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THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLOTINUS THE EGYPTIAN

Plotinus and His Master Ammonius

Plotinus (A.D. 204-270) is sometimes regarded as the greatest philosopher in the period between Aristotle and Proclus, though the later Platonists based their teachings rather on the metaphysics of Iamblichus and Syrianus. In this respect, they did not share the modern opinion of the "radical originality" and exceptional status of Plotinus, customarily viewed by the Western classicists as the founder of a reinterpreted version of Platonism that came to be known as "Neoplatonism." This term itself appears to have originated in the eighteenth century as a derisory label invented by Protestant scholars who regarded Neoplatonism as the root and source of all kinds of evils, attributing (as did Johann Lorenz von Mosheim) the invention of such a philosophy to the Devil himself. Even such philosophers as Leibniz declared that Plotinus, in his vain craving for the mystical and marvelous, had corrupted the teaching of Plato. The Protestant theologians were highly suspicious of the "corrupting" influence of Neoplatonism on Christianity. Thus, as E.N. Tigerstedt has pointed out:

> The separation of Platonism from Neoplatonism seems to have been inspired by the wish to dissociate Plato from his later followers, who were regarded as anti-Christian, and thus maintain the venerable view of Plato as *anima naturaliter christiana*.[1]

[1] E.N. Tigerstedt, *The Decline and Fall of the Neoplatonic Interpretation of Plato: An Outline and Some Observations* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1974), p. 49.

The "younger Platonists," or "Neoplatonists," were those who, "inflated by metaphysical dreams" and "wild enthusiasm," opposed Plato to Christ and "tried to crush Christianity."

In the strict sense, the label "Neoplatonism" is used to describe that form of Platonism which started with Plotinus, though "Neoplatonism" may also refer to the much earlier transformations of Platonism, including so-called "Middle Platonism." All philosophers now classified as "Middle Platonists" (e.g., Antiochus of Ascalon, Gaius, Atticus, Calvenus Taurus, Alcinous) and "Neoplatonists" (Plotinus, Amelius, Porphyry) regarded themselves as Platonists pure and simple. Their different interpretations of Plato were based partly on oral teachings, partly on the written works, both viewed as containing an esoteric wisdom reserved only for the initiated. Though the basic Neoplatonic doctrines may be collected from an attentive and creative reading of Plato's dialogues, the later Platonists carried Platonic doctrines somewhat further and developed them into a more carefully elaborated metaphysics and mysticism.

According to J.N. Findlay, they brought out Plato's doctrines "from hinting incompletness to expository fullness and coherence," freeing them from tiresome stylistic and argumentative (if not "sophistic") reflexes. Arguing that Plotinus and his master Ammonius represented no serious deviation from Plato (who had only an inexplicit metaphysical system or, rather, program of investigation), he says:

> I see comparatively little development in the treatises of Plotinus. They are the varying exposition of an already established body of doctrine, to which Plotinus may have made some brilliant additions, but whose basic pattern had been previously laid down.[2]

As Plotinus himself clearly attested (though antitraditional scholars regard this assertion as an outrageous lie):

[2] J.N. Findlay, "The Neoplatonism of Plato," in *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, ed. R. Baine Harris (Norfolk: ISNS, 1976), p. 25.

> So that what we say represents no novelty, and was said not now, but long ago, though in inexplicit fashion. Our present exposition is merely an exegesis of what was then said, and relies for its proof of antiquity on the writings of Plato himself (*Enn.* V.1.8).

The Neoplatonists dealt with the noetic and ineffable realities which in the ancient civilizations were expressed in the language of myth and sacramental theurgic rites. However, they were unwilling to sacrifice rational philosophical discourse, trying thereby to maintain the conceptual precision characteristic of Hellenic thought. Thus, seemingly contradictory statements were unavoidable, and different metaphysical formulations—based on the esoteric interpretation of ancient "theologians" (Homer, Hesiod, Orpheus, the Egyptian and Chaldean priests) and philosophers (Pythagoras, Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle)—might appear equally inadequate where the realm of first principles is concerned.

