



PLOTINUS

The bonds of human fate are loosed for you, and, strong of heart, you beat your eager way from out the roaring tumult of this fleshly life to the shores of that wave-washed coast, free from the thronging of the guilty, thence to take the grateful path of the sinless soul.

THE DELPHIC ORACLE

Creativity and decadence were mingled in a mixture of anticipation and apprehension in Alexandria during the second and third centuries of this era. Philosophers and theologians taught and fought over every conceivable metaphysical and practical issue, at once supporting a freedom of mind seldom known in recorded history while also offering fantastic forms of escape from the radical parameters of the human condition. Magicians and monks, emperors and entrepreneurs flooded Alexandria's streets and lecture halls with promises and predictions. Some preached the imminent end of the world, and indeed the doom of the Roman *imperium* was already in evidence. Others offered little more than imported potions to satisfy the hedonistic pursuits of those who sought surcease from the world's endless, weary round. Not all, however, were caught up in the contest between fatalism and salvationism. A few men and women of noble mind and compassionate heart sought out the inner meaning of forces and events and translated their lasting discoveries into words and deeds based on ethical understanding and metaphysical awareness.

Ammonius Saccas, *Theodidaktos*, 'divinely taught', gathered around him a few disciples who had found their way to him through earnestness in the search for knowledge and willingness to sacrifice everything for it. Plotinus was one such disciple. Holding that the personal history of the human form has no more to do with the saga of the immortal soul than time has to do with eternal duration, Plotinus refused throughout his life to discuss his origin, parentage or personal life, save to tell an occasional instructive story by way of example.

Plotinus was probably born about 204 AD. in Lykopolis on the west bank of the Nile in Upper Egypt. He may have been a Greek or a Hellenized Egyptian. Though he never revealed the date of his own birth, for he wished to avoid birthday festivities, in later life he solemnly celebrated the traditional birth anniversaries of Plato and Socrates. From Porphyry, his disciple and editor, a few details of his activities and manner have been preserved. Nothing is known of the life of Plotinus until the age of twenty-seven, when he became seriously interested in philosophy as a mode of knowing and a way of life. He was drawn to the well-known philosophers teaching in Alexandria and listened to the lectures of each in turn. He found them dry, academic, unoriginal and divorced from the conduct of life. When he told a friend about his disheartening discoveries, he was advised to

seek out Ammonius, whose disciples came only through word of mouth. Plotinus heard one discourse and said to his friend, "This is the man I was looking for." For the next eleven years Plotinus learned from Ammonius and was a member of his inner circle. Since the teachings of Ammonius dealt with the meaning of the Mysteries, they were as universal as they were necessarily secret. Plotinus did not learn systems and nomenclature, but a method, the dialectic of self-transformation and universal compassion. In this school, understanding was wedded to life, thought to experience, and philosophy was recognized as initiation. In addition to the secrecy compelled by the nature of the teaching, Plotinus, Origen and Erennius "made a compact not to disclose any of the doctrines which Ammonius had revealed to them". Though Erennius eventually violated the agreement, thus releasing Origen and Plotinus from its restrictions, it is impossible to determine from their writings which ideas are specifically Ammonian. The master never had to bear the burden of the formulations of his disciples.

When Plotinus was thirty-nine, having been the best disciple of Ammonius for more than a decade, he decided to study Persian and Indian philosophy at first hand. The emperor Gordianus III launched an expeditionary force against Persia and Plotinus joined it. Gordianus was slain in Mesopotamia in 244, perhaps through the intrigues of his successor, Philip the Arabian, and Plotinus had to flee for his life. With great difficulty he eventually reached Antioch and thence proceeded directly to Rome. There he established a school for philosophy, gathered disciples and taught orally for ten years. In 253 A.D. he began to set his thoughts on paper, composing fifty-four treatises in the next sixteen years. Since his eyesight was poor, Plotinus never read what he had written even once. He would think out a treatise, often involving extended arguments, and then write it at one sitting. Should he be interrupted from the task by other business, he would begin where he had left off without pausing to review what he had written. About the time he began writing, he received as close friends the emperor Gallienus and a number of individuals of political importance, including Zethos the Arabian, Castricius Firmus, the senators Marcellus Orontius and Sabinillus. The senator Ragatianus took up the philosophical life with such ardour that he freed his slaves, dispersed his property and refused the praetorship when it was offered to him. A number of doctors – Paulinus of Scythopolis, Eustochius of Alexandria – and men of letters – Zoticus and Serapion – joined the circle of Plotinus. But the greatest of his direct disciples were Amelius Gentilianus and Porphyry, the former winning the latter to his master by philosophical reasoning.

