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PLOTINUS

ENNEAD V.1

On the Three Primary
Levels of Reality

Translation with an Introduction
and Commentary

ERIC D. PERL



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Contents

<i>Introduction to the Series</i>	1
<i>Abbreviations</i>	11
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	13
INTRODUCTION TO THE TREATISE	15
<i>Note on the Text</i>	23
<i>Synopsis</i>	25
TRANSLATION	31
COMMENTARY	53
Chapter 1	53
Chapter 2	69
Chapter 3	83
Chapter 4	89
Chapter 5	105
Chapter 6	119
Chapter 7	137
Chapter 8	157
Chapter 9	161
Chapter 10	167
Chapter 11	173
Chapter 12	179
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	185
<i>Index of Ancient Authors</i>	195
<i>Index of Names and Subjects</i>	205

To my parents

with love and gratitude

*Introduction to the Series
With a Brief Outline of the Life and
Thought of Plotinus (205–270 CE)*

PLOTINUS WAS BORN IN 205 CE in Egypt of Greek-speaking parents. He attended the philosophical schools in Alexandria where he would have studied Plato (427–347 BCE), Aristotle (384–322 BCE), the Stoics and Epicureans as well as other Greek philosophical traditions. He began his serious philosophical education, however, relatively late in life, at the age of twenty-seven and was deeply impressed by the Platonist Ammonius Saccas about whom we, unfortunately, know very little, but with whom Plotinus studied for some eleven years. Even our knowledge of Plotinus' life is limited to what we can glean from Porphyry's introduction to his edition of his philosophical treatises, an account colored by Porphyry's own concerns. After completing his studies in Alexandria Plotinus attempted, by joining a military expedition of the Roman emperor Gordian III, to make contact with the

Brahmins in order to learn something of Indian thought. Unfortunately Gordian was defeated and killed (244). Plotinus somehow managed to extract himself and we next hear of him in Rome where he was able to set up a school of philosophy in the house of a high-ranking Roman lady by the name of Gemina. It is, perhaps, surprising that he had no formal contacts with the Platonic Academy in Athens, which was headed at the time by Longinus, but Longinus was familiar with his work, partly at least through Porphyry who had studied in Athens. The fact that it was Rome where Plotinus set up his school may be due to the originality of his philosophical activity and to his patrons. He clearly had some influential contacts, not least with the philhellenic emperor Gallienus (253–268), who may also have encouraged his later failed attempt to set up a civic community based on Platonic principles in a ruined city in Campania.

Plotinus' school was, like most ancient schools of philosophy, relatively small in scale, but did attract distinguished students from abroad and from the Roman upper classes. It included not only philosophers but also politicians and members of the medical profession who wished to lead the philosophical life. His most famous student was Porphyry (233–305) who, as a relative late-comer to the school, persuaded him to put into writing the results of his seminars. It is almost certain that we possess most, if not all, of his written output, which represents

his mature thought, since he didn't commence writing until the age of forty-eight. The school seemingly had inner and outer circles, and Plotinus himself was clearly an inspiring and sympathetic teacher who took a deep interest in the philosophical and spiritual progress of his students. Porphyry tells us that when he was suffering from severe depression Plotinus straight away visited him in his lodgings to help him. His concern for others is also illustrated by the fact that he was entrusted with the personal education of many orphans and the care of their property and careers. The reconciliation of this worldly involvement with the encouragement to lead a life of contemplation is encapsulated in Porphyry's comment that "he was present to himself and others at the same time."

The *Enneads* of Plotinus is the edition of his treatises arranged by his pupil Porphyry who tried to put shape to the collection he had inherited by organizing it into six sets of nine treatises (hence the name "*Enneads*") that led the reader through the levels of Plotinus' universe, from the physical world to Soul, Intellect and, finally, to the highest principle, the One. Although Plotinus undoubtedly had a clearly structured metaphysical system by the time he began committing himself to expressing his thought in written form, the treatises themselves are not systematic expositions, but rather explorations of particular themes and issues raised in interpreting Plato and other philosophical texts read in the School. In fact, to achieve his

neat arrangement Porphyry was sometimes driven even to dividing certain treatises (e.g., III.2–3; IV.3–5, and VI.4–5).

