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Introduction

I A COMPANION TO PLOTINUS

This volume, like the others in the series, is intended to serve as an aid to the reading of a major Western philosopher. One service that the editor and contributors would be glad to perform is to change the mind of those who caval at the use of the term “major” or even “philosopher” in reference to Plotinus. Read them and him for yourself and decide. Do not be put off by ignorant detractors or uncritical enthusiasts or by the essentially empty label “Neoplatonist,” which in some circles has become nothing more than a term of abuse.

How best to assist someone who wants to read Plotinus, whose works, regardless of their quality, are intensely difficult, is not easy to determine. First of all, his thought is not simply divisible into the traditional categories of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and so on. And so it would be positively unhelpful to suggest otherwise by offering a tidy package of essays each of which “does” a given subject. Second, Plotinus’s writings can hardly be characterized as systematic, although there is a Plotinian system in the sense that there are basic entities, principles of operation, and an effort at a unified explanation of the world. The system, however, does not for the most part cut up nicely into the written works, such that an introductory exposition of a work would provide one of that system’s building blocks. Third, Plotinus is a philosopher deeply and self-consciously rooted in a long and complex tradition. To try to represent his views without some appreciation of this context could only result in grotesque distortions and it would make this book at best a treacherous “companion.”

The expedient employed here is something of a compromise,
attempting to combine elements of different possible approaches. The first essay should give one an overview of the philosophical context of Plotinus’s writings. The next three together provide an outline of the three “hypostases” or basic entities of Plotinus’s system and their operations. Essays five through nine discuss specific philosophical problems that Plotinus deals with on the basis of his fundamental principles. Essays ten through thirteen concern Plotinus’s treatment of issues that cut across what today would be said to belong to philosophy of mind, ethics, and philosophy of religion. Essay fourteen concerns Plotinus’s remarkable use of the Greek language in his sometimes tortured efforts to convey his philosophical vision. Essays fifteen and sixteen provide the reader with some signposts leading from Plotinus to the increasingly complex history of later Neoplatonism and its encounter with Christianity. Some important topics are only touched on – aesthetics and mysticism, for instance. The airing of controversies regarding interpretation of texts has been largely suppressed, not by editorial fiat, but by the far more effective expedient of space limitations. I am reasonably confident that in generally having ignored deeply contentious issues of interpretation we have not done a disservice to the neophyte. More experienced readers of Plotinian scholarship will after all have some idea of what the issues are and what is the range of scholarly opinion, and they can evaluate what is said here accordingly.

II THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF PLOTINUS

We know rather more about the life of Plotinus that we do about most ancient philosophers. His disciple Porphyry, a distinguished philosopher in his own right, not only undertook an edition of his master’s works – the edition that is the basis for all modern editions – but added to it a biography, The Life of Plotinus. Unfortunately, Plotinus was exceedingly reticent regarding his personal history and so, though we know that he was born in Lycopolis, Egypt in A.D. 205, we cannot be certain that he was a Greek rather than a member of a Hellenized Egyptian family. Porphyry tells us that in his twenty-eighth year Plotinus recognized his vocation as a philosopher. What occupied him until that time is unrecