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Plotinus IV 7 (2): On the immortality of the soul

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Review by

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[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review.]

Lorenzo Ferroni and Daniela P. Taormina are the editors of an interesting new book on the Plotinian treatise IV 7 (2) *On the Immortality of the Soul*. This multilingual volume, stemming from the Plotinian seminars organised as part of a project funded by Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata and a conference organised by the Istituto Svizzero of Rome, shows how productive interdisciplinary research can be. The list of contributors includes not just Plotinus specialists but also scholars who have explored different aspects of Greek thought and culture. The twelve chapters are grouped into three sections: the first discusses philological issues regarding the possibility of a pre-Porphyrion edition, the direct and indirect tradition, and textual problems; the second defines the treatise's place within the *Enneads*; the third addresses various problems concerning the sources and reception of the treatise. Given the number of contributors and the varying levels of complexity of the topics covered, I will proceed with a concise presentation both of all the chapters – highlighting the originality of each with respect to established theses – and of the three sections, trying to detect their overall novelty, particularly with respect to the *status quaestionis* as outlined in Fleet (2016) and D'Ancona (2017).

Treatise IV 7 (2) is the second treatise Plotinus wrote and this is the reason why it has long been considered elementary and of little interest. This assumption is the polemical target of Fleet's work, which for this reason cannot be disregarded. Several studies have highlighted important doctrinal content that is properly Plotinian, although not all the problems surrounding it have been solved. This treatise is as perfect example both of Plotinus' dialectical and aporetic style and of the particular issues that arose during seminar discussion, yet it cannot be seen *just* as an example of the activity of Plotinus' school. Ferroni and Taormina's *Introduction* is a useful *prolegomenon* to an understanding of the importance of this treatise and the plurality of questions it raises, thereby justifying the need for a new publication of this sort.

Section I contains Taormina's contribution and Ferroni's. With convincing new observations, including of a palaeographical nature, Daniela P. Taormina succeeds in demonstrating that Henry's hypothesis regarding the puzzling Greek numbering in the Plotinian text's margin (Henry 1938: 312-32) is still compelling. Reviewing the *status quaestionis*, especially after a careful analysis of the argumentative and syntactical structure of chapter 12 of the treatise, Taormina demonstrates not only that the attempt in Frenkian (1963) to dismiss the hypothesis of a Porphyrion commentary is implausible, but also that this numbering constitutes valuable evidence for the very complex structure of the arguments developed in IV 7 (2) and, more generally, in the other Plotinian treatises in which it is attested. A chapter by Lorenzo Ferroni leads the reader into a real philologist's workshop. The author re-examines three problematic passages of the treatise, discussing the work of the various editors. Reflections on the direct and indirect textual tradition, on possible syntactic readings, but also on the consistency of Plotinian arguments allow Ferroni to show with solid arguments that it is still possible to improve the Henry-Schwyzler edition.

In Section II, George Paşcalău deals with what appears to be the merely scholastic character of the treatise and tries to highlight the importance of this text within Plotinus' thought as a key moment for re-discussing themes already present in I 6 (1) and a starting point for tackling issues that are expanded and developed in III 1 (3), V 9 (5), and VI 9 (9). Claudia Lo Casto addresses the theory of the non-descended intellect by which man is distinguished from other living beings. Eleni Perdikouri shows, in an interesting and persuasive way, that the soul's separateness from the body is a necessary condition not only for intellection but also for perception. Mauricio Pagotto Marsola, in collaboration with Andrea Araf, highlights the uniqueness of chapter 15 in connecting ἰστροπία with oracles and the mantic art in relation to the theme of the immortality of the soul. In general, although no contribution within this section delves into the idea that Plotinus follows Plato in arguing that the soul is immortal, even on the basis of his own personal experience (see e.g. IV 8 (6) 1.1-11), this detailed and rich part succeeds in overcoming a weakness in Fleet's commentary: Fleet (2016) is too focused on the Platonic sources of Plotinus' argument and uninterested in investigating its real originality and speculative innovativeness with respect to Plato's theses.

The intriguing Section III has some original insights into Plotinus' criticism of materialist theories of soul belonging to rival schools and the importance of the theory of the immortality of the soul in coeval or later authors. Apart from chapters by Sfameni Gasparro and Tommasi, which do not deal directly with IV 7 (2), but rather with issues pertaining to the theory of the soul in Late Antiquity, the approach to Plotinus' text suggested by Fleet (2016) would appear to be largely (if sometimes tacitly) embraced by all the authors of the contributions collected in this section. For only in light of discussions that were taking place in Plotinus' seminars is it possible to understand the thinkers Plotinus is arguing against and the texts he has at hand.