Since the divine truths were very imperfectly expressible, Plotinus, being at the same time a mystic and a rationalist, partly adopted an aporetic approach to philosophy. The term "mystic" is here used not in the sense of "irrational," or "devoid of reason"; a "mystic" is one who follows the anagogic path of the spiritual or philosophical "mysteries" to the Ultimate Reality, to be finally united with God or His Attributes. And a "rationalist" (in the traditional sense of this word) is one who possesses, and identifies himself with, the "rational" and therefore "immortal" part of his soul, and thus regards the intelligible world, or the realm of noetic archetypes, as more real than the physical world of images which, nevertheless, are part of the ordered metastructure that mirrors its intelligible paradigms.

It is usually maintained that Plotinus "has gathered the legacy of nearly eight centuries of Greek philosophy into a magnificently unified synthesis."[3] However, he saw himself as a faithful inter-

[3] Maria Luisa Gatti, "Plotinus: The Platonic Tradition and the Foundation of Neoplatonism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cam-

preter of Plato, the supreme master, who possessed the whole truth already, like other inspired teachers and divine messengers. Plotinus clearly understood that he himself belonged to the long chain of tradition (*paradosis*), constituted by the brethren of the golden race. According to Porphyry, the oracle of Apollo presented Plotinus (who seemed ashamed of being in the mortal body) as one pure of soul, ever striving towards the divine:

> The oracle says that he was mild and kind, most gentle and attractive, and we knew ourselves that he was like this. It says too that he sleeplessly kept his soul pure and ever strove towards the divine which he loved with all his soul, and did everything to be delivered and "escape from the bitter wave of blood-drinking life here." So to this god-like man above all, who often raised himself in thought—according to the ways Plato teaches in the *Symposium*, to the First and Transcendent God—that God appeared who has neither shape nor any intelligible form, but is throned above Intellect and all the intelligibles (*Vita Plot.* 23).

According to Eunapius (*Vita Soph.* 455) and David (*In Isagog.* 91.23ff), Plotinus was born in Lycopolis, Upper Egypt, in A.D. 204 or 205. Lycopolis (modern Asyut, ancient Egyptian *Zawty*) was the capital of the 13th nome of Upper Egypt, situated between 1. Akhmim (ancient Egyptian Ipu or Khen-min, Coptic Khmin, Greek Khemmis or Panopolis), the famous center of alchemy and Pythagorean philosophy, in the south, and 2. Hermopolis (modern el-Ashmunein, ancient Khmun, Khemmenu), the town of Hermes, Egyptian Thoth, the god of wisdom, sacred rites, philosophy and theurgy, in the north. Thoth was an undisputed master of all knowledge, the patron of scribes, doctors, magicians, and architects who built the sanctuaries of the gods. In Graeco-Roman times, Hermopolis became a center of pilgrimage for Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, worshipers of Hermes Trismegistus, or Thoth. This god is sometimes regarded as a substitute of Ra (the solar Intellect, later turned into the second hypostasis of Plotinus), and equated

bridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 10.

with his heart and demiurgic *logos*. Lycopolis had the famous temple of the local god Upawet (Wepwawet), "the Opener of the Ways," the mystagogue of initiates and the guide through the Osirian Underworld (Duat), sometimes equated with the jackal-headed god Anubis.

We cannot be certain about Plotinus' racial origin. He may either be a Greek, or a member of a Hellenized Egyptian family, like that of the priest Aurelius Petearbeschinis, a thoroughly Hellenized man of letters from Panopolis (Akhmim). Plotinus, who was exceedingly reticent regarding his life, is called "the Egyptian" by Proclus (*Plat. Theol.* I.1). At the age of twenty-eight Plotinus became interested in philosophy. He came to Alexandria and, after trying different teachers of philosophy, encountered Ammonius (c. A.D. 175-242), scornfully nicknamed "Saccas" by the later Christian authors, though the Neoplatonists themselves never used this disdainful label, meaning "porter." From that day Plotinus "followed Ammonius continuously, and under his guidance made such progress in philosophy that he became eager to investigate that practiced among the Persians and that perfected by the Indians" (*Vita Plot.* 3).

