

GREAT THEOSOPHISTS

PLOTINUS

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Ammonius Saccas, like many other great Teachers, never committed anything to writing. Following the custom of the ancient Hierophants, he transmitted his teachings orally, and bound his pupils by an oath not to divulge his most profound doctrines except to those who could be trusted not to disclose or misuse them. After the death of Ammonius, the work of recording the Neoplatonic teachings was taken up by his pupil Plotinus, and it is to him that we owe most of our knowledge of that system.

Plotinus was an Egyptian by birth, and a native of Lycopolis. The keynote of Plotinus' whole nature is summed up in the word impersonality. He was so resolved to keep his personality in the background that he refused to tell the place of his birth or the names of his parents. When he was asked to have his portrait painted he replied:

"Is it not enough to have to carry around this image? Must I transmit the image of this image as worthy of attention?"

Nothing is known of the early years of Plotinus' life. We meet him for the first time in Alexandria when he was twenty-eight years old. At that time he was devoting himself to the study of philosophy, and was seeking among the different schools for a system which would satisfy him. Having failed in his search, he met a friend one day and told him of his predicament. His friend advised him to visit the school of Ammonius Saccas. As soon as Plotinus heard Ammonius speak he cried: "This is the man I have been seeking!" And from that day on he attended Ammonius' classes, remaining with him for eleven years.

At the end of that time Plotinus determined to visit Persia and India so that he could study the Eastern philosophies at first hand. At the age of thirty-nine he joined the army of the Emperor Gordian and went with him to the Far East. After the destruction of Gordian's army Plotinus returned to Antioch and finally went to Rome during the reign of the Emperor Philip. (A.D. 244-249.)

There he founded a school of philosophy which soon attracted many of the most brilliant minds of the day. He began to write when he was fifty years old and during the following ten years wrote twenty-one books which were circulated among his friends and pupils. When he was fifty-nine years old he met Porphyry, who was then a young man of thirty. Before his death, which occurred in his sixty-sixth year, Plotinus had written fifty-four books dealing with physics, ethics, psychology and philosophy. Plotinus was thoroughly conversant with the doctrines of the Stoics and Peripatetics, and found it useful to employ these familiar ideas in his writings. There was no geometrical, arithmetical, mechanical, optical or musical theorem with which he was not acquainted, although he does not seem to have applied these sciences to "practical" purposes.

After the death of Plotinus, his pupil Porphyry took the fifty-four books that he had written and divided them into the six *Enneads*, the present form of his works. As it is impossible here to discuss the *Enneads* in detail, the student who desires to go more deeply into the subject is referred to the original edition of the *Works of Plotinus*, translated from the Greek by Thomas Taylor and published in London in 1794 and 1817, and also to a later translation by Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie. The words spoken by Plotinus in the following dialogue are direct quotations from these works.



Let us go back in imagination to the year A.D. 260, when Porphyry first met Plotinus. Amelius, a pupil of Plotinus, has offered to take Porphyry to the home of his Teacher. On a warm afternoon in the late spring, as the two friends approach the house of Plotinus, they hear the happy sound of children's voices.

PORPHYRY: "Is thy Teacher a married man, Amelius, or does he conduct a school for children?"

AMELIUS: "Neither, friend Porphyry. But Plotinus is a great lover of children and is always surrounded by them. So great is the admiration for Plotinus here in Rome that many wealthy families commit their children to his care. And so his house is always filled with children whom he educates with the greatest care and diligence."

The two friends enter Plotinus' house by means of a long narrow vestibule. On either side of the hall they see the bed-chambers and the room of the porter. In the center of the passage is a square shallow reservoir for rain water which pours from a hole in the roof. Passing through the vestibule they come into the *atrium*, a larger hall where visitors are received. In the corner they perceive a large wooden chest, ornamented and strengthened by strong bands of bronze and secured firmly to a stone pedestal, which is the money-box of the master of the house. The walls of the atrium are adorned with paintings, the colors of which are repeated in the mosaic floors. Passing through the atrium, the two friends find themselves in the peristyle. From the columns which surround it hang long festoons of garlands. In the center is the garden, where white marble vases holding rare flowers stand upon pedestals.

Plotinus rises from his seat as the two young men approach, sends away the small boy with whom he has been conversing and bids one of his servants bring some refreshment for his guests. In a moment they are regaled with delicious fresh figs served upon their own leaves, a delicious concoction of anchovies and eggs, and small cups of honey diluted and cooled with snow water. When they have finished their light repast a servant brings a silver basin of perfumed water and delicate linen napkins bordered with purple.

Porphyry is eager to begin his conversation with Plotinus. He knows that Plotinus is a Neoplatonist, and therefore realizes that he must start his inquiries with universal concepts. He seats himself before Plotinus.

