

# Studia graeco-arabica

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### *Cover*

Mašhad, Kitābhāna-i Āsitān-i Quds-i Radawī 300, f. 1v  
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 1853, f. 186v

A. Longo, D.P. Taormina (eds.), *Plotinus and Epicurus. Matter, Perception, Pleasure*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge - New York 2016, XVIII + 236 pp.

The ten papers collected in this volume are developed in the framework of the project *Le filosofie post-ellenistiche da Antioco a Plotino* directed by A. Longo and D. P. Taormina. As stated in the Introduction (pp. 1-25), the aim of the research is to clarify Plotinus' relationship to Epicureanism. Epicurean texts were not included in the curriculum of the Platonists in Late Antiquity (although they circulated in the Mediterranean basin at least until the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, particularly in Athens, Alexandria and Rome), and naturally Plotinus' circle in Rome was no exception. However, in the *Enneads* there are various references to Epicureanism: Epicurean terms (e.g. ἐπιβολή and ἐπιλογισμός), Epicurus' name in II 9 [33], and several anti-Epicurean arguments. So, the relationship between Plotinus and Epicureanism is worth being examined in depth, also in the light of the Herculaneum papyri, the inscriptions at Oenoanda, and Gnostic writings: "The primary aim of the volume is to test its starting hypothesis – and that is: whether certain points in Plotinus' philosophy may be elucidated by specifically referring to his use of Epicurean material, as this emerges from an initial survey" (p. 8). This aim can be considered as achieved.

The first part, "Historical overview", is formed by only one paper: T. Dorandi, "The School and Texts of Epicurus in the Early Centuries of the Roman Empire" (pp. 29-48). Plotinus may well have known Epicureanism through Epicurus' own texts, rather than through doxographical traditions, and this because the Epicurean school in Athens was still active as an institution in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. In addition, in the same period Epicurus' texts circulated throughout the Mediterranean. Plotinus may have read them in Alexandria, as suggested by the diffusion of the Epicurean works in Egypt documented by Dorandi in his learned study.

The second part, entitled "Common anti-Epicurean arguments in Plotinus", begins with A. Longo, "The Mention of Epicurus in Plotinus' tr. 33 (*ENN.* II 9) in the context of the polemics between Pagans and Christians in the second to third centuries AD. Parallels between Celsus, Plotinus, Origen" (pp. 51-68). The only passage in the *Enneads* where Epicurus is explicitly mentioned is II 9[33], 15, where Plotinus criticises the Gnostics for denying providence exactly as Epicurus did, in order to justify immoral pleasures. This idea is not attested in Epicurus' extant texts, but features among the arguments used by Celsus against Christians, then turned around by Origen against Celsus: Origen depicts Celsus as an Epicurean. "Plotinus' writings reflect a phase of transition in third-century Platonism: whereas his anti-Christian – and in particular anti-Gnostic – polemics stand in continuity with the polemics of the Middle Platonists Celsus (second century AD) against Christians, many features of his philosophy are to be found in the writings of Origen (third century AD), who attacked Celsus and undertook a monumental work of systematisation with regard to Christian doctrine" (p. 68). Also M. Mazzetti, "Epicurean and Gnostics in tr. 47 (*ENN.* III 2) 7.29-41" (pp. 69-81) deals with Plotinus' use of anti-Epicurean arguments in his anti-Gnostic polemics. In III 2[47], 7.29-41, Plotinus refutes two theses: (i) providence does not reach the lower world, (ii) it does not have full control of the latter. These are traditional Epicurean statements, and it is as such that they are criticised; but here Plotinus deals with them as with Gnostic tenets, as shown by a comparison with passages of II 9[33].

