

**External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Ota Gál
"Beauty as Unity in Multiplicity in Plotinus"**

Submitted in 2019 at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies (Charles University, Prague) and the Department of Philosophy (University of Fribourg)

I. Brief summary of the dissertation

The present dissertation is a study of the notion of beauty in Plotinus and its relation to the unity/multiplicity structure that, in Plotinus' metaphysics, is characteristic of Intellect, the second hypostasis or Being as such. As far as Being is concerned, beauty is closely related to (Platonic) Form: Everything in Intellect and down to corporeal reality is beautiful insofar as it is what it is in the fullest and highest sense. Yet as beauty is not just related to being but also to the Good or the One, the Plotinian transcendent First Principle, it represents the Good within being, which is, as it were, illuminated by the Good and thereby becomes "good-like" (*agathoeides*). Ota Gál (G.) therefore proposes "illuminated unity in multiplicity" as a kind of definition of Plotinian beauty (p. 172 *et saepius*), whose parts however are differently emphasized according to the purpose and perspective of the single Plotinian treatises. This result is reached by means of a close analysis of the most relevant *Enneads* (I 6, V 8, VI 7, plus some selections from VI 2 and VI 6).

II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation

Beauty in Plotinus has often been studied (the relevant studies are catalogued in the bibliography and discussed where necessary), but often with a focus on aesthetics and on the most immediately relevant treatises I 6 and V 8. G. goes distinctly beyond this by providing a kind of metaphysics of beauty in the framework of Plotinus' metaphysics of Intellect and succeeds in delineating a clear yet flexible notion of beauty that can be shown to be operative on each ontological level in its peculiar way. This is a fine result that, as far as I know, has not been reached in Plotinian studies in this way yet. A strength of G.'s procedure is his extremely careful way of dealing with the texts that refuses itself to excessive reconstructions ("speculation", as G. would put it) and, even more importantly, reflects about the question an individual treatise or part of a treatise asks and what perspective it adopts. Plotinian texts certainly profit from being pressed, and sometimes one would wish that G. went a bit deeper with his interpretative efforts, but the advantage of his careful approach is that the results are text-based and reliable throughout.

III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

1. Structure of the argument

G. proceeds by interpreting the selected treatises in their chronological order (with the exception of VI 2 [43], which comes before VI 6 [34]). After a short introduction that briefly introduces the treatises to be discussed and their guiding questions and sketches the subject and method of the dissertation (but is silent about the state of research, which, in a contribution to an often-addressed topic like this one, is regrettable), G. begins with an interpretation of I 6 (ch. 2) and V 8 (ch. 3). Both, on his reading, associate beauty with Form, Being and unity in multiplicity, with the difference that V 8, addressed to a more advanced reader, does so in a more detailed manner while I 6 more generally focuses on intelligible (as opposed to sensible or material) reality, including the Good, as the "dwelling place" of beauty. This is no doubt right, but I would suggest to pay more attention to the motif of erotic desire in I 6, which is, after all, an exegesis of the *Symposium*. G. has some very good pages on this motif in his discussion of VI 7, and his study would profit from some cross-references between I 6 and these developments. The method of going through each treatise analyzed chapter by chapter, characteristic of the entire dissertation, helps to avoid that texts are torn from their contexts but also sometimes causes the main subject being lost sight of. It would help to resort to

brief summaries, also because I 6 and V 8 are famous Plotinian texts that can be assumed to be familiar to the readership. The longest and best chapter is the 5th on *Ennead* VI 7. It is a fine running analysis of the whole treatise that despite its length is never redundant. On G.'s reading, the treatise can indeed be regarded as a deepening of Plotinus' previous discussions of beauty: The first part gives greater profile to the notion, familiar from V 8 and VI 6, that beauty is Form and unity in multiplicity; the second opens a wider perspective by viewing beauty from a "genetic" (intelligible beauty explained as *agathoeides* because of the genesis of Intellect from the Good) and a "phenomenological" (the soul's response to beauty as proof of the "light" of the Good, irreducible to being or intellection, that "runs over" everything) point of view. (I am not too happy with the term "phenomenological", which G. takes from the somewhat idiosyncratic book of G. Siegmann; more profitably, G. might resort to his own distinction of a "top-down" and a "bottom-up" perspective and also to H.R. Schwyzer's old distinction of a "gegenständliche" and "aktuale Sicht" in Plotinus, which, under various names, has reappeared in more recent scholarship (e.g. in Leroux' commentary on VI 8, Paris 1990). G. concludes with a lucid summary that rehearses the operation of beauty on the various ontological levels; as noted above, the portrait of Plotinian beauty as a highly dynamic yet unified concept is, to my mind, the most important result of the inquiry. G.'s writing and argument is in general clear and convincing; on some occasions, it is however too condensed to become really transparent, or better at stating a problem than at resolving it (see p. 149-150, where G.'s explanation of the paradox that supreme beauty is "shapeless but in shape in another way" is unclear, at least to me).

2. Formal aspects of the dissertation

The formal presentation of the dissertation is impeccable. As far as I can tell as a non-native speaker, the English is almost flawless. I would however suggest to transliterate only single Greek words or expressions and use Greek script for longer quotations (here transliteration is of no help to the Greekless reader and a stumbling spot for those who do read Greek). In a study that works so closely with the texts it would also be advisable to include the most important passages in Greek in the footnotes so as to spare the reader the need to always look up the Greek edition. For English translations of Plotinus Armstrong is used, though the new translation by Gerson et al. appears in the bibliography; a brief comment on this choice would be in order.

3. Use of sources and/or material

G. is excellently read in Plotinus and the Greek philosophers and also in the secondary sources, which he cites when appropriate and criticizes in the footnotes if necessary. The study could profit from a more extended use of the commentaries available on the treatises G. cites as background material (Narbonne on II 4; Vorwerk and Schniewind on V 9; Tornau on VI 4-5). The new commentary on V 8 by A.-L. Darras-Worms (*Les écrits de Plotin*, 2018) probably appeared too late to be taken into account. I do not see the need to cite V. Schubert's rather mediocre German introduction to Plotinus; Halfwassen 2004 is greatly superior.

4. Personal contribution to the subject

The dissertation is an independent interpretation of several important Plotinian texts. The approach – to address the treatises in chronological order so as to build up the Plotinian concept of beauty successively instead of positing it dogmatically and substantiating it with quotations *ex post* – is original and refreshing. The overall result furthers Plotinian studies considerably, as indicated above.

IV. Questions for the author

A blind spot, as it were, in G.'s work is Plotinus' philosophical exegesis. G. is, of course, aware that Plotinus took himself to be, first and foremost, an exegete of Plato, but in practice this aspect is

virtually absent from the dissertation. There is only half a page of passages from Plato that are relevant for Plotinus' thinking on beauty (p. 156-157), which however comes rather late in the book and is not put to profit for the interpretation. This page belongs in the introduction; and at least in I 6 and V 8, but also at many points elsewhere, it would contribute to the clarity of the exposition to begin with the exegetical starting points (*aphormai*) of Plotinus' argument. I would like to invite G. to reflect on the relationship of Plotinus' hermeneutics to his ideas on beauty.

V. Conclusion

I recommend the submitted dissertation with the tentative grade of *insigni cum laude* (5.5).

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