

Plotinus and the Platonism of late antiquity

Nathan Bjorge

Iamblichus' neoplatonism accepts the authority of the writings of Plotinus (205-270 CE), and develops its innovative positions through the expansion of his concepts. Plotinus' work consists of the *Enneads*. Its title ("nine-fold") refers to the internal division into nine sections, each consisting of six tractates, collected and published by Plotinus' disciple Porphyry.¹ Plotinus' system of dualist idealism restages the basic platonic and peripatetic distinction between the principles of form-mind-soul and substance-body-matter (dualism), with the ultimate ontological emphasis and priority being placed on the side of incorporeal, disembodied form (idealism). Plotinus writes: "We know that man is not a thing of one only element; he has a soul and he has, whether instrument or adjunct in some other mode, a body: this is the first distinction."² Therefore, "something of us [body] passes over to dissolution and destruction, while something else [soul], that which is the true man, endures for ever."³

The *Enneads* are a complex and challenging work of pagan theology possessed of a robustly self-consistent methodology. In conjunction with this method, Plotinus' theological criterion, I would propose, is not to lessen the divine by association with the limitations of materiality. Or, as he writes, "When therefore you seek to state or to conceive Him, put all else aside; abstracting all, keep solely to Him; see that you add nothing; be sure that your theory of

¹ Plotinus, *The Six Enneads* (Chicago, IL: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952).

² Ibid, 191.

³ Ibid.

God does not lessen Him.”⁴ For god is, “Something in which there is no more than That Thing itself to affirm and know, Something which lies away above all and is—it alone—veritably free, subject not even to its own law, solely and essentially That One Thing, while all else is thing and something added.”⁵

This “thing and something added,” is the cosmic conjunction of form and substance. The material substance of the cosmos ultimately derives its intelligibility, teleology and animation from an ensoulment originating outside of the universe—from an absolutely immaterial, eternally self-created and self-sufficient mental being Plotinus calls “the One” or “the Good.” The One is not equivalent to the Judeo-Christian monotheistic god, because it is an entirely impersonal entity. The One is related only to itself, has no knowledge of the cosmos, and is eternally devoid of internal change or activity. “The Divine Mind in its mentation thinks itself; the object of the thought is nothing external: Thinker and Thought are one; therefore in its thinking and knowing it possesses itself, observes itself.”⁶ Nevertheless, the One is the goal and source of religious piety because it is the perfectly *eleutheric* being, entirely liberated from any limitations of involvement with materiality.

Like the overflow spilling from a fountain, the absolute ontological fullness of the One spontaneously emanates what Plotinus calls the Intellectual-Principle, which is distinct from the One, but exclusively directed towards it. The primary *hypostasis* (emanation) of the One is the Demiurge which creates the universe, or more properly is the archetypal source of the cosmos, from which the forms of the universe are further emanated, like water cascading down the

⁴ Ibid, 353.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, 66.

descending levels of a fountain. “And the First Act is the Act of The Good stationary within Itself, and the First Existence is the self-contained Existence of The Good; but there is also an Act upon It, that of the Intellectual-Principle which, as it were, lives about It. And the Soul, outside, circles around the Intellectual-Principle, and by gazing upon it, seeing into the depths of It, through It sees God.”⁷ Plotinus rejects the “gnostic” multiplication of the primordial hierarchy into a complex system of aeons. “We need not, then, go seeking any other Principles; this—the One and the Good—is our First; next to it follows the Intellectual Principle, the primal Thinker; and upon this follows Soul. Such is the order in nature. The Intellectual Realm allows no more than these and no fewer.”⁸

The opposite of the Good, which is absolute mind, is the principle of evil, or materiality as such. “[For] the Soul’s seeing is baulked by the passions and by the darkening that Matter brings to it, by its decline into Matter, by its very attention no longer to Essence but to Process – whose principle or source is, again, Matter, the Kind so evil as to saturate with its own depravity even that which is not in it but merely looks towards it. For, wholly without part in Good, the negation of Good, unmingled Lack, this Matter-Kind makes over to its own likeness whatsoever comes in contact with it.”⁹ Indeed, as such, “Matter has not even existence whereby to have some part in Good: Being is attributed to it by an accident of words: the truth would be that it has Non-Being.”¹⁰

⁷ Ibid, 27.

⁸ Ibid, 66.

⁹ Ibid, 29.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Plotinus theorizes matter independent of its form as a pure abstract potentiality that is nothing in-itself until it is in-formed by its interaction with soul. “The Nature of this Kosmos is, therefore, a blend; it is blended from the Intellectual-Principle and Necessity,” or matter which is subject to fate, “what comes into it from God [soul/form] is good; evil is from the Ancient Kind which, we read, is the underlying Matter not yet brought to order by the Ideal-Form.”¹¹ Matter is pure potentiality without the interpenetration of the primary ontological principle of mental, ideal form; it is nothing in itself. Stoic and Epicurean atomism, with its concept of a matter independent of mind, is rejected by Plotinus in favor of a consistent platonic idealism. “‘Atoms’ or ‘elements’—it is in either case an absurdity, an impossibility, to hand over the universe and its contents to material entities, and out of the disorderly swirl thus occasioned to call order, reasoning, and the governing soul into being; but the atomic origin is, if we may use the phrase, the most impossible.”¹²

Plotinus rehearses his version of the myth of the “fall” of the soul from its home in eternity into the imprisonment of matter from which it must liberate itself: “This is the fall of the Soul, this entry into Matter: thence its weakness: not all the faculties of its being retain free play, for Matter hinders their manifestation; it encroaches upon the Soul’s territory and, as it were, crushes the Soul back; and it turns to evil all that it has stolen, until the Soul finds strength to advance again.”¹³

Plotinus summarizes his dualism bluntly: “body is the cause of evil [...] the cause of Evil is Matter.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, Plotinus rejects the gnostic conclusion that the cosmos is evil, for the

¹¹ Ibid, 30.

