

Plotinus (205 – 270)

Plotinus is reported to have been born in Egypt. His student, biographer and editor Porphyry describes how he began studying philosophy in Alexandria. In his late thirties he joined a Roman expedition into Mesopotamia, hoping to learn from Persian and (eventually) Indian sages. When the expedition failed, he returned to Rome where he set up a philosophical school, though eventually withdrawing to the countryside because of ill health.

He is one of the prime examples of the so-called Neo-Platonist philosophers, who take Plato (and Socrates) as role models not just for their thinking but for the way of life they promote. Much of Plotinus' text reads as creative commentary on big Platonic themes, the nature of the soul, the structure of the cosmos and human destiny. He will often take Platonic text as a sort of scripture needing exegesis and then explore ways of resolving the paradoxes it generates. In the background there often lurk themes familiar from Pythagoras, Parmenides, Aristotle and the Stoics.

His philosophical thought is strikingly infused with spirituality: the philosophical journey for him is very clearly a spiritual journey. It is no accident that Porphyry begins his short biography by remarking that he "seemed ashamed of having to be in a body" and towards the end describes his end and goal as "being united to and drawing near the God above all things". Here we have a sense of the sort of mystical piety practised by pagan intellectuals before Christianity became mainstream. We get glimpses of interest in guardian spirits, sympathetic magic and astrology, but an overriding affirmation of the ultimate goodness of God, the lesser gods and of the world and hints of a personal practice of the transition from articulated 'thinking through' to contemplation.

That close relationship between the life of the mind and the spiritual journey made Plotinus' sort of Neo-Platonism an important element in the matrix that produced classical Christian theology. His writings were organised thematically after his death by Porphyry and other students in six groups of nine discourses known for obvious reasons as *Enneads*. Some of these, translated into Arabic, were warmly received by Islamic scholars as 'the theology of Aristotle'. Of overwhelming attraction was the emphasis on 'the One' as the ultimate source of everything. Traces of this are very close to the surface in Ibn Sina's *Theology*. But his brand of cosmic, intellectual mysticism has held a powerful attraction for Western thinkers as well.

His writing is very difficult to follow. Porphyry says that his orthography was bad and that he never re-read what he or his amanuensis had written. This explains a lot. Porphyry also says (a tad smugly) that his best and most mature writings date from the time that he became his student. There does indeed seem to be an increase in coherence (as well as depth) in some of the texts that fall in this bracket. In the texts that follow I will try to give you a sense of the questions Plotinus is trying to

tackle, as he tries to construct a coherent cosmology, anthropology and spirituality out of the philosophical bequests of Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras and the Stoics. But I also want to give you a sense of the spiritual dimension, where the themes of love, goodness and the fulfilment of the soul come to the fore.

1. Problems with the Soul

The cosmic myth in Plato's Timaeus describes a process in which a divine craftsman mixes an entity which becomes soul. This non-physical soul then creates the physical universe and infuses it with life. Somehow all the individual souls in animals and humans remain part of that universal soul. The Stoic account of the soul as fiery spirit likewise emphasises a 'sympathy' connecting every part of the universe with every other part. Aristotle's account of the different sorts of soul (Plant, Animal, Human), with powers of generation, growth, nutrition, perception and movement places more emphasis on the individual creature and its perceptions. But Aristotle also creates a personal and cosmic role for 'nous' the divine mind that contains all forms in itself. These all leave a lot of loose philosophical ends and Plotinus does several handspins as he tries to tackle them. These extracts will give you the flavour of one of the problems.

If the soul of the universe gives itself to all the individual animals, and thus each becomes an individual, it would not be giving itself to each one by being divided up, but it will be the same soul, a whole, everywhere, one and the same present in many individuals simultaneously. (IV, 3, 4)

But how will one soul be yours, one soul his, and another hers? Does it mean that it belongs to him here below, but to her in the higher order? But that would mean that Socrates, and Socrates' soul will exist while he is in the body, but will be eliminated just when he returns to the best of places! But nothing that exists is lost... (IV, 3, 5)

This goes with questions like: if the whole soul is in you and me, why don't I have your perceptions, and if the world soul is in me and the world soul created the universe, why don't I create the universe?

Plotinus' response is to emphasise a balance between the identity and difference that fix individual sorts of consciousness and capacity according to their situation over against the fundamental sympathy that they share by being a part of the world soul. He uses the analogy of a tree. The top part is in the non-physical realm. Our embodied souls are like maggots in the rotten base of the tree. But the top part is like a gardener looking after the rest of us... Well it sort of helps. Here is an extended account:

First, then, it is not the case that if my soul and someone else's are one, that the two combinations of body and soul are the same as each other. The same entity in two different bodies will not have the same experiences in each, as is the case with 'the human' in me when I move. The human in me when I am moving, will move, and the human in you when you're not moving, will be at rest. But that doesn't make it strange or puzzling that the same thing is in me and you. So there is no need, when I am perceiving something, for someone else to have exactly the same experience. In

the case of the same body, we do not find the left hand perceiving the experience of the right, but the soul of the whole body. If you had to be conscious of what was happening to me as well, on the grounds that we were one thing from two entities, it would have to be the body that was joined together. If we were joined in this way, each of our souls would experience the same thing.

But we should consider that a whole [conscious being] misses a lot of things, even when they arise in the same body, all the more so the greater the size of the body, as they say about the great whales, for whom the perception of an injury in a part does not reach the whole [conscious being] because the change is minimal. So there is no necessity for a clearly defined perception experienced by one individual to make it through to the universal whole. Of course, that there should be sympathetic experience is not ridiculous or to be discounted, but it does not have to generate a perceptual imprint.

And it is not ridiculous that [the one soul] should have virtue in me and vice in someone else, given that it is not impossible for the same thing to be in motion in one thing and at rest in another.

For neither are we claiming that it is one in such a way as to be entirely without plurality – that characteristic should be granted to a superior nature – but we are claiming that it is one and plural, and that it shares both in the nature that is parcelled out across bodies and in the nature that is indivisible, so once again, it is one. In my case what happens in one part of my body does not overcome the whole, whereas anything that arises in my more essential self has an effect on the part. Similarly, it is more obvious that each individual soul often shares a sympathetic affection with the whole, while it is unclear if what happens to us ever reaches the whole. [V, 9, 2]

But Plotinus does not just stick with Plato – he is also interested in Aristotle's account of the Mind as first mover. And in addition, he has to come up with an account that respects Aristotle's account of the different powers of the plant/animal soul (nutritive, generative, etc.), matching it to Plato's tripartite soul (reason, righteous anger and desire) – as well as the medical understanding of the day, that linked brain, liver and heart (as the seat of reason, passions and righteous anger respectively) via the nervous system. How can the one soul that is essentially bound to the universal soul in the higher realm, and the pure soul that lies beyond fit in with this complex in the lives of individuals? Why are not all our decisions good and pure? Why aren't all our thoughts, thoughts from the beyond?

If you were to arrange the Good at the centre, Mind [=Aristotle's Nous] would be in a motionless circle around it, but after that you would place Soul as a circle in motion, moved by longing. For Mind immediately possesses and encompasses [the Good] but Soul longs for the Beyond. Thus, the sphere of the universe, which possesses the Soul which has that longing, moves according to that natural longing. Insofar as it is a body, its nature is to long for what is within it, thus it enfolds and surrounds itself on all sides, and therefore moves in a circle.

But why aren't the thoughts and reasonings of the soul like that in us as well [instantaneous – immediate – holistic]? But here everything is in time, one thing after another, and so too are our investigations.

Is it because there are many things [in us] doing the governing and in motion, though no single one is supreme? Yes. And also because there is always one thing after another, according to the need of the moment, and not bounded within the self, but always with respect to that one thing after another from without. This is why our plans change in the moment. A need arises, this external event takes place – so we do this. And because there are many [mental faculties] doing the governing, there must be many different mental images acquired from outside, each one new to the rest, interfering with their own movements and activities.

For when the faculty of desire is stirred, its mental image appears, like a perception, one presenting and foreshadowing the experience, which demands chasing down and acquiring the object of desire. But the other part of us is necessarily at a loss, and either goes along with it and seeks out [the experience], or makes some resistance. The righteous anger does the same when it is stirred, summoning us to defend ourselves, and the different needs and affections of the body all fill our thoughts; there is ignorance of what is good, and the soul can find itself with nothing to say as it is pulled in all directions, and the combination of these brings still more deviant thoughts. But does that which is best in us itself assent to these deviant thoughts? In fact the confusion and conflicting belief is due to what is common in us: the correct reasoning of our best part is given up to what is basic in us, so that it is a part of the [chaotic] mixture. It is not feeble in its own terms, but it is like the situation when there is a great conflict in the popular assembly and where the best counsellor fails to prevail, while the less honourable succeed, amidst the clamouring and shouting. So he just sits down quietly, unable to do anything, defeated by the clamour of the dishonourable.

In the worst kind of man, it is the common thing, from all the different voices [that prevails] as in the worst kind of city. In the case of a middling man it's like being in a city where the good can prevail, where it is democratic, but has some self-control. In the better sort of person it is an aristocracy, a way of life that already flees common humanity and gives itself over to better things. In the best of all, the one who separates themselves, the one voice is in charge, and everything else is ordered accordingly. It's as if there is a twofold city, one above, and one belonging to those below but given its order according to what is higher.

And so we have said how it is that in the soul of the universe we have unity and sameness and likeness, but in all the other souls there can be differences, and why.
(IV, 4, 17)

2. From Cosmology to Theology

The discussion of the soul overlaps with Aristotle's discussion of the universal mind or intellect (nous) – the origin of motion in the Metaphysics – and with Plato's response to Parmenides' challenge of the One and the Many. How do you get the manifold world from One origin?

Plotinus works his way backwards. First we have the universal soul in its pure state, then we look beyond that to the first intellect which produces the universal soul, and then we look beyond that to the One who is also The Good and who is beyond being and description. It is this One that is the ultimate goal of the Soul's striving – a striving in which each individual soul participates. Essentially, we all desire deep down to return to the One original goodness from whom we came.

This sort of structure for generating the universe out of the One, the technical language for the first three divine entities (the first 'three hypostases'), the contrast between the essence/being of the world intellect, and the existence beyond being/essence of the One provide some of the background language and assumptions in which classic Christian theology of God, Christ and Spirit was forged. Notice the important distinction between the timeless 'intelligible' world and the timebound physical or visible world.

If you find it hard to make sense of, the problem is not you!

(a) *How do Souls forget where they come from?*

What then is it that made souls forget their father God, even though they are parts from the higher world that wholly belong there, and still they are completely ignorant of him and themselves? This evil first begins for them with audacity, with coming to be, with their first differentiation, and with the desire to be their own masters. (V 1, 1)

(b) *The road back begins by recognising the transcendent nature of Soul itself*

Given that the soul is such a noble and divine entity, you can already trust that with such an entity you can attain God, and with such motivation ascend towards him. Certainly you will not strain far. There are not many things in between. Now consider that which is still more divine than this divine thing, the soul's higher neighbour, after which and from which the soul [exists].

Even though [Soul] is just as our argument has shown it to be, it is only an image of Intellect. Just as the word that is spoken is an image of the word in a soul, so too Soul is the spoken word of the Intellect, its whole activity and the life that it projects into the existence of something other. As in the case of fire, there is the heat that is intrinsic to it, and the heat which it provides. We must think of it not as flowing out from there, but one heat remains where it is and the other is brought into existence.

[Soul] being from Intellect belongs to the intelligible world – its own intellect is manifest in discursive reasoning and it achieves perfection again through the one who is like a father nurturing it, who has brought into being something that is not

yet perfect in comparison to himself. So [Soul's] existence comes from Intellect and reason becomes active within it when Intellect is the object of its gaze. For when Soul gazes on Intellect her whole thinking and activity comes from within and is proper to her. We should call these the only true activations of the soul, those that are intellectual and that are from within. Anything lesser is from outside, things that merely affect the soul (as we have described it). So Intellect renders Soul still more divine, both because it is her father and by being with her. For there is nothing to divide them, other than their difference, Soul as the one that comes after, and the passive recipient, Intellect as the form. The material of the mind is beautiful, since it is intellectual matter and simple. But what Intellect is like is obvious by this very fact that it is still better than Soul, [wonderful] as it is... (V 1, 4)

(c) *Plotinus now does a riff on the Intellect, which combines Aristotle's idea of 'thought thinking itself' and Plato's five categories (being, other, the same, change and rest) from the Sophist to establish that Intellect is Being and Being Intellect. This will be a Big Idea in medieval Islamic and Christian theology. This very dense passage has echoes in Hegel and even in Bertrand Russell.*

Intellect does not have to look for what it thinks, it already possesses it. Its blessedness is not something that it has to acquire. In eternity it is all things. And this is the true eternity, which time imitates as it races about soul, letting some things go and attending to other [in sequence]. For at one time [Soul] is Socrates, at another a horse, one of whatever things there are that happen to exist. Intellect on the other hand is everything. It contains within it all things, at rest in the same place. It simply 'is' and its 'is' is always – never future, because it 'is' there, nor past, for nothing there is past. But all things are at rest, being the very same, as if they love themselves just as they are. Each individual entity is Intellect and Being, and the whole is universal Intellect and universal Being. Intellect by thinking brings into existence that which is, and that which is, by being thought gives Intellect the opportunity to think and to be real.