Ammonius wrote nothing and very little is known about him and his teaching. John Dillon argues that, in the person of Ammonius (who is "little more than a charismatic purveyor of Numenian Neopythagoreanism") Plotinus came into contact with the so-called "Neopythagorean underground":[4] "The great respect that he generated in his pupils for the wisdom of the East is also in line with Numenius."[5] A.H. Armstrong, who assiduously rejects that Plotinus was influenced by any Hermetic teaching or by the ancient solar theologies through the intermediary of Ammonius, says: "The chief claim to distinction of Plotinus' master, the myste-

[4] John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: A Study of Platonism 80 B.C. to A.D. 220*, revised edition with new afterword (London: Duckworth, 1996), pp. 383 and 381.

[5] Ibid., p. 383.

rious Ammonius Saccas, was to have reconciled Plato and Aristotle, and in this he was following a well-established tradition."[6]

Numenius, the second century A.D. Pythagorean and Platonic philosopher, is connected with the Syrian city of Apamea in the Orontes valley where Amelius Gentilianus of Tuscany, the chief pupil of Plotinus and admirer of Numenius, went to live just before his master Plotinus passed away. Numenius based his "perennial philosophy" not only on the teachings of Pythagoras and Plato, but also on the doctrines of the Brahmans, Jews, Magi, and Egyptians (fr. 10). He employed the technique of symbolic and allegorical exegesis, explaining the war between Atlantis and the Athenians recounted by Plato in *Timaeus* (23d ff), for example, as a battle between the wise followers of Athena (the noble and rational souls) and the irrational subjects of Poseidon involved with generation (Proclus, *In Tim.* I.76.30ff).

According to John Dillon, the fragments of Numenius' *On the Good* "gives the impression much more of an Hermetic dialogue than of a Platonic one": the main speaker in this treatise reminds one of Hermes instructing his spiritual "son" Tat.[7] When Plotinus was accused of appropriating the ideas of Numenius or even plagiarizing him, Amelius wrote a book in his defense called *On the Difference between the Doctrines of Plotinus and Numenius.* According to Porphyry the Phoenician (whose native name was Malchus), some people not only thought that Plotinus "was making a show on a basis of plagiarism from Numenius," but also considered that,

> he was a big driveller and despised him because they did not understand what he meant and because he was so completely free from the staginess and windy rant of the professional speechifier: his lectures were like conversations, and he was not quick to make clear to anybody the compelling logical coherence of his discourse (*Vita Plot.* 18).

[6] A.H. Armstrong, *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1967), pp. 7 and 57.

[7] John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, p. 383.

Plotinus belonged to the inner circle of Ammonius' school in Alexandria. Longinus, Erennius, and Origen the Platonist (who produced two works, O*n Daimons* and *That the King is the Only Maker*) were also initiates of Ammonius. It is, however, doubtful that the Christian Origen was really Ammonius' pupil at all. The later and, as a rule, less informed authors (including the Church historian Eusebius, who perhaps misunderstood or simply distorted the attestations of Porphyry) sometimes failed to distinguish between the two Origens. Erennius is otherwise unknown, but Longinus, who respected Plotinus while rejecting some of his teachings about the location of the Forms within the Intellect, is known as a learned literary critic and teacher of Porphyry at Athens before he joined Plotinus. Later Longinus became the minister of Arab Queen Zenobia (Zaynab) of Palmyra and was executed when the Romans destroyed Zenobia's state in Syria.

