

Supervisor's Report on Ota Gál's Dissertation *Beauty as Unity in Multiplicity in Plotinus*
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1. Brief characterisation of the thesis and its main claims

The goal of Ota Gál's dissertation is to present a systematic and comprehensive reconstruction of Plotinus' conception of beauty. The central claim of the thesis is that according to Plotinus, beauty is to be identified with a specific unity in multiplicity, which belongs primarily to Intellect inasmuch as it is illuminated by the light of the Good. According to Ota Gál, unlike Plato and despite some formulations in the *Enneads* that might suggest the opposite, Plotinus does not assume an independent idea of beauty. What is beautiful is primarily Intellect as a whole, because this is where multiplicity is united to the highest possible degree.

To achieve an adequate understanding of beauty as a specific unity in multiplicity on the level of Intellect, we must however distinguish beauty from other predicates which characterise Intellect as a whole (e.g. life, Being, Motion, Rest, the Same, the Other, but also number, intellection, wisdom, virtues and other such 'holistic' predicates). Furthermore, we should also appreciate the specific nature of relation between the beauty of Intellect and the Good, thanks to which beauty becomes an illuminated unity in multiplicity and is thereby capable of evoking in souls love of Intellect and of the Good. Only then can one fully understand how beauty permeates the entire ontological universe and on each of its levels draws the soul 'upwards' to Intellect and the Good. According to Ota Gál, it is precisely this combination of 'pervasiveness' and 'referential character' of beauty which underlies its strangely ambivalent nature. For although beauty leads souls 'upwards', it can also divert some individual souls from Intellect and the Good – paradoxically because on their ascent to it, they are detained or distracted by mere reflections of beauty or even, most strangely, on the level of Intellect, by beauty itself.

2. Discussion of some select motifs in particular chapters and questions for thesis defence

The dissertation is structured in six chapters. In the first, Ota Gál briefly outlines his methodological approach and the overall structure of the work. One of his initial assumptions is a highly plausible claim that the *Enneads* do not contain any fundamental changes in Plotinus' position. Eventual discrepancies in Plotinus' statements regarding beauty therefore should not be interpreted as indicating a change of his view but as expressions of various mutually complementary perspectives, which jointly help us to fully grasp the specific nature of beauty. Ota Gál's justification of this methodological approach in the first chapter is perhaps too brief and general, but in his thesis as a whole this methodology works well. It helps him present a coherent and unified interpretation of Plotinus' concept of beauty and some closely related subjects, and to offer convincing insights into Plotinus' speculative and highly focused, but also flexible way of thinking.

According to Ota Gál, two different perspectives are apparent already in Plotinus' two main texts on beauty (I.6 and V.8), which are analysed in the second and third chapter of the

thesis. Based on an interpretation of these two complementary texts and several excursions to other works by Plotinus, Ota Gál reaches the abovementioned conclusion, namely that Plotinus views beauty as a specific form of unity in multiplicity, whose source is the One but its original seat is the Intellect.

It is to be highly valued that Ota Gál does not stop with this perhaps overly schematic conclusion. In accordance with what Plotinus himself says at the end of treatise V.8 when noting the need to approach Intellect in a new way, Ota Gál views conclusions of these initial chapters as merely a preliminary outcome of his investigation. The first three chapters thus present the basic layout of Plotinus' conception of beauty but also serve as a starting point for broader investigations. These further explorations focus not only on beauty as such but venture also on the more difficult ground of general questions pertaining to the nature of Intellect and its relation to the Good, as well as the manner in which individual souls relate to both. This combination of a relatively firm foundation laid in the first part of the thesis and more speculative investigations of Plotinus' thought in the second part of the work naturally has its own problems (some of which are mentioned below) but it is, in my view, one of the main strengths of Ota Gál's thesis.

Ota Gál starts this transition to a deeper elaboration on Plotinus' conception of beauty by distinguishing among five mutually complementary perspectives on the unity in multiplicity in the Intellect (see section 3.15). This five-fold distinction has no direct basis in Plotinus' text and does not directly follow from the preceding exposition. It might therefore at first glance seem problematic and arbitrary. Nevertheless, in the subsequent exposition it does prove its worth as a starting point for a more thorough investigation of the specific nature of beauty.