Although Plotinus' writings are not transcripts of his seminars, but are directed to the reader, they do, nevertheless, convey the sort of lively debate that he encouraged in his school. Frequently he takes for granted that a particular set of ideas is already familiar as having been treated in an earlier seminar that may or may not be found in the written text. For this reason it is useful for the reader to have some idea of the main philosophical principles of his system as they can be extracted from the *Enneads* as a whole.

Plotinus regarded himself as a faithful interpreter of Plato whose thought lies at the core of his entire project. But Plato's thought, whilst definitive, does according to Plotinus require careful exposition and clarification, often in the light of other thinkers such as Aristotle and the Stoics. It is because of this creative application of different traditions of ancient thought to the interpretation of Plato that Plotinus' version of Platonism became, partly through the medium of later Platonists such as Porphyry, Iamblichus (245–325), and Proclus (412–485), an influential source and way of reading both Plato and Aristotle in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and up to the early 19th century, when scholars first began to differentiate Plato and "Neoplatonism." His thought, too, provided early Christian theologians of the Latin

and particularly of the Byzantine tradition, with a rich variety of metaphysical concepts with which to explore and express difficult doctrinal ideas. His fashioning of Plato's ideas into a consistent metaphysical structure, though no longer accepted as a uniquely valid way of approaching Plato, was influential in promoting the notion of metaphysical systems in early modern philosophy. More recently increasing interest has centered on his exploration of the self, levels of consciousness, and his expansion of discourse beyond the levels of normal ontology to the examination of what lies both above and beneath being. His thought continues to challenge us when confronted with the issue of man's nature and role in the universe and of the extent and limitations of human knowledge.

Whilst much of Plotinus' metaphysical structure is recognizably an interpretation of Plato it is an interpretation that is not always immediately obvious just because it is filtered through several centuries of developing Platonic thought, itself already overlaid with important concepts drawn from other schools. It is, nevertheless, useful as a starting point to see how Plotinus attempts to bring coherence to what he believed to be a comprehensive worldview expressed in the Platonic dialogues. The Platonic Forms are central. They become for him an intelligible universe that is the source and model of the physical universe. But aware of Aristotle's criticism of the Platonic Forms as lifeless causes he takes

on board Aristotle's concept of god as a self-thinker to enable him to identify this intelligible universe as a divine Intellect that thinks itself as the Forms or Intelligibles. The doctrine of the Forms as the thoughts of god had already entered Platonism, but not as the rigorously argued identity that Plotinus proposed. Moreover the Intelligibles, since they are identical with Intellect, are themselves actively intellectual; they are intellects. Thus Plato's world of Forms has become a complex and dynamic intelligible universe in which unity and plurality, stability, and activity are reconciled.

Now although the divine Intellect is one it also embraces plurality, both because its thoughts, the Intelligibles, are many and because it may itself be analyzed into thinker and thought. Its unity demands a further principle, which is the cause of its unity. This principle, which is the cause of all unity and being but does not possess unity or being in itself, he calls the One, an interpretation of the Idea of the Good in Plato's *Republic* that is "beyond being" and that may be seen as the simple (hence "one") source of all reality. We thus have the first two of what subsequently became known as the three Hypostases, the One, Intellect, and Soul, the last of which acts as an intermediary between the intelligible and physical universes. This last Hypostasis takes on all the functions of transmitting form and life that may be found in Plato, although Plato himself does not always

make such a clear distinction between soul and intellect. Thus the One is the ultimate source of all, including this universe, which is then prefigured in Intellect and transmitted through Soul to become manifest as our physical universe. Matter, which receives imperfectly this expression, is conceived not as an independently existing counter-principle, a dangerously dualist notion, but is in a sense itself a product of the One, a kind of non-being that, while being nothing specific in itself, nevertheless is not simply not there.