¹² Ibid, 79.

¹³ Ibid, 33.

¹⁴ Ibid, 31.

very interpenetration of matter by form has redeemed and sanctified the universe as a reflection of the Good. “The Universe is a life organized, effective, complex, all-comprehensive, displaying an unfathomable wisdom. How, then, can anyone deny that it is a clear image, beautifully formed, of the Intellectual Divinities? No doubt it is a copy, not original; but that is its very nature; it cannot be at once symbol and reality. But to say that it is an inadequate copy is false; nothing has been left out which a beautiful representation within the physical order could include.”¹⁵

Plotinus is willing to grant that the cosmos is good in virtue of being an ensouled and rationally ordered system, but the cosmos is not good *qua* its materiality. This position sustains his dualist thesis while smoothing out gnostic radicalism. However, Plotinus’ dualism is actually reinforced by this argument. Why is the cosmos not evil?—because soul sustains itself within the cosmos as a principle radically separate from and superior to matter. The universe is good because it has been invaded and overwhelmed by a divine *logos* originating from another reality, which establishes and sustains the natural order for the sake of its own transcendence of nature. The cosmos is only good insofar as its intelligibility points beyond itself, towards a radically transcendent spiritual and immaterial world. If the basic myth of gnosticism is that the cosmos is a battleground between the principles of spiritual good and material evil, and that evil has won as a result of their mixture, then what is different for Plotinus is that good has instead (mostly) won the battle. Otherwise, from a modern post-metaphysical perspective the two positions are not in fact as different as Plotinus wants them to be.

Although it is outside of the One and divided among diverse bodies, soul participates in the One in virtue of its mental nature. “For, note, we inevitably think of the Soul, though one and undivided in the All, as being present to bodies in division: in so far as any bodies are Animates,

¹⁵ Ibid, 70.

the Soul has given itself to each of the separate material masses; or rather it appears to be present in the bodies by the fact that it shines into them: it makes them living beings not by merging into body but by giving forth, without any change in itself, images or likenesses of itself like one face caught by many mirrors.”¹⁶ “There will therefore be a compromise; the action of the Soul will be in part guided by this environment while in other matters it will be sovereign, leading the way where it will.”¹⁷

Spiritual life, for Plotinus, is normatively concentrated in the intellectual re-ascent of the soul to its primordial, un-embodied origin in the One. All other traditional religious activities are demoted. Provisional and preparatory at best, at worst they distract the sage from the noetic escape from embodiment. By emphasizing the “intellectual” Plotinus means that the soul is bound to the body by emotional feeling and physical pleasures, which must be transcended by their ascetic renunciation. He consistently and emphatically rejects any other relationship to the “passions” as the antithesis of spiritual life. In this sense Plotinus’ philosophy is a historically consistent expression of the asceticism prevalent in the Roman culture of late antiquity.

In their return towards the One against the restraint of embodiment the primary spiritual practice of the sage is “restraint” (*Sophrosyne*) of the bodily desires and emotions.¹⁸ “Disengagement means simply that the soul withdraws to its own place. It will hold itself above all passions and affections.”¹⁹ Therefore, the sage is not moved to emotional distress by the

¹⁶ Ibid, 4.

¹⁷ Ibid, 81.

¹⁸ Ibid, 9.

¹⁹ Ibid, 8.

suffering of others, even within their own family. “Anyone who says that it is human nature to grieve over misfortune to our household must learn that this is not so with all, and that, precisely, it is virtue’s use to raise the general level of nature towards the better and finer, above the mass of men. And the finer is to set at nought what terrifies the common mind.”²⁰ The Plotinian sage can and will act to assist those in distress, but their action is for the sake of civic and filial duty, never emotional sympathy. The sage stands aloof from all human suffering, experiencing it as an illusion before the immutable immortality of soul. “Murders, death in all its guises, the reduction and sacking of cities, all must be to us just such a spectacle as the changing scenes of a play; all is but the varied incident of a plot, costume on and off, acted grief and lament. For on earth, in all the succession of life, it is not the Soul within but the Shadow [body] outside of the authentic man, that grieves and complains and acts out the plot on this world stage which men have dotted with stages of their own constructing. [...] Those incapable of thinking gravely read gravity into frivolities which correspond to their own frivolous Nature. Anyone that joins in their trifling and so comes to look on life with their eyes must understand that by lending himself to such idleness he has laid aside his own character. [...] We must remember, too, that we cannot take tears and laments as proof that anything is wrong; children cry and whimper where there is nothing amiss.”²¹

In these passages Plotinus’ platonism is at its most susceptible to the charge of nihilism. By positing the value of the cosmos exclusively in the principle of soul, which originates from and is normatively oriented towards an extra-cosmic world, the value of this-worldly, practical life is devalued and negated. Since, as I will be arguing at greater length below, there is, in fact, no “other” world, and no supernatural reality “behind” or “above” the historical human life-world,

²⁰ Ibid, 16.

²¹ Ibid, 90.

the maneuver of positing metaphysical transcendence is futile. As there is no “there there” to ascend to beyond the universe, the devaluation of practical life simply devalues all modes of possible human existence, because from a post-metaphysical perspective all possible modes of human existence are practical. From a critical point of view platonism is disclosed as the quintessential western philosophy of nihilism.