But there must be a separate cause of the thinking, which is itself a separate cause for what is. So both together must have some further cause. For those two (Being and Thinking) coexist and are inseparable from each other. Though two, they are at the same time one thing together: Intellect, Being, thinker and thought: Intellect with respect to thinking, Being with respect to what is thought. For there could be no thinking unless there were Otherness and Sameness.

So the first things are Intellect, Being, Otherness, Sameness – and we should add Motion and Rest. Motion, if it is to be thinking; Rest so that it can be thinking the same thing. Indeed, take away Otherness, and it becomes one and will be silent. But the objects of thought must be other with respect to each other. But it is the same, since it is one in itself and there is a common unity to all [its elements]. And the distinction is Otherness. As these become many, they create number and quantity.

And the individual property of each of these things, creates quality, from which all other things come, as from first principles. (V 1, 4)

(d) *All of this leaves the \$64000 question. Where does this plural Intellect-cum-Being come from? I leave out of this extract a Pythagorean riff on the generation of number, but this should give you a flavour of the argument. Notice the crossover between intellectual endeavour and spiritual quest in Plotinus' world.*

So this God [the Intellect] who is above soul is manifold. And Soul finds herself existing in close contact with these realities, unless she should choose to depart from them. So when she approaches him and becomes one with him, she lives eternally.

So who then was it that generated Intellect? The one who is simple and who is prior to all this plurality, the one who is the cause for Intellect's existence and for its being manifold, the one who makes number...

...So how does Intellect 'see' and whom does it see? And how did it exist and come into being at all from that Other, so as to be able to see? The Soul now grasps that these things must be so, and [now] longs for [an answer to] this, so widely sought by the wise of old. How is it that out of the One, who is such as we claim one to be, anything [else] came to exist – whether plurality or duality or number. How did it not stay within itself, but [instead] so great a multitude flowed out, which is visible in the things that are, and which we are proposing should be derived from that One?

Let us speak thus, calling on God himself, not with a spoken word, but in our souls stretching ourselves out in prayer before him, for it is in this way that we are enabled to pray alone to the Alone. He is by himself in the interior, as in a temple, remaining at peace beyond all things. The one who contemplates must, as it were, gaze on the images that already stand on the outside, and above all the first image that has appeared, which is revealed in this way:

For everything that is in motion, there must be some thing towards which it moves. Since the One has no such thing, let us presume that it does not move. But if something comes into being after it, necessarily it has come into being, while the One is turned to itself.

Let's rid ourselves of thoughts of coming-to-be in time, since our discussion is about things that are eternally real. By talking about 'coming-to-be, we are labelling a sequence of causation, so we should say that that which comes to be from beyond does so without any change taking place...

So if a second [=Intellect] entity is to exist after [the One], the One must be changeless, neither assenting, nor willing, nor moved in any way.

So how did Intellect come into being, and how are we to think of the One as it remains? It is like a radiance from around the One, while the One stays as it is, like the brightness which as it were races around the sun, being ever generated while the sun remains.

Indeed all beings, as long as they last, necessarily produce from themselves a reality dependent on them in their external environment due to the power present in them, a likeness as it were of the archetypes from which it came. Fire produces heat from the heat within, and snow does not keep its coldness to itself. It's best exemplified by [flowers] with sweet scents. As long as they last, they send forth something of themselves around them, these can be enjoyed as real existents by anyone nearby.

And all creatures when they come to the perfection of maturity generate. And that which is ever perfect will generate what is eternal. But it will generate what is less than itself. What can we say of that which is most perfect? Nothing will come of it except those things that are greatest after itself. The greatest, second to the One, is Intellect. For Intellect sees the One and has need only of the One. But the One has no need of Intellect. (V 1, 5-6)

- (e) *So Intellect/Being derives from the One, and looks to it with longing. This is a fundamental pattern for relationship in Plotinus' universe: the desire for union with the source of one's existence, which literally makes Plotinus' world go round.*

Everything longs for its parent and loves it, and above all when parent and offspring are alone, and when the parent is the highest good, necessarily the offspring is with it, and separated only by its otherness. (V 1, 6)

- (f) *One last piece of the jigsaw. You will naturally enough have been saying to yourselves, this is all very well for generating our intelligible world beyond space and time, but where does the physical world come in? Here we have to go back one Ennead to the discussion on Soul: every Soul needs a body if it is to extend...*

