
Readers of Landas are probably familiar enough with Augustine of Hippo to know that the saint was influenced by the Neoplatonists, and particularly by Plotinus. Historians of philosophy are not in perfect agreement about the details of that influence, but in the opinion of Etienne Gilson the general nature of the influence has been summed up by Thomas Aquinas in one terse sentence: “Whenever Augustine, who was imbued with the doctrines of the Platonists, found in their teaching anything consistent with faith, he adopted it, and those things which he found contrary to faith he amended.”

Like others interested in Plotinus, Deck finds Ennead III, 8 worthy of special attention. Its literary excellence and its weaving together of several Plotinian themes confer on it a place of honor. Plotinus admits at the start that his main point “nature contemplates” might seem like nonsense to some but still he perseveres in developing this theme that contemplation is present in all things below the One, the Plotinian God. Nature includes trees, plants, the earth, and thus contemplation is said to be productive of concrete realities. The Plotinian God (the One) is beyond the duality of knowledge, and so gives rise to the Intelligence (Nous in Greek) by a way different from contemplation.

The reality of the One can be reached by affirming that the Nous as Intelligence-Intelligible, being a duality, must be derived from a simple source, the One. This One, being a source, must be the Absolute Good. And so there is a real identity of One and Good. Can we say anything about the One? Plotinus is aware that he cannot shrug this question off. He is compelled to say whether anything can be said, and therefore
proceeds very cautiously. Warning the reader ahead of time of the danger of saying anything about the One, he then proceeds to make certain statements, and then proposes another word of caution that his statements must not be understood to imply any duality in the One. Any claim of the form "The One is x" cannot be understood to be an attribution of a quality to the One. Rather there is an identity of x and the One. In this way it is Plotinus' desire to protect the One from all shadow of duality. The One does not have any quality or perfection. He affirms that it is, but denies that it has existence.

A similar situation prevails with the One's knowing. There is no discovery by the One, since discovery, reasoning, etc., imply growth and therefore imperfection. Rather the One can be said to be identical with self-contemplation. A less absolute identity of contemplator and contemplation and contemplated is found in the Nous (Intelligence-Intelligible), in the soul, and in nature. And so on all levels below the One there is a straining of contemplation toward union, even identity, of knower and known which amounts to truth. Identity is the ideal of knowledge.

Some of the above themes seem congenial to contemporary philosophical theology and epistemology. But Deck is aware that the present-day reader may regard Plotinus' stress on contemplation as romantic and his world as dreamy thought. Deck also knows that if Plotinus' philosophy is to have any value it must be an understandable account of the visible material world. Showing this is the task of chapters 8 to 10, in my opinion the most helpful part of the book.

Is the world we experience in our non-philosophical moments the same world that is described in the Enneads? Is the world of our experience truly a contemplation? And is contemplation that which produces the sensible universe? Now contemplation is knowledge and not merely the quest of knowledge. And a more real world, a world of true being, above the material world, is identical with knowledge. Inasmuch as this is an identity it can be said that knowledge (even human knowledge) is a real world, a world of true being above the material world. There are trees, rocks and earth there, but everything in that realm is identical with knowledge of itself. The identity which is knowledge is the greatest identity possible for things. And the tree in the world of true being is tree and not simply another tree in the woods.

And is contemplation that which produces the sensible universe? To answer this, ask what is our understanding of production? Can the "push-and-pull" of bulldozers, the "raise-and-lower" of construction cranes be regarded as the prime model of production? What can unify
our understanding of causation in the world as primarily an instance of knowing the truth, i.e. of Plotinus’ contemplation? The more important and excellent instance of construction is the conception of the engineer, the mathematical computation of stresses and strengths of materials. Similarly with the way that trees, plants, and the planet itself produce: the intelligent design of structure and fruit, of wind and sun and icecap produces more magnificently and more fundamentally than the individual instances of growth from seed to seedling to sapling, etc. The world itself gives evidence that there is more to reality than that very world. That “more” is a knower and a doer. It is a knower that is identical with knowledge, and a doer who produces primarily by knowing and choosing to realize what he knows.

In chapters 8 to 10 Deck is not simply reporting what Plotinus thinks. Rather he is performing a hermeneutic of benevolence by showing that what Plotinus thinks can be used as a source of a metaphysics and epistemology which enlightens our familiar world. And Deck leaves it to the student of his book to be like Augustine: take what is compatible with the faith, amend what is not. But this taking and this amending will require a careful and quiet philosophizing.

Francis E. Reilly, S.J.


This book is superb entertainment. Its success is largely due to Malachi Martin’s fascinating power to write fiction very dramatically. Not that it is all fiction. But if it were all non-fiction, then every Jesuit, including Martin’s “close associate” (as the book publisher puts it!) Cardinal Bea, would have been morally obliged to become like Martin, an ex-Jesuit.

There can be no doubt that Martin’s final scenario (“The Consistory”) is intended to present Papa Valeska’s cardinalatial opponents as Jesuit sympathizers. Why? Because that is the unmistakable tone of his other best-seller “The Jesuits,” whose chapter 14 (about Teilhard de Chardin) shows how unfamiliar he is with the context of Teilhard’s writings except for four excerpts interpreted out of context. Martin maintains this tone in this present book except that instead of explicitly naming the Jesuits