Two of the five perspectives on the unity of Intellect – namely the unity of Intellect conceived as a unity of intellectual self-relation and the presence of the whole of Intellect and all its parts in all parts of Intellect – are treated already in the second and third chapter of the thesis. Of importance for the subsequent development of the dissertation are therefore the remaining three:

(1) A '*hierarchical*' unity in multitude based on the 'highest or primary kinds' (i.e. Being, Motion, Rest, the Same, and the Other), which in Intellect function not only as 'kinds' but also as principles of other ideas and their mutual relations. This perspective is developed in section 4.1, which focuses on interpreting treatise VI.2, especially its chapters 17 and 18. According to Ota Gál, these texts show that while beauty is not another 'highest kind', it is closely related to them, especially to Being. This opens a crucial question, namely whether and to what extent one can differentiate between beauty and Being. The issue is addressed later in the thesis, in sections 6.3 and 6.5 (for more questions on this subject, see below).

(2) A '*structural*' unity in multiplicity which is grounded specifically in the 'numerical' unity of Intellect is treated in section 4.2, dedicated to the interpretation of selected sections of treatise VI.6. In this section, the author laudably combines speculative depth with interpretative caution and brings some valuable insights on the notoriously difficult issue of Plotinus' conception of numbers and its implications for the inner constitution of Intellect as a numerically delimited possibility. This leads to an interesting and insightful discussion about the mutual relations of beauty, Being, and life in Intellect, which serves as a foundation of a

deeper understanding of the close connection between Intellect and the Good in the two concluding chapters.

(3) The last of the abovementioned perspectives, treated in the fifth chapter of the thesis, focuses on treatise VI.7 and investigates the ‘*genetic*’ unity of Intellect which is illuminated by the grace of the Good. Despite some degree of thematic and methodological fragmentation it is this, markedly the longest chapter of the dissertation, that brings some of the most interesting analyses and ensures that the thesis as a whole does not slide into a repetitive justification of the claim that beauty is ‘unity in multiplicity’.

The most important contribution to this deeper understanding of the concept of beauty is found in sections 5.4 and 5.6. In the former, Ota Gál convincingly shows that beauty belongs to Intellect inasmuch as it is illuminated by the light of the Good and thereby made similar to the Good, *agathoeidēs*. ‘Non-illuminated’ Intellect, i.e. Intellect as it were ‘on its own’, a mere unity in multiplicity detached from the Good, is beautiful, too, but its beauty is devoid of the grace that stems from the Good. It is therefore “‘inactive” and doesn’t arouse soul’s interest. It can be even “boring”” (p. 179).

Ota Gál’s focus on the distinction between ‘illuminated’ and ‘unilluminated’ Intellect as crucial to proper understanding of beauty is highly laudable. To what extent, however, can we say that ‘Intellect itself’ is ‘non-illuminated’? Could it not be that this hypothetical ‘non-illuminated state’ of Intellect consist merely in the way some individual souls relate to it, in their (erroneous) understanding of it? And why is this non-illuminated Intellect not only ‘boring’ but also ‘painful’ and ‘shocking’ (see pp. 59-60 and section 5.6)? How are these two characteristics of ‘non-illuminated Intellect’ related?

The specific closeness of beauty and the Good is also probably the reason why Plotinus in this treatise, especially in chapters 32 and 33, ascribes some sort of ‘beauty’ (see expressions such as *kallonē*, *anthos kalū*, *kallos hyper kallos*, or *hyperkalon*) also to the Good. Nevertheless, Ota Gál’s precise analysis in sections 5.6 and 5.7 convincingly shows that these formulations do not indicate that the proper seat of beauty is not Intellect but the Good. As evidenced also by the concluding chapter of this treatise, the Good, being the cause of all beauty, is ‘above all beauty’. Even so, the formulations do express something fundamental. They help us understand the unique relation of beauty to the Good and thereby to better appreciate in what ways is beauty different from other similar predicates which relate to Intellect as a whole, but in whose case the relation between Intellect and the Good does not play such a prominent role.