Plotinus avoided dry commentaries on classical thinkers and clever criticisms of his contemporaries. Though he taught that Plato was the philosopher without equal, he found the contemporary orthodoxy of the Academy uninspiring. Seldom referring to the work of others, he discussed philosophical concerns conversationally, encouraging his disciples to ask questions and requiring that they think through the rigorous logic that underlay his free association of ideas. "When he was speaking his intellect visibly illumined his face", Porphyry recalled, adding that "he radiated benignity". His profound understanding of human nature was evidenced in unusual clairvoyant powers. Once he foretold the future of a number of children about him, and he frequently divined the thoughts of his disciples. When invited to participate in a ceremony honouring the gods, Plotinus refused, saying, "It is for those Beings to come to me, not for me to go to them." Olympius of Alexandria, jealous of the reputation of Plotinus, attempted to harm him through sidereal black magic. He felt the attack and noted it without response, yet Olympius found his assaults mirrored back upon himself and desisted, confessing that Plotinus possessed "a mighty soul". An Egyptian priest offered to summon the "presiding spirit" of Plotinus in the Temple of Isis at

Rome. But when, instead of a daimon, a higher order of being appeared, the priest exclaimed, "You are singularly graced: the guiding spirit within you is not of the lower degree but a God." Plotinus, despite the charismatic power of his person, did not seek public recognition or fame. When Origen, the pagan who had been his co-disciple in the school of Ammonius, entered his conference room, Plotinus drew his lecture to a close, saying, "The zest dies down when the speaker feels that his hearers have nothing to learn from him."

Though Plotinus had no interest in worldly affairs, the precision and integrity which marked his handling of them led many Romans to entrust him with the guardianship of their estates and children. His house rang with the voices of young men and women growing up under his care. Plotinus carefully examined their accounts, for "Until young people take to philosophy, their fortunes and revenues must be kept intact for them." Gallienus and his empress Salonina were so impressed with the teaching of Plotinus that they subscribed to the idea of creating a city of philosophers in Campania near Rome, a site which, according to ancient legend, had once supported such a city. It was to be called Platonopolis and its inhabitants were to be governed by the principles found in Plato's *Laws*. Bickering and hesitation in the court brought the plan to naught, and when Gallienus died, Plotinus retired to the country estate of Zethos near Minturnae, where the lands of Castricius supplied his needs. Amelius went to Apamea in Syria, while Porphyry, contemplating suicide, travelled to Lilybaeum in Sicily to recover a sense of balance. Castricius remained in Rome and Eustochius moved to Puteoli. In 270 AD., during the second year of Claudius' reign, Plotinus, long ailing, died. Eustochius rushed to his side and had the honour of hearing his last words: "I have been a long time waiting for you; I am striving to give back the Divine in myself to the Divine in the All." At that moment a small serpent crept from under his bed and slipped through a hole in the wall, and the Great Sage renounced his mortal frame.

Plotinus entrusted Porphyry with editing his treatises. Since many of them were composed in response to questions arising in oral discussion, a strictly chronological ordering would not show the logical architecture of their thought. Porphyry, intuitively sensitive to Pythagorean numerology and Platonic geometry, arranged the fifty-four treatises topically into six enneads, or sets of nine. He subdivided the six sets into three collections: the first collection of three enneads dealt with ethics and the world; the second, consisting of two enneads, discussed the soul and Nous, the Divine Mind, the radical principle of Intellect; the third, containing one ennead, included discourses on numbers, the Good, the will and the One.