But this procession from an ultimate principle is balanced by a return movement at each level of reality that fully constitutes itself only when it turns back in contemplation of its producer. And so the whole of reality is a dynamic movement of procession and return, except for matter, which has no life of its own to make this return; it is inert. This movement of return, which may be traced back to the force of “love” in Plato or Aristotle’s final cause, is characterized by Plotinus as a cognitive activity, a form of contemplation, weaker at each successive level, from Intellect through discursive reasoning to the merest image of rational order as expressed in the objects of the physical universe.

The human individual mirrors this structure to which we are all related at each level. For each of us has a body and soul, an intellect, and even something within us that relates to the One. While it is the nature of soul to give life

to body, the higher aspect of our soul also has aspirations toward intellect, the true self, and even beyond. This urge to return corresponds to the cosmic movement of return. But the tension between soul's natural duty to body and its origins in the intelligible can be, for the individual, a source of fracture and alienation in which the soul becomes over-involved and overwhelmed by the body and so estranged from its true self. Plotinus encourages us to make the return or ascent, but at the same time attempts to resolve the conflict of duties by reconciling the two-fold nature of soul as life-giving and contemplative.

This is the general framework within which important traditional philosophical issues are encountered, discussed and resolved, but always in a spirit of inquiry and ongoing debate. Issues are frequently encountered in several different contexts, each angle providing a different insight. The nature of the soul and its relationship to the body is examined at length (IV) using the Aristotelian distinctions of levels of soul (vegetative, growth, sensitive, rational) whilst maintaining the immortal nature of the transcendent soul in Platonic terms. The active nature of the soul in sense-perception is maintained to preserve the principle that incorporeals cannot be affected by corporeal reality. A vigorous discussion (VI.4 and 5) on the general nature of the relationship of incorporeals to body explores in every detail and in great depth the way in which incorporeals act on body. A universe that is the

product of design is reconciled with the freedom of the individual. And, not least, the time-bound nature of the physical universe and human reason is grounded in the life of Intellect, which subsists in eternity. Sometimes, however, Plotinus seems to break outside the framework of traditional metaphysics: the nature of matter and the One, each as non-being, though in a different sense, strains the terminology and structure of traditional ontology; and the attempt to reconcile the role of the individual soul within the traditional Platonic distinction of transcendent and immanent reality leads to a novel exploration of the nature of the self, the “I.”

It is this restless urge for exploration and inquiry that lends to the treatises of Plotinus their philosophical vitality. Whilst presenting us with a rich and complexly coherent system, he constantly engages us in philosophical inquiry. In this way each treatise presents us with new ideas and fresh challenges. And, for Plotinus, every philosophical engagement is not just a mental exercise but also contributes to the rediscovery of the self and our reintegration with the source of all being, the Platonic aim of “becoming like god.”

While Plotinus, like Plato, always wishes to engage his audience to reflect for themselves, his treatises are not easy reading, partly no doubt because his own audience was already familiar with many of his basic ideas and, more importantly, had been exposed in his seminars

to critical readings of philosophical texts that have not survived to our day. Another problem is that the treatises do not lay out his thought in a systematic way but take up specific issues, although always the whole system may be discerned in the background. Sometimes, too, the exact flow of thought is difficult to follow because of an often condensed mode of expression.

Because we are convinced that Plotinus has something to say to us today, we have launched this series of translations and commentaries as a means of opening up the text to readers with an interest in grappling with the philosophical issues revealed by an encounter with Plotinus' own words and arguments. Each volume will contain a new translation, careful summaries of the arguments and structure of the treatise, and a philosophical commentary that will aim to throw light on the philosophical meaning and import of the text.