Valuable in this respect is Ota Gál’s attempt in section 6.3 of the last chapter to systematically differentiate between beauty and other general predicates of Intellect. This synoptic perspective shows that among all the predicates which characterise Intellect as a whole, beauty is the most similar to life. Both of these predicates, i.e. beauty and life, describe Intellect from a vertical perspective, ‘genetically, i.e. both in its birth and in its birth giving’ (p. 182). The main difference between them is while beauty refers ‘upwards’, to its source, life aims ‘downwards’. In other words, beauty is ‘focused on *unity* of a multiplicity, whereas life on its *multiplicity* and multiplying character’ (p. 182). Another group of these general predicates of Intellect – which in addition to the highest kinds also includes the number and the monad – according to Ota Gál differs from beauty and life by characterising Intellect in its ‘horizontal’

or ‘internal’ structure. A third group, which includes predicates such as ‘intellection, active actuality and eternity, knowledge and wisdom, and virtues’ (p. 186) is supposed to focus neither on the inner structure of Intellect, nor on the vertical relation between Intellect and what is above or under it, but rather on the very way in which Intellect is what it is.

Although I find this analysis of different predicates related to Intellect useful and revealing, it remains to some extent on the level of a general and slightly schematic outline. This is visible for instance in the abovementioned distinction between the horizontal and vertical predicates of Intellect. As Ota Gál himself admits (see footnote 179), this distinction fails when we realise that in Plotinus’ description of the genesis of Intellect, the highest kinds, especially Motion and the Other, also play a significant role. The ‘*supreme genera*’ can thus characterise not only the horizontal or internal structure of Intellect but also its constitution in its vertical relation to the One.

The distinction between a horizontal and vertical perspective is clearly useful, but it should be used with utmost caution. In what sense can we, for instance, speak of the horizontal structure of Intellect without its vertical relation to the One? To what extent does the vertical perspective ‘presuppose’ the horizontal one (see p. 183) and in what sense is it the other way around, too?

Another group of questions is linked to the third group of predicates, which Ota Gál describes only most briefly. What exactly is their unifying characteristic? According to him, they ‘try to capture “*how* Intellect is what it is”’ (p. 186). I am not sure that I understand what exactly this is supposed to mean and how it distinguishes this group of predicates from the first two. After all, one might claim that these predicates, too, contain an inherent reference upwards, to the One as the cause of Intellect? In what sense is then their ‘referential character’ different from the ‘referential character’ of beauty? Or do they lack this character altogether?

It also remains to be seen what exactly this distinction between beauty and other ‘holistic’ predicates of Intellect contributes to a better understanding of beauty and its relation to these predicates on the ‘lower’ levels of the soul and the physical world. Does this distinction on the level of Intellect shed light on the difference between Intellect and the soul and help us better understand that unlike Intellect, individual souls (or their ‘parts’) can become ugly and foolish? And to what extent is the opposition between beauty and ugliness on the level of soul and the visible world coextensive with these other predicates and their opposites?

3. Overall evaluation of the thesis

Ota Gál’s thesis is dedicated to one of the central themes in Plotinus’ philosophy and despite some asides to related, complementary subjects, it follows the subject throughout. From a formal perspective, it is written in a clear language, it is well structured, and its composition has understandable inner logic. (To judge the correctness and fluidity of the English language is beyond my competence.) Despite relative brevity, it attests not only to very good knowledge of Plotinus’ work and familiarity with secondary literature, but also to Ota Gál’s ability to interpret Plotinus’s work independently and systematically, with empathy for his specific style of thought and inner unity of his philosophy, and without getting mired in needless ponderousness or confusing complexity.


Some parts of the thesis are rather paraphrastic. In a vast majority of cases, however, the paraphrases of Plotinus' text are accurate and ultimately mostly useful. In some parts, the thesis is somewhat schematic, and we see repeated defence of previously known and defended claims, especially the claim beauty is 'unity in multiplicity'. In the end, however, thanks to some many excellent interpretations, mainly in the fourth to sixth chapter, the thesis avoids the danger of schematic exposition and offers a non-trivial and many-layered analysis of Plotinus' conception of beauty.

As far as I know, no similarly systematic and extensive interpretation of Plotinus' conception of beauty has been published. In this respect, this thesis is an original contribution to current Plotinian studies. The central claim of the thesis opens some further questions (see above) and would profit from increased focus on Plotinus' position within the historical context and from a more detailed discussion of differences between the interpretation offered in this thesis and possible alternative positions. Nevertheless, the main claim is defended convincingly and offers new valuable perspectives on using the concept of beauty as a key to better understanding of Plotinus' philosophy as a whole.

4. Conclusion

Ota Gál's dissertation convincingly attests to the author's philosophical erudition and requisite academic competence. I recommend it therefore for a defence and propose grade *insigni cum laude*.

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