Though Ammonius himself is sometimes described as the most learned scholar of the day, he remains for us "a shadowy figure, who wrote not at all and of whom we know next to nothing."[8] The oral and, to a certain extent, esoteric character of Ammonius' teachings is attested by Porphyry, who says:

> After Philip had become Emperor he (Plotinus) came to Rome, at the age of forty. Erennius, Origen, and Plotinus had made an agreement not to disclose any of the doctrines of Ammonius which he had revealed to them in his lectures. Plotinus kept the agreement, and, though he held conferences with people who came to him, maintained silence about the doctrines of Ammonius. Errenius was the first to break the agreement, and Origen followed his lead. . . . Plotinus for a long time continued to write nothing, but began to base his lectures on his studies with Ammonius. So he continued for ten complete years, admitting people to study with him, but writing nothing (*Vita Plot*. 3).

[8] Denis O'Brien, "Plotinus and the Secrets of Ammonius," *Hermathena: A Trinity College Dublin Review*, no. CLVII, winter 1994, p. 137.

From this account it is clear that the pupils of Ammonius bound themselves not to reveal their master's doctrines. We do not know what kind of secrets Porphyry had in mind, but E.R. Dodds argues that the obvious supposition—identifying the hidden doctrines of Ammonius as teachings of the ineffable One and mystical union with the One—is perhaps wrong.[9] However, the mysterious or esoteric character of Ammonius' instructions concerning the philosophical purification and ascent of the soul to the divine is not to be underestimated.

The "secrets" of ancient mystery cults and those of Pythagorean philosophy (e.g., the doctrines regarding the immortality of the soul, reincarnation, separation of the soul from the body, elevation, and deification) were "an open secret." They were more related to spiritual initiation, the ineffable vision, or the real divine presence, than to doctrinal exposition at the level of discursive reasoning. As Peter Kingsley has pointed out,

> true esoteric teaching aims not at filling the disciple or pupil with mere fascinating theories but with opportunities for making these ideas and theories real in his own experience. Romantic notions of an esoteric text as a document containing earth-shattering statements that need locking away from the profane are naïve and vastly oversimplistic. The fact is that hardly anyone would recognize such a text for what it is, let alone know how to use it.[10]

Some scholars, following R.H. Schwyzer, are convinced that the argument regarding Ammonius' doctrines consisted in not putting them into written form, because they were oral teachings. In fact, Porphyry explicitly states that Plotinus had drawn on the teachings of Ammonius for a long time before he began to write, by which time the agreement had already been broken by Erennius

[9] E.R. Dodds, "Numenius and Ammonius," *Les sources de Plotin: Entretiens sur l'Antiquite classique, No.5* (Vandroeuvres-Geneve, 1960), pp. 27-28.

[10] Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 369-370.

and Origen.[11] However, Richard Goulet thinks that the oral teachings of Ammonius were not revealed in the early lectures which Plotinus gave in Rome.[12] Even the written lectures were not yet given out to everybody but only to those who had been carefully selected beforehand, since the school of Plotinus in Rome also had its inner circle. The most important members of this inner circle were Amelius, Eustachius, and Porphyry.

The later Neoplatonic tradition tends to emphasize the role of Ammonius in the rediscovery of true Platonism after a long period of its not being properly understood. According to the Alexandrian philosopher Hierocles (whose treatise O*n Providence* is presented in a summary by the Byzantine writer Photius), Ammonius belonged to the Golden Chain of Platonism. To describe those philosophers who rediscovered the divine philosophy, Hierocles uses the expression *hiera genea* (the golden race). He believed that Ammonius had purified true philosophy (which is regarded as a revelation) and restored harmony between the views of Aristotle and Plato. Thus Ammonius is introduced by the epithet "divine" (*theodidaktos*) (Photius, *Bibl.* III.112; 172a). As Dominic J. O'Meara has pointed out, Ammonius, according to Hierocles, "emerges as having accomplished what had been an essentially Numenian mission: the restoral of unanimity (*homodoxia*) of Platonism through the purification of a contentious and degraded tradition."[13]

Proclus assigned this role of "rediscoverer" to Plotinus, saying that the divine philosophy shone forth through the grace of the gods: the divine mysteries, established by the gods and guarded by the gods themselves, were in the course of time revealed to such exceptional men as Plato, who may be justly called the high priest and the chief mystagogue of those participating in the mysteries of the pure souls (*Plat. Theol.* I.1). Plotinus the Egyptian, he says,

[11] Denis O'Brien, "Plotinus and the Secrets of Ammonius," p. 119.