John M. Dillon
Andrew Smith

Abbreviations

- DK** Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, eds. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. 7th ed. Berlin: Weidmannsche, 1954.
- HS₁** P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzer, eds. *Plotini Opera I–III* (editio maior). Paris and Leiden: Desclée de Brouwer and Brill, 1951–1973.
- HS₂** P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzer, eds. *Plotini Opera I–III* (editio minor, with revised text). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964–1982.
- LSJ** H. G. Liddell and R. Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th ed. Revised by H. Jones. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940.
- Smyth** Herbert Weyr Smyth. *Greek Grammar*. Revised by Gordon M. Messing. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956.

- SVF** J. von Arnim, ed. *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*. Stuttgart: Teubner, 1968.
- VP** *Vita Plotini* = Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*, printed at start of HS1, HS2, MacKenna, and Armstrong.

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Introduction to the Treatise

Ennead V.1, numbered 10 in Porphyry's chronological listing and thus one of Plotinus' earlier works, bears the title *Peri tōn triōn archikōn hypostaseōn*, "On the Three Principal Hypostases," here translated, "On the Three Primary Levels of Reality." But Porphyry reports that Plotinus did not give titles to his writings, and that the titles he records, which have since become traditional, are "those that prevailed" (VP 4, 16–19). In the case of V.1, the traditional title is exceptionally misleading, in two ways. First, this title presents the treatise as if it were an exercise in theoretical metaphysics, aimed at distinguishing and describing soul, intellect, and the One as three ontological principles superior to the sensible world. Much of the work is indeed occupied with this theme. But the central topic of the treatise is in fact the self, and the metaphysical analysis takes place within this personal and spiritual context.

Like several of Plotinus' other early works (I.6 [1]; V.9 [5]; IV.8 [6]; VI.9 [9]), the treatise is primarily concerned with the ascent of the soul and is protreptic in nature, aimed at awakening the human soul to its alienation from itself and its divine origin and exhorting us to turn back and discover the higher levels of reality within ourselves. The "three hypostases," soul, intellect, and the One, are not an objectified scale of metaphysical entities to be climbed by a self which is extrinsic to them and which remains untransformed as it ascends. Rather, in ascending to intellect we become intellect (see, e.g., V.3.4, 10–12; V.8.10, 35–41); in ascending to the One we ourselves become "beyond reality" (VI.9.11, 41–42). Thus the "hypostases" are at once metaphysical principles and, in Pierre Hadot's excellent phrase, "levels of the self" (1993, 27): intellect is both the intelligible paradigm of the cosmos and the highest level of consciousness, and the One is both the source of all reality and the inmost center of the self. The present treatise is a particularly striking example of how, as is always the case in Plotinus, metaphysics is spirituality and spirituality is metaphysics.

The second way in which the traditional title is misleading is that the phrase "three hypostases" (a phrase that nowhere occurs in the work of Plotinus himself) tends to suggest that we are dealing with three different realities additional to one another, as if the One were a first thing, which generates intellect as a second thing,

which in turn generates soul as a third thing. But Plotinus is at pains in the treatise to show that this is not the case. Rather, the relation of soul to intellect, and of intellect to the One, is in each case that of “image” (*eikōn* or *eidōlon*) and “expression” (*logos*), and the “generation” in question is nothing but the derivation of an image from its original. An image of something—for instance, a reflection—is not another, additional thing. It is, rather, the same thing at a secondary and inferior level of presentation. Thus Plotinus explains that the three levels are distinguished from one another only by their different modes of possession of the same content. This is the meaning of the important expressions, “nothing between but difference” (3, 21–22) and “separated only by difference” (6, 53), which he uses to describe the relation of soul to intellect and of intellect to the One. The principle that is operative throughout the sequence, and which is indeed a dominant theme of this treatise, is what will later become the scholastic maxim, “Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the recipient,” or, as Plotinus expresses it elsewhere, “What is present must be understood to be present for the capacity of that which receives” (VI.4.11, 3–4). Thus Plotinus explains in Chapters 3 and 4 that soul is constituted as soul, distinct from and subordinate to intellect, in that it possesses discursively and sequentially that which is found all together at once in intellect. This principle becomes especially prominent in Plotinus’ discussion of

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