PORPHYRY: "Amelius has told me, Plotinus, that I must gain my knowledge of philosophy through the understanding of universal principles. Therefore I ask thee: What is it that lies behind all manifested, conditioned existence? What is its nature? How can it be described?"

PLOTINUS: "Above all things there must be something which is *simple*. For if it be not completely simple, and be not really ONE, it cannot be Principle. The Principle of everything must therefore be the One and only."

PORPHYRY: "But the manifested universe is multiple and complex! Dost mean to tell me that the complex springs from the simple?"

PLOTINUS: "It is not possible for the Many to exist unless the One exists from which, or in which, they subsist; or, in short, unless there is a One which is prior to other things. The One is the First Principle of things."

PORPHYRY: "How, great Teacher, can the One be described? It seemeth to me that the One must transcend the power of human conception and could only be dwarfed by human expression or similitude!"

PLOTINUS: "How, indeed, can we speak of IT? We are indeed able to say something of It, but we cannot describe It. Nor have we any knowledge or intellectual perception of It. For we can say what It is *not*, but we cannot say what It is. We are not, however, prevented from possessing It, though we cannot say what It is."

PORPHYRY: "Could we speak of the One as *Being*?"

PLOTINUS: "The One is not Being, but Being is the progeny of It, and, as it were, the first-born. For It is prior to any particular thing. Hence It is really ineffable. Properly speaking, there is no name for It, because nothing can be asserted of It."

PORPHYRY: "Ah, I see! It is rather Be-ness than Be-ing. Has It then no relation to manifested, finite Being?"

PLOTINUS: "The One is all things, and yet no one of all. The One is all, because all things co-exist in It. But in It, they *are* not yet, but only *will be*."

PORPHYRY: "I understand. The One really represents a condition of potentiality! What, then, is its relation to Life itself?"

PLOTINUS: "It subsists above Life, and is the *Cause* of Life, since the energy of Life is not the First, but emanates from this Principle as from an ineffable fountain."

PORPHYRY: "Must I then conclude that this Principle, being *above* all, is not to be perceived in the manifested universe? Where is the One?"

PLOTINUS: "The One is *everywhere*. There is no space where It is not. Therefore It fills everything. It is by the One that everything exists. The One fills everything, and produces everything, without being that which It produces."

PORPHYRY: "But, Plotinus, thou knowest as well as I that the whole manifested universe is characterized by *motion*! Is Motion the One? Or is the potentiality of Motion a condition of rest? What is the relation of the One to rest and motion?"

PLOTINUS: "The One is superior to both rest and motion. It is the potentiality of both rest and motion, and consequently it is superior to both."

PORPHYRY: "Another thought occurs to me, great Teacher. The universe manifests intelligence. Can that which thou describest as the One be Intelligence itself? In other words, does the One think?"

PLOTINUS: "The One does not think, because it comprises both the thinker and the thought. The One is not Intelligence, but is superior to Intelligence. As it is superior to Intelligence, that which emanates must of necessity be intelligence."

PORPHYRY: "This Principle which underlies thy philosophy is indeed profound. I clearly see that the One transcends the power of human conception. Wilt thou not bring me down into regions which can be comprehended by my finite mind? What follows this condition of potentiality? How does the manifested universe come into existence?"

PLOTINUS: "Everything that exists after the One is derived from the One. But this second stage is no longer the ONE, but the *multiple* One. We see that all things that reach perfection cannot remain in an unmanifest condition, but must produce themselves in manifestation. This is seen throughout the whole of nature. Not only do beings capable of choice, but even those lacking in soul perception have a tendency to impart to other beings what is in them. As, for instance, fire emits heat; snow emits cold. Therefore all things in nature seek to reach immortality by the manifestation of their qualities. The One manifests Itself. That which is manifested also manifests itself in its own way."

PORPHYRY: "Ah, I see! Thou teachest the Doctrine of Emanations as the Gnostics do! But thou forgettest, Plotinus, that manifested things are made of matter. How can matter manifest itself?"

PLOTINUS: "Matter is not dead. Matter is not devoid of life or intelligence. One cannot exist without the other. Reciprocally, intelligible entities do not exist without the matter that makes them. Form and matter are principles that are necessary to the constitution of all things."

PORPHYRY: "I See, Plotinus. Thy theory is that Spirit, or Consciousness, and Matter are not to be regarded as independent realities, but as the two facets, or aspects, of the One, which constitute the basis of conditioned being, whether subjective or objective. But what about man? Is there something in *man* that corresponds to the One?"

PLOTINUS: "There must be another nature, different from the body, which possesses existence from itself. It is necessary that there should be a certain nature primarily vital, which is also necessarily indestructible and immortal, as being the Principle of Life to other things. It is necessary that there should be something which is the supplier of life, the supplier being external to, and beyond corporeal nature."

