3) that V. 3 [49] 15. 27 is the only text of the entire work of Plotinus that states that the One, the principle of all things, contains in it all its products not discriminated (*mè diakekriména*). It may be the only passage of the *Enneads* in which the verb *diakrinein* occurs to describe how all things are in the One, but certainly is not the only text implicating the immanence of the effects in the first cause. The author does not address the extensive, if now somewhat unfashionable discussion about whether Plotinus' One can be said to be transcendent or immanent, and whether his account of reality can be considered monist, pantheist or panentheist. Not surprisingly, one can find support for each position in Plotinus. Anyway, several texts could be cited in order to show that, although Plotinus would maintain that the One gives what it is not and is other than its products, he also would maintain that the effect is contained in the cause rather otherwise. I am inclined to think that, if we could ask Plotinus who has rightly understood him, he would say: "the One is all things and not a single one of them" (V. 2 [11] 1. 1), or "it is nowhere and there is nowhere it is not" (V. 5 [32] 8. 24), and would walk away. For these questions, one may with profit consult chapter 4 of René Arnou's classic monograph *Le désir de Dieu dans la philosophie de Plotin*. I hope I do not seem unfair to Collette-Ducic if I say that sometimes his book makes Plotinus far more coherent than he actually is.

The author's method deserves a note too. Unlike a very common scholarly practice nowadays, that seems to regard the reading and the quoting of secondary critical literature more important than the direct and personal contact with and reflection on the primary texts, Collette-Ducic concentrates almost only on Plotinus' texts. He has, however, a vast and up-to-date acquaintance with the critical literature, but never is really dependent on it. Instead, he is confident in his own readings of Plotinus and original in his conclusions, and does not show embarrassment when he (rightly, it seems to me) refutes eminent names of Plotinian scholarship -- as he does with Kevin Corrigan and Jean-Marc Narbonne on the origin of matter (pp. 88-92). Even Plato, Aristotle, and Stoic and Pre-Socratic philosophers are mentioned only in view of the understanding of Plotinian questions. The book does not contain any enigmatic or undeveloped references to the philosophy after Plotinus, but only dense, yet amazing, exegesis of the *Enneads'* texts by an author who can be proud of complete mastery over his theme. *Plotin et l'ordonnement de l'être* has all it takes to become a classic of Plotinian studies.

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#### Notes:

1. Collette-Ducic traces (pp. 38-39) a precise and very important distinction between

*eidos* and *morphe*, respectively translated as 'specificity' and 'form', that is not incorporated into this review in order to avoid excessive technical language.

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