[12] Ibid., p. 118.

[13] Dominic J. O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived: Mathematics and Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 113.

belongs to this "divine chorus" of true priests and hierophants, who are the exegetes of the divine mysteries of Plato and the promoters of the true interpretation of the blessed visions into which they have been initiated. Hence, the Golden Chain of philosophers (which transcends the boundaries of space and time) transmits these mysteries of "the most unadulterated and the purest light of the truth" (*to gnesiotaton kai katharotaton tes aletheias phos*) to future generations.[14] If the role of Plotinus is somewhat crucial in this chain of transmission, as Proclus has suggested, he may then be regarded as a founder of "Neoplatonism," understood in the hieratic sense of "revival" or "return" to the revealed principles of "divine philosophy" (*theia philosophia*).

Plotinus and His School in Rome

In A.D. 243 Plotinus decided to make contact with the sages of Persia and India in order to study their philosophy. On leaving Alexandria, he joined an expedition of the Emperor Gordian III to Persia against the great Shahanshah, the "king of kings," Shapur I. The Sassanian Empire, founded in A.D. 224, was notably unreceptive to Western (Graeco-Roman) influences and supported a rigid Zoroastrian orthodoxy, though Mesopotamia (where the Sassanian capital Ctesiphon became a new center of learning) was an area of many different creeds and "philosophies." The newly arisen religious teacher Mani (A.D. 216-277) was present in the opposing Persian army. However, the Roman Emperor was assassinated in Mesopotamia by his own troops and Plotinus (who supposedly had been in close relations with the Emperor) escaped death by fleeing to Antioch.

After his failure to reach the East—he had perhaps intended to go as far as Afghanistan and the Indus valley where a veneer of Greek (or Graeco-Buddhist) civilization still covered large areas up

[14] John Glucker, *Antiochus and the Late Academy* (Gottingen: Vanderhoeck and Ruprecht, 1978), p. 313.

to the first-second centuries A.D.—Plotinus established himself in Rome in A.D. 245. During his first years in Rome, Plotinus lectured on the philosophy of Ammonius, giving only oral instruction until A.D. 253 when his pupils (the wider circle of Plotinus' school was made up of Roman senators and local aristocracy) persuaded him to commit his lectures to writing. Among Plotinus' patrons were the Emperor Gallienus (whose sole rule extends from A.D. 260 to 268) and his wife Salonina.

Porphyry describes the living ambience of Plotinus as follows:

> Another of his companions was Zethus, an Arab by race, who married the daughter of Theodosius, a friend of Ammonius. He was another medical man and a close friend of Plotinus, who kept trying to divert him from the affairs of state in which he was active and influential. Plotinus was on terms of great intimacy with him and used to go and stay at his place in the country, six miles from Minturnae. This had formerly belonged to Castricius, surnamed Firmus, who was the greatest lover of beauty of all of us and venerated Plotinus. . . . A good many members of the Senate also attended his lectures, of whom Marcellus Orrontius and Sabinillus worked hardest at philosophy. There was also Rogatianus, a senator, who advanced so far in renunciation of public life that he gave up all his property, dismissed all his servants, and resigned his rank.
>
> . . . There were women, too, who were greatly devoted to philosophy: Gemina, in whose house he lived, and her daughter Gemina, who had the same name as her mother, and Amphiclea, who became the wife of Ariston, son of Iamblichus. Many men and women of the highest rank, on the approach of death, brought him their children, both boys and girls, and entrusted them to him along with all their property, considering that he would be a holy and god-like guardian (*Vita Plot.* 7; 9).

Porphyry the Phoenician stayed with Plotinus only for the six years from A.D. 263 to 268. Plotinus started to write on the subjects that came up in the meetings of the school in the first year of Gallienus (A.D. 253) and produced twenty-one treatises until the appearance of Porphyry, who arrived from Greece with Antonius of Rhodes. Only a few people had received copies of Plotinus' treatises at that time. According to Porphyry, "The issuing of cop-

ies was still a difficult and anxious business, not at all simple and easy; those who received them were most carefully scrutinized" (*Vita Plot.* 4).