PORPHYRY: "Is that what men call the Soul? If so, what is the relation of the Soul to the One?"

PLOTINUS: "Soul is One, and in a certain respect the ONE. The soul which has more alliance with the One participates more abundantly in It."

PORPHYRY: "What is the nature of the Soul?"

PLOTINUS: "The Soul is not corporeal, as the Stoics taught. No aggregation of atoms could produce the Soul. The Soul is an incorporeal and immortal essence. The Soul imparts movement to everything else. She imparts life to the body. She alone possesses real life."

PORPHYRY: "What in thy opinion, is the relation of all Souls with the Universal World-Soul?"

PLOTINUS: "The Universe lies in the Soul that sustains it, and no part is destitute of Soul, being moistened with life like a net in water. If all souls be one in the Universal World-Soul, why should they not together form One? If both my soul and your soul proceed from the Universal World-Soul, then all Souls form but a single One."

PORPHYRY: "How then, Plotinus, wouldst thou define man? Is he fundamentally a Soul or does he only possess a Soul?"

PLOTINUS: "Man *is* a Soul. He *has* a body. The nature and essence of these must be divided. Since the body is a composite, reason shows that it cannot remain perpetually the same. Sense likewise shows that it is dissolved at death and receives various destructions, since each of the things inherent in it tends to its own, or to the whole from which it was derived. Soul is separable from the body. Nor yet is the soul in the body, as part of the whole. For soul is not a part of the body."

PORPHYRY: "But is the body not a part of us, Plotinus?"

PLOTINUS: "If the body is a part of us, we are not wholly immortal. But when we see correctly, we see that the body is only the *instrument* of the soul, and that the *soul is the man himself*."

PORPHYRY: "But, Plotinus, even though the body is only the instrument of the soul, it is an important one. We could not function without it!"

PLOTINUS: "We are not the body, but we are not entirely separated from it. It is associated with us. It depends upon us. Therefore its sufferings and pleasures are not indifferent to us. The weaker we are, the more we occupy ourselves with it. In it is plunged a part of ourselves, which constitutes the essential personality."

PORPHYRY: "Why then, Plotinus, do men speak of the soul as if it were the body?"

PLOTINUS: "The soul is said to be in the body because the body alone is visible. But if we could see the soul, and if we could see that she surrounds the body by the life she possesses, we would say that the soul is in no way in the body, but that on the contrary the body is contained within the container, that which flows within the immovable."

PORPHYRY: "Wouldst thou give an illustration, Plotinus, so that the matter will be clearer to my comprehension?"

PLOTINUS: "The soul is said to be in the body as a pilot in a ship. If it were there as a passenger, it would be there only by accident. But even this is not enough. For the pilot is not present in the whole of the ship, but only in a part of it at one time, while the soul is always present everywhere. A better illustration is that the soul is present

in the body as light is present in air. Light is present in air without mingling with it. When the air, within which the light radiates, withdraws its light, the air keeps none of the light. But it is illuminated as long as the air remains subject to the light."

PORPHYRY: "I thank thee, Plotinus, for thy illustrations. But there is another question I would like to ask thee. Thou saidst a few moments ago that a part of ourselves is plunged in the body. Must I understand that the whole soul is not present in the body?"

PLOTINUS: "The soul never enters completely into the body. By her higher part, she ever remains united to the intelligible world, as by her lower part she remains united to the sense world. The higher part of the soul is insensible to the attraction of these transitory pleasures and leads an undisturbed life. Every soul has a lower part turned toward the body, and a higher part turned toward the divine intelligence."

PORPHYRY: "Ah, I see! The nature of the soul becomes dual as soon as it is attached to a body! That would necessarily give it a double action!"

PLOTINUS: "Exactly! The soul has a double action in her double relation to what is above and what is below. By her first action, she manages the body, and by her second action she contemplates the intelligible entities."

PORPHYRY: "I understand. The soul is therefore an *active* entity. What are some of her activities?"

PLOTINUS: "The soul is a real being, with characteristic nature and activities. Among these is *memory*, whose exercise is only hindered by the body. When the soul unites with the body, she *forgets*. When she separates herself from the body, she *remembers*. The body is therefore only the stream of Lethe, or forgetfulness. To the soul alone belongs memory."

PORPHYRY: "Thou hast said that the soul is the man himself. How can we arrive at this conclusion?"

PLOTINUS: "Consider the soul by taking away that which is extraneous. Or rather, let him who takes this away survey himself, and he will see himself as immortal when he beholds himself in the intelligible world, and situated in a pure abode. For he will perceive himself as intellect surveying not anything sensible, but an eternal power contemplating that which is eternal."

PORPHYRY: "How then does the soul acquire a body? Is there a Law which causes her to incarnate in a body of flesh?"