M. Pagotto Marsola, "‘Heavy birds’ in tr. 5 (*ENN.* V 9) 1. 8. References to Epicureanism and the Problem of Pleasure in Plotinus" (pp. 82-95) discusses the well-known metaphor of birds in V 9[5], 1. Here Plotinus lists three attitudes towards intelligible reality, comparing each of them to birds of unequal weight. According to Pagotto Marsola, this comparison does not allude – as most scholars think – to the Epicureans (the heaviest birds), the Stoics (those capable of flight) and the

Aristotelians plus Platonists (the only ones that can really fly towards the intelligible). A tripartition similar to this is used by Plotinus to attack Epicureans and Gnostics, who, for their part, famously subdivide mankind into the three orders of spiritual, psychic and merely material. In V 9[5], he does not enumerate the philosophical schools, rather alludes to a tripartition of Platonic origin to which he has recourse in II 9[33] in order to refute the materialism common to Gnostics and Epicureans.

The next two studies are devoted to the epistemic questions raised by V 5[32], 1. In “Plotinus, Epicurus and the Problem of Intellectual Evidence. Tr. 32 (*Enn. V* 5) 1” (pp. 96-112), P.-M. Morel focuses on Plotinus’ argumentation that sense perception cannot be either the origin of intellectual knowledge, or a kind of knowledge comparable to it. Real intellectual knowledge is provided not by demonstration, but by the presence of the Forms in the intellect. In his polemics against the doctrines that connect sense-perception and intellection, Plotinus refers to a series of arguments that are reminiscent of Epicurean theories, even though it cannot be excluded that his adversaries include the Aristotelians. D.P. Taormina, “‘What is known through sense perception is an image’. Plotinus’ tr. 32 (*Enn. V* 5) 1.12-19. An anti-Epicurean argument?” (pp. 113-30), claims that self-perception is presented by Plotinus as self-contradictory, and wonders whether or not the arguments here employed are directed against the Epicureans. The comparison between V 5[32], 1.12-19 and IV 6[41], 1.28-32 on the one hand, and some testimonies on Epicurus, Alexander of Aphrodisias and Plutarch on the other, proves that this passage contains typical anti-Epicurean arguments, thus confirming the analysis by P.-M. Morel.

The third part, “Plotinus’ Criticism of Epicurean Doctrines” consists of two studies. M. Ninci, “Corporeal Matter, Indefiniteness and Multiplicity. Plotinus’ Critique of Epicurean Atomism in tr. 12 (*Enn. II* 4) 7.20-8” (pp. 133-59), deals with Plotinus’ anti-atomist argument in II 4[12]. The arguments against atomic matter, their dependence on Aristotle, their affinity with Epicurus, and the Plotinian conception of matter emerge from the analysis of a passage in this treatise. The paper also suggests that the whole of Plotinus’ thought can be reconstructed from a short passage, because “when Plotinus thinks in the negative, he always lets the positive side of his philosophy emerge, and with the utmost clarity” (p. 158). In his “Plotinus’ Reception of Epicurean Atomism in *On Fate*, tr. 3 (*Enn. III* 1) 1-3” (pp. 160-74), E. Eliasson focuses on the connection between atomism and determinism. At variance with É. Bréhier and others, Eliasson claims that Chapters 1 and 3 of III 1[3] are closely connected: in Chapter 3 Plotinus resumes the anti-Epicurean arguments of Chapter 1. The arguments here employed are not original, but seem to be taken from unidentified works.

The last part, “Epicurean Elements in Plotinus. Some Instances”, consists of two papers. A. Cornea, “*Athroa epibolē*. On an Epicurean Formula in Plotinus’ Work” (pp. 177-88), studies the occurrence of the formula ἀθρόα ἐπιβολή in the *Enneads*. It is quoted directly from Epicurean sources: anyone but Epicurus and Plotinus uses it. In the *Enneads*, it occurs in three treatises (IV 4[28], III 8[30], and III 7[45]) belonging to the middle of Plotinus’ career, just like II 9[33], where is located the sole explicit mention of Epicurus (and, more generally, of a post-Aristotelian philosopher): thus, according to Cornea, the use of this expression is evidence of Plotinus’ interest in Epicurus, rooted in his polemic against the Gnostics.