No less than thirty years after the master's death in A.D. 270 these and other treatises were arranged by Porphyry into six groups of nine each. This arrangement ignored the actual chronological order in which the works were written, and so the division into fifty-four treatises is somewhat artificial. Some treatises were split up in order to make six enneads, thus giving the title *Enneads* to the whole collection. The number nine is prominent in ancient Egyptian theology where the gods are grouped into the Enneads. The Ennead (*pesedjet*) of Heliopolis represented the structure of the noetic cosmos constituted by four ontological levels: 1. Atum, 2. Shu and Tefnut, 3. Geb and Nut, 4. Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephtys. The nine gods (*neteru*) of the great Ennead represent the intelligible paradigms for the world of manifestation. Further, according to the Pythagoreans:

> The ennead is the greatest of the numbers within the decad and is an unsurpassable limit. At any rate, it marks the end of the formation of specific identities. . . . That number admits nothing beyond the ennead, but rather everything circles around within it, is clear from the so-called recurrences: there is natural progression up to it, but after it there is repetition. . . . Hence they called it "Oceanus" and "horizon," because it encompasses both of these locations and has them within itself.[15]

The Plotinian treatises, as arranged by Porphyry, represent a movement from the earthly realm to the noetic cosmos and the ineffable One, the supreme God. Thus, the *Enneads* begin with human goods, proceed to the topics of the physical world, the soul, and the intelligible reality, and finally reach the One, or the Good.

[15] *The Theology of Arithmetic: On the Mystical, Mathematical, and Cosmological Symbolism of the First Ten Numbers. Attributed to Iamblichus*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1988), p. 105.

In A.D. 268 the Emperor Gallienus, the main patron of Plotinus, was assassinated and Porphyry, following the advice of Plotinus, departed to Sicily. At the same time an illness from which Plotinus had suffered became worse and he left Rome for Campania, where he died in A.D. 270 in the presence of the physician Eustochius of Alexandria, his devoted disciple. Porphyry describes the last days of his master as follows:

> When the plague broke out and his masseurs died he . . . contracted acute diphtheria. While I was with him no symptoms of this kind appeared, but after I left on my voyage his disease increased. . . . When he was on the point of death, Eustochius told us—as Eustochius had been staying at Puteoli and was late in coming to see him—that Plotinus said, "I have been waiting a long time for you." Then he said, "Try to bring back the god in us to the divine in the All" and, as a snake crept under the bed on which he was lying and disappeared into a hole in the wall, he breathed his last. It was the end of the second year of the reign of Claudius, and according to Eustochius he was sixty-six years old. At the time of his death I, Porphyry, was staying at Lilybaeum, Amelius was at Apamea in Syria, and Castricius was in Rome; only Eustochius was with him (*Vita Plot.* 2).

After the master's death Amelius asked Apollo where the soul of Plotinus had gone and received an oracle that Plotinus had joined the chorus of the blessed ones:

> But now that you have been freed from this tabernacle (*skenos*) and have left the tomb (*sema*) which held your heavenly (*daimonines*) soul, you come at once to the company of heaven, where winds of delight blow, where is affection and desire that charms the sight, full of pure joy, brimming with streams of immortality from the gods which carry the allurements of the Loves, and sweet breeze and the windless brightness of high heaven. There dwell Minos and Rhadamanthus, brethren of the golden race of great Zeus, there righteous Aeacus and Plato, the sacred power, and noble Pythagoras and all who have set the dance of immortal love and won kinship with spirits most blessed, there where the heart keeps festival in everlasting joy. O blessed one, you have borne so many contests and now move among holy spirits, crowned with mighty life (*Vita Plot.* 22).

"Selections from "*The Philosophy of Plotinus the Egyptian*"

Features in

The Heart of Plotinus: The Essential Enneads

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