If there were no body, Soul would not extend, since there is no other suitable place for it to be. And if it were going to extend, it will generate a place for itself – i.e. a body. Its rest in the act of resting is as it were intensified, this is like a great light shining, and at the edges of the fire there appears a shadow. Soul saw this, and since that [shadow] now had subsistence [by being seen?], Soul gave it shape. It was not lawful for anything bordering it to be without a shaping word, insofar as this stuff Plato refers to as 'dim in dimness', is receptive in coming to be. Once it [the outer heavens] came into being it was like a beautiful, and richly decorated dwelling, which is not cut off from its builder – though neither does the builder share anything of himself with it. [The architect = Soul] thinks that it is in all respects entirely worthy of his care, it is useful to him by being what it is, and by its beauty (as far as it can participate in being), and can do no harm to the one who presides over it. (IV 3, 9)

(3) *All things are in the One, which is goodness: this text gives us another way of configuring these relationships.*

Consider the universe, notice that since there is no universe before it, it is not in a universe, and is not in a space. What space could there be before the universe existed? The parts of the universe are constructed in reference to the universe and are within it. But Soul is not in the universe. Rather, the universe is in Soul. Body is not the space for the soul, rather Soul is in Intellect, body is in Soul and Intellect is in Another. But there is nothing further beyond this Other for it to be in. Therefore the ultimate is not *in* anything. In this sense, it is nowhere. Where then is everything else? In the ultimate. Therefore it has not withdrawn from the other things, nor is it among the other things, nor is there anything that possesses it, but it possesses all things.

For this reason it is the good of all things, because all things exist and depend on it, each one in a different way (and that's why some things are better than others, because some have more reality than others).

But do not try to see it through other things. Otherwise you would be seeing a trace, not [the Good] itself. But hold in mind what this should be, which is to be grasped in itself, being pure, unmixed with any of the entities that participate in it. For there is nothing else like this, but there must be one such thing. Who could grasp its whole power in one go? If you were able to grasp it at once, how would you be different from it? So do you grasp it partially? But you will give it your whole attention, yet you will not be able to relate the whole; otherwise, you will be Intellect thinking, and even if you encounter it, the One beyond will escape you – or rather you will escape him.

But when you see, see the whole. And when you think of him, whatever you recall of him, think that he is the Good, for he is the power responsible for conscious, intelligent life, from whom comes life and Intellect, and all Being and existence; that he is One – for he is the first and simple, because the principle – for all things are from him. From him comes the first movement (for there is no motion *within* him) and from him comes rest (for he had no need of rest)... For he is the first. Nor is he limited (what could limit him?) but nor is he of infinite size? In what direction should he extend to acquire something, when he needs nothing? He is infinite though, in the sense of infinitely powerful. He could never be otherwise, nor ever fail, for all that does not fail is because of him.

And he is infinite insofar as he is not more than One and has nothing with which anything of his can be compared. Because he is One, he cannot be measured or given a number. Nor is he bounded by anything else, not even by himself – because then he would be twofold. He has no shape, no parts, no form.

So do not look for this with mortal eyes, as our account tells it, nor think that he is to be seen in the way of those who suppose that everything is physically perceptible.

To suppose this is to eliminate that which is most real of all things. What such a person thinks most real are precisely the least real. What is physically large has less reality. The First is principle of existence and has mastery over reality, so that you have to turn your thinking upside down. Otherwise you will find yourself bereft of God... (V 5, 9-11)

(4) *A central theme of Plotinus' thought is the desire of the awakened individual soul to return and be close to the One from whom it ultimately came. So he reflects on the nature of love – doing an exegesis of a famous passage of Plato (from the Symposium) where love is described as a 'daimon' – a divine spirit – rather than a god, because incomplete. And filled with yearning. In Plotinus' exegesis of the 'bringing into existence' of transcendent love, we possibly catch a glimpse of a model for Augustine's influential explanation of the relations in the Christian Trinity. This is another mind-bender argument.*

We should not fail to believe that love is reality, with a nature lesser than the being which made it, but still existing.

For that Soul came into existence as a being out of a fully actual reality that preceded it [sc. Intellect], and out of the Being of all things that exist, and it gazed on [its origin], which was the first Being, and looks on it with great intensity. This was the first object of Soul's gaze and she looked on it as her Good, and delighted in her gaze. And the vision was of a kind that the onlooker could not observe without full attention, thus by the delight and intensity and frequency of attention to it, she generated something worthy of her and of her vision. From the one thus actively concentrating on the object of sight, and from what flows from the vision, the eye is filled as with the sight of an image, and Love then came into being...

(III, 5, 3).