Plato wrote in his *Seventh Letter* that the true object of the philosophical quest could not be formulated in words. "Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining." Given the perspective of the Divided Line and the Allegory of the Cave found in the *Republic*, as well as the Ladder of Love in the *Symposium*, knowing and being can be separated only in the world of becoming. In the realm of being, to know is to be the object of knowledge. Ontology and epistemology constitute a single venture, and ethics represents efforts to integrate them. Starting from this standpoint, Plotinus saw that the quest for spiritual wisdom reaches its consummation in a mystery which can never be expressed but may be experienced. Philosophical problems – freedom and necessity, mind and matter, optimism and pessimism, good and evil – reflect this root mystery at every level.

The main source of the difficulty is that awareness of this Principle comes neither by knowing nor by the intellection that discovers the Intellectual Beings but by a presence overpassing all knowledge. In knowing, soul or mind abandons its unity; it cannot remain a simplex: knowing is taking account of things; that accounting is multiple; the mind thus plunging into number and multiplicity departs from unity.

Our way then takes us beyond knowing; there may be no wandering from unity; knowing and knowable must all be left aside; every object of thought, even the highest, we must pass by, for all that is good is later than This and derives from This as from the sun all the light of the day.

'Not to be told; not to be written': in our writing and telling we are but urging towards it: out of discussion we call to vision: to those desiring to see, we point the path; our teaching is of the road and the travelling; the seeing must be the very act of one that has made this choice.

Avoiding a monism which tends to reduce spirit to matter or the reverse, and a dualism which introduces an unbridgeable gulf between them, Plotinus affirms that there is the One, the Absolute, which transcends the realm of being and the world of becoming. "It will debar all telling and knowing except that it may be described as transcending Being – for if there were nothing outside all alliance and compromise, nothing authentically one, there would be no Source."

The necessarily unspecifiable nature of this transcendent One entails the indescribable 'relation' of all things to It.

The One is all things and no one of them. The source of all things is not all things, and yet it is all things in a transcendental sense – all things, so to speak, having run back to It, or, more correctly, as not all are yet within It, they will be.

Both spirit and matter, consciousness and object of knowledge, equally intimate the One. That anything *is* points to That which is *beyond* all things, but that One cannot be said to *be* anything.

It is precisely because there is nothing within the One that all things are from it: in order that Being may be brought about, the source must be no Being.

If the One conceived as the Source is the First Hypostasis, then Nous, the principle of pure intellection or the Divine Mind, in looking towards the One, is constituted as the Second Hypostasis. The pure act of ceaseless contemplation of the One releases an energy which is reflected as the Universal Soul. By looking up to the One, Divine Mind imitates It in remaining motionless in relation to the world of becoming. The hypostatic nature of the Universal Soul, however, is a reflection of Divine Mind, and so 'looks down', and thus moves. Divine Mind contains the noumena of all that can manifest – ideas, souls and matter – and yet is ever a unity in diversity. For Plotinus, Divine Mind is holographic – everything in it contains everything else – reminiscent of the *Mahayana* teaching of the mutual interpenetration of all things. Thus the movements of Universal Soul, reflecting its source, are a law-governed harmony. Individual souls remain in an abstract condition, descend into celestial forms or incarnate in terrestrial bodies, depending upon the heterogeneity of matter, that is, its ontological distance from the One. The process of radiation through which the Divine Mind arises must remain a mystery. The Divine Mind emanates the Universal Soul from its overflowing fullness as an eternal act, and so is not diminished itself. Each hypostasis is present in and yet independent of its successor. This activity is the root of the beauty of the world. When individual souls assume some degree of embodiment in matter, however, they may distance themselves from the Universal Soul, and thus the Divine Mind, through apprehension of the form assumed. Cosmic

order pervades every aspect of nature down to the lowest sensory existence, requiring that the imbalance created through the false separation of the individual soul from its parent and source be rectified through a series of incarnations.

Universal Soul, and thus every individual soul, may be thought of in three aspects: closest to Divine Mind is the Intuitive Soul, farthest is the Unreasoning or Irrational Soul and mediating between them is the Reasoning or Rational Soul. Insofar as the Irrational Soul unconsciously imitates the dynamics of emanation, matter is the result. The physical world leaps into manifestation when matter is illuminated by soul. Individual souls are simultaneously submerged in matter and living a celestial life in union with the Divine Mind, but when consciousness tends to focus on material existence, the higher life of the soul eludes conscious awareness.