A point of contact between Plotinus and Epicurus is the idea, discussed by A. Linguiti in his “Plotinus and Epicurus on Pleasure and Happiness” (pp. 189-99), that happiness does not increase in time. Although they have different concepts of happiness (bodily pleasure according to Epicurus, contemplation of the Forms for Plotinus), both “embraced – albeit in different ways – the same theoretical stance: a stance that is also attested among the Stoics and that presumably is of Academic-Aristotelian origin” (p.195). At any rate, Epicurus’ influence on Plotinus is excluded according to Linguiti. The book ends with a bibliography (pp. 199-214), and the Indexes (pp. 215-36).

This collection of papers has the merit of drawing attention to the Epicurean elements used more or less explicitly by Plotinus, against the background of the circulation of Epicurean texts in 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century Alexandria. It also highlights the connection established in the *Enneads* between Epicureanism and Gnosticism. A limit that I see is that nothing is said of the link between Epicureanism and ancient Atomism, that is also well attested in the *Enneads*. In his refutation of the atomistic theories, Plotinus does not refer necessarily to Epicureanism: his target is atomism in general, of which Epicurean physics is for him only one of the possible versions. His use of Aristotle's arguments shows that he puts Epicurus and Democritus on equal footing. Some attention is paid to this (Ninci, pp. 134-40), but the focus of the volume is primarily on ethics. This collection of essays proves nevertheless useful for those interested in Plotinus' sources.

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*Ideas in Motion in Baghdad and Beyond. Philosophical and Theological Exchanges between Christians and Muslims in the Third/Ninth and Fourth/Tenth Centuries*, ed. by D. Janos, Brill, Leiden [etc.], Boston 2015 (Islamic History and Civilization. Studies and Texts, 124), IX + 479 pp.

This multi-authored volume edited by Damien Janos contains a short introduction, eleven essays in chronological order, and a bibliography. Its focus is on the philosophical inter-cultural exchanges between Christians and Muslims in the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad, with an eye on further developments. In the words of its editor, the volume aims "to highlight the role that the Arabic Christian philosophers played in the elaboration of the vibrant and cosmopolitan intellectual culture that flourished in medieval Baghdad" (p. 1). This role has often been studied in isolation from the development of mainstream Islamic philosophy, and this volume proposes a more dynamic approach.

Opening the volume, J.W. Watt in his "The Syriac Aristotelian Tradition and the Syro-Arabic Baghdad Philosophers" (pp. 7-43) analyses the Syriac Aristotelian tradition and the activity of the Syro-Arabic philosophers in Baghdad. This is done not from the perspective of their alleged instrumental role in transmitting the Greek texts to the subsequent Arab readership, but from that of their original philosophical agenda. Watt begins with the early, pre-Abbasid phase of Syriac philosophy and in particular from Sergius of Res'aina, the Syriac scholar who was most influential on the later tradition. A treatment of the monastic school of Qenneshre on the Euphrates follows, then a presentation of the East Syrian patriarch Timothy I (d. 823). Watt ends his contribution examining the shared interest in Aristotelian philosophy of Christian and Muslim scholars in the 9<sup>th</sup> century through the analysis of the East Syrian Hunayn ibn Ishāq, and then through the work of the Baghdad Aristotelians from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

The perspective of a Christian philosophical agenda is the backdrop of the following three contributions. A. Treiger, "Palestinian Origenism and the Early History of the Maronites: In Search of the Origins of the Arabic *Theology of Aristotle*" (pp. 44-80) presents two rival working hypotheses on the theological background – either Melkite or Maronite – of 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Himṣī, the Christian translator of a selection of Plotinus' *Enneads* that forms the backbone of the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*. In her "Some Observations about the Transmission of Popular Philosophy in Egyptian Monasteries after the Islamic Conquest" (pp. 81-108) U. Pietruschka presents a vivid picture of the transmission of 'popular philosophy' (in S. Brock's terminology) in Egyptian monasteries, where Coptic literature, immediately before and afterwards the Islamic Conquest, was preserved. The Copto-Arabic and Ethiopic literature blossomed benefitting from Syriac manuscripts and thus preserving old translations: several examples are taken from the collections of gnomologies.