

*[Review of Plotinus' Search for the Good, by Joseph Katz. The Philosophical Review 60, No. 3 Jul 1951.]*

PLOTINUS' SEARCH FOR THE GOOD. By JOSEPH KATZ. New York, King's Crown Press, 1950. PP.ix, io6. \$2.50.

One chief key to Platonism is to read its levels of reality as levels of value.... This book then deviates from the usual approach to Plotinus in that it is less concerned with the interrelation of his ideas... than with the experiential reference of his ideas. It treats Plotinus' dialectic less for its own sake than to show its function in bridging the inevitable inconsistencies that arise when valuational and existential considerations are not clearly distinguished (p. vii).

This approach of necessity would lead to an external and somewhat unsympathetic criticism of any system. Modern philosophic opinion is taken as normative and the ancient author is judged by it. For example, "Ultimately of course any categories expressed in discursive language can be applied only to sense reality" (p. 47). This type of criticism is legitimate, but one must decide whether the critic is merely disagreeing with the text or whether he has uncovered actual inconsistencies. To substantiate a charge of inconsistency one must pay attention more to the interrelation of ideas than to their experiential reference.

Professor Katz admits that "Many of Plotinus' arguments become much more plausible if his hypostases are regarded as formal 'causes' rather than as efficient or quasi-material causes" (p. 95, n. 20). Now, the fact that one interpretation preserves consistency whereas a second does not would seem to be a good reason for adopting the former. If a particular definition of moral evil (p. 52) and a conception of liberty (p. 53) make Plotinus' words inconsistent, then probably these are not Plotinus' meanings; and for my part, I question the assertion that they are implied in the text (p. 96, n. 38). One who holds with Faust that "In the beginning was the Act" (p. 65) should try to correct for the momentum of external criticism by doing everything grammatically possible to preserve the author's consistency.

An unsympathetic or modern approach to Plotinus is entirely legitimate, but it has its dangers not only with respect to consistency but even in the case of disagreement. With a distaste for mysticism that I also share, Katz asserts that the claim to have experienced supersensible realities in the mystic trance is a false claim (p. 24). He notes that the experience and the description of the experience are not identical. Plotinus was subjectively sincere, but his interpretation was mistaken. He was mistaken because, first, the assumption of supersensible realities can be made on conceptual grounds without a

mystic experience, and in fact Plotinus would not have described the experience in the terms he used, unless he had already elaborated his conceptual scheme; and second, the descriptions refer to experiences that are in kind not different from sense experiences. Neither of these reasons, however, prove that Plotinus was mistaken. How could a conceptual argument proving the existence of supersensible realities disprove the possibility of experiencing them mystically? And since the One cannot actually be described, the use of sensory imagery in the description, or the use of any type of language, testifies to nothing more than the mystic's conviction that the experience is important enough to recommend. Granted that the similarity among love poems (pp. 85-86, n. 29) does not justify the assertion that women possess the qualities ascribed to them, it is still possible that women exist.

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