Matter as noumenal potentiality in the Divine Mind is not evil, but when qualified as the indeterminate product of the lowest aspect of soul, it is total privation, and that is evil. The individual soul cannot forever remain in the cycle of incarnation. It will tend towards knowing matter with increasing intensity until the soul itself becomes indefinite through identification with indeterminate matter; or, the soul will strive to know the One by becoming one with It. Since the One as the First Hypostasis is simple, and since matter is heterogeneous, the soul moves towards the One through the purification of its heterogeneous elements. This is the basis of ethics and the reason for conceiving of the First Hypostasis as the Good. Union with the One, an act transcending even knowledge of the highest kind, is demonstrably possible because it can be reached in moments of meditation by the true philosopher.

Soul must see in its own way; this is by coalescence, unification; but in seeking thus to know the Unity, it is prevented by that very unification from recognizing that it has found; it cannot distinguish itself from the object of this intuition. Nonetheless, this is our one resource if our philosophy is to give us knowledge of the Unity.

We are in search of unity; we are to come to know the principle of all, the Good and First; therefore we may not stand away from the realm of Firsts and lie prostrate among the lasts: we must strike for those Firsts, rising from things of sense which are the lasts. Cleared of all evil in our intention towards the Good, we must ascend to the Principle within ourselves; from many, we must become one; only so do we attain to knowledge of that which is Principle and Unity. We shape ourselves into the Divine Mind; we make over our soul in trust to the Divine Mind and set it firmly in That; thus what That sees, the soul will waken to see: it is through the Divine Mind that we have this vision of the Unity.

Plotinus achieved this ecstatic state six times in his life, and Porphyry records his own experience of the One. None save those who have been caught up into Unity can discover what it means.

Divine Mind, Nous, knows itself and therefore all things. The individual soul knows through conceptual and sensible images. Conceptual imagery, being less unified than pure ideation, is thus farther from noumenal matter, while at a lower level, sensible images are more unified than phenomenal matter and hence closer to Nous. Imagination is thus the bond between reason and sensation, mediating between fullness and privation. When the individual soul is at war with itself, when its different aspects pull apart, sensation throws distorted images before the imagination. But when the soul is in harmony with itself, when it is noetic, the imagination mirrors the ideation of Nous and rules the images arising from sensation. Then the soul may understand and purify itself

simultaneously. The virtues – wisdom, self-control (*sophrosyne*), justice, courage and sanctity – are powers of purification whose nature, like the distillations in the alchemical alembic, change with the level of simplification reached. In dissolving fascination with phenomenal matter, they free the soul from the phantasms of the sensible imagination. In becoming less self-conscious in respect to images, the life of the soul itself becomes self-conscious. When the imagination becomes a pristine mirror of Nous, one is no longer conscious *of* the Divine Mind – one is self-conscious *in* the Divine Mind. One is the noetic Self. This exalted state, the original and natural condition of the individual soul, cannot be known, but it can be experienced.

This is the purport of that rule of our Mysteries: 'Nothing divulged to the uninitiate'; the Supreme is not to be made a common story, the holy things may not be uncovered to the stranger, to any that has not himself attained to see. There were not two; beholder was one with beheld; it was not a vision compassed but a unity apprehended. The man formed by this mingling with the Supreme must – if he only remember – carry its image impressed upon him: he is become the Unity, nothing within him or without inducing any diversity; no movement now, no passion, no outlooking desire, once this ascent is achieved; reasoning is in abeyance and all intellection and even, to dare the word, the very self: caught away, filled with God, he has in perfect stillness attained isolation; all the being calmed, he turns neither to this side nor to that, not even inwards to himself; utterly resting he has become very rest. He belongs no longer to the order of the beautiful; he has risen beyond beauty; he has overpassed even the choir of the virtues; he is like one who, having penetrated the inner sanctuary, leaves the temple images behind him – though these become once more first objects of regard when he leaves the holies; for there his converse was not with image, not with trace, but with the very Truth in the view of which all the rest is but of secondary concern.

This is the life of gods and of the godlike and blessed among men, liberation from the alien that besets us here, a life taking no pleasure in the things of earth, the passing of the alone to the Alone.

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