The attempt to bring Plotinus face to face with Aristotle is certainly not new. However, the chapters by Francesco Verde and Luca Gili which open the section show that the research context can further be broadened. Francesco Verde's hypothesis concerns the possibility that Plotinus – not least in constructing his own criticism of the conception of the soul as an aggregate of elements – may have drawn upon Aristotle. If one accepts this then, in IV 7 (2) 3, Plotinus might be interested in refuting, not a specific doctrine, but rather a theoretical model consisting of those doctrines that make the soul an aggregate of elements. Corporeal elements (atoms) and non-corporeal ones (indivisibles) would therefore be juxtaposed by following, not a doxographic formulation – as D'Ancona (2017: 192-9) argues –, but the Aristotelian criticism that lumps Xenocrates' position together with Democritus' atomism (see e.g. *De an.* I 4, 408b33-409a30).

Luca Gili analyses Plotinus' language and shows that, while characterising dialectic as a method of ascent to the first principles, Plotinus uses an argument that echoes one proposed by Aristotle in the *Topics* to attack the Aristotelian conception of *entelecheia*. The use of an Aristotelian conceptual scheme to criticise Aristotle from within has already been identified as typically Plotinian by Chiaradonna (2002: 149-50). Gili, however, delves deeper into the analysis of the logical structure of the Plotinian criticism of the entelechy-soul doctrine than other studies have done. Federico M. Petrucci proposes that Stoics and Peripatetics are Plotinus' direct targets, although Plotinus also provides implicit or indirect criticism of Middle Platonist theories on the nature and immortality of the soul. Petrucci's hypothesis is a genuinely innovative one that departs from the interpretive perspective according to which Plotinus adopts the same position as his Platonist predecessors in his anti-Stoic criticism (e.g., D'Ancona 2017: 177-82). Petrucci persuasively argues that Plotinus' combined criticism of non-Platonist opponents and Platonist predecessors in this treatise highlights not only the affinity between his models, but also the fact that one of the most harmful mistakes made by Plotinus' Platonist predecessors was to remain too close to the Stoics and Aristotelians. In their attempt to reject materialism, some Middle Platonists (those who believe the world had a beginning) ended up sharing the Stoics' position, while others (those who believed that it always existed), in their attempt to show that the soul is not composed in the same way as a body, ended up sharing the Peripatetics' position on the soul.

Giulia Sfameni Gasparro's chapter seeks to move beyond enquiries limited to describing Plotinus' interest in the (mythical) past as a merely antiquarian interest. The author does not present an in-depth analysis of IV 7 (2), but examines the transformation of the mythical account of the journey of the soul by revisiting, in a well-documented and critical manner, Plotinus' focus on religious and ritual tradition. Chiara O. Tommasi addresses with exemplary clarity early Christian thinkers' approach to themes and motifs widely present in the religious and philosophical culture of Late Antiquity. Dwelling particularly on Arnobius and Tertullian, she outlines the premises from which these authors set out – premises quite different from those of Plotinus – and hypothesizes, particularly in relation to Tertullian's materialism, the influence of Stoic and Platonic elements, which are also present in some Platonists of the second century.

One point examined all too briefly by Fleet (2016: 24 and 234) is the absence of chapters 8¹-8⁵ from Porphyry's edition and their preservation by Eusebius' *PE*: this absence certainly deserves a more thorough philosophical discussion, as Alexandra Michalewski's chapter shows. She succeeds in pointing out the change undergone by the criticism of the soul-entelechy doctrine from Atticus to Porphyry; IV 7 (2) shows that it is no longer a matter of criticising the doctrine of an immobile entelechy, so much as of defining the conditions under which the soul can be declared truly substantial, that is, independent of the body.

All in all, the volume is a dense and very insightful work offering different ways of reflecting on IV 7 (2). It presents contributions that raise a number of questions and argue clearly and convincingly, providing numerous innovative insights into Plotinus' teaching about the immortality of the soul. The volume is well edited: there are very few typos and none of them are really noteworthy. The references, up-to-date and complete, are usefully divided into Editions & Translations of IV 7 (2), Editions & Translations of Eusebius' *Praeparatio evangelica*, Editions & Translations of Pseudo-Aristotle's *Theology*, and Other References, followed by an Index of Ancient Authors and Texts.

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Authors and Titles

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