PLOTINUS: "What is called inevitable necessity and divine justice consists in the sway of nature which causes each soul to proceed in an orderly manner into the bodily image which has become the object of her affection. Consequently the soul approaches the object toward which her interior disposition bears her. Thus she is led and introduced where she is to go. At a fixed moment she descends, as it were, spontaneously, where she ought to enter. Each soul has her own hour. When this hour arrives, the soul descends as if a herald had called her. Thus individuals come here below by virtue of the common law to which they are subjected."

PORPHYRY: "Ah, Plotinus, it seems that thou teachest of a power outside of man! The Law of which thou speakest, where is it? From whom is it derived?"

PLOTINUS: "Each one bears *within himself* this common Law, a Law which does not derive its power from outside, but which depends upon the nature of those who are subject to it, because it is innate in them."

PORPHYRY: "What purpose, then, has the soul in incarnating?"

PLOTINUS: "The soul descends for the purpose of developing her own powers, and to adorn what is below her. Souls alternately changing their bodies pass to other forms, just as in the scenes of a play, where one of the actors apparently dies, but shortly after changes his dress, and, assuming the appearance of another person, returns to the scene."

PORPHYRY: "What then, Plotinus, is death?"

PLOTINUS: "To die is only to change body, no otherwise than shifting a garment. Nevertheless he who departs will hereafter return to the play."

PORPHYRY: "Give me another illustration of death, Plotinus! It is a subject that long has puzzled me!"

PLOTINUS: "Life is a partnership of soul and body; death its dissolution. In either life or death, the soul will feel herself at home."

PORPHYRY: "In what state of consciousness is the soul after death?"

PLOTINUS: "There are two states after death. In the first, the soul which is attracted by body will recollect everything that the man did or suffered during the present life. In the course of time, however, the recollection of other things from former lives will arise. For the soul becoming in a greater degree purified from the body, she will recollect those things, the remembrance of which she had lost in the present life. A forgetfulness of such worldly pursuits is necessary. Hence he who says that the worthy soul is oblivious will speak rightly. For the soul will fly from the many and will collect multitude into one. Thus it will not associate with multitude, but, expelling it, will live by itself. "

PORPHYRY: "And when the soul returns to earth-life, Plotinus, what happens then?"

PLOTINUS: "It meets the consequences of its former deeds. Those who, in a former life, were slave owners, if they abused their powers, will be enslaved. It is not by chance that a man becomes a slave, is made prisoner, or is dishonored. He must himself have committed the violence which he in turn undergoes. If you desire to discover the exercise of distributive justice, it is not sufficient to examine the present only; the past and future must also be considered. The orderly system here mentioned is really inescapable, truly a justice and an admirable wisdom. The order which reigns in the universe is eternal. It penetrates everywhere, even in the smallest thing."

PORPHYRY: "Thou hast shown me, Plotinus, that man is the maker and fashioner of his own destiny, the only one who sets in motion the causes of his own happiness and misery. But how does that Law which is inherent in man determine the quantity and quality of the punishment the man has to suffer?"

PLOTINUS: "The Divine Law is inevitable, containing at once in itself the power of accomplishing what it has now judged to be fit. In the Law it is promulgated how much and how long it is necessary to suffer. The punishments which overtake the evil one must therefore be derived from that Order which rules all things with propriety. The unjust evils, accidents and misery which seem to overwhelm the good may all be said to be the consequences of anterior faults. This universal Order must not be accused of being unjust, but we should insist that distributive justice exercises itself with perfect propriety. If certain things seem worthy of blame, it is because they are due to secret causes which escape our knowledge."

PORPHYRY: "Distributive Justice! I shall remember those words, Plotinus! They will clear up many points which have sorely puzzled me. But, Plotinus, do all men suffer the effects of distributive justice in the same manner?"

PLOTINUS: "There are three types of men. Since all men from their birth employ sense prior to reason, some, proceeding no further, pass through life considering these as the first and last of things. But others are in a small degree elevated from things subordinate, the more excellent parts of their soul recalling them from pleasure to a more worthy pursuit. In the third class is the race of Divine Men, who, through a more excellent power, and with piercing eyes, perceive supernal light."

Plotinus died at the age of sixty-six. At the moment of his death a Dragon, or Serpent, is said to have glided through a hole in the wall and disappeared - a fact highly suggestive to the student of symbolism. In later years Porphyry, his devoted pupil, summed up Plotinus' life in these words:

He left the orb of light solely for the benefit of mankind. He came as a guide to the few who are born with a divine destiny and are struggling to gain the lost region of light, but know not how to break the fetters by which they are detained; who are impatient to leave the obscure cavern of sense, where all is delusion and shadow, and to ascend to the realms of intellect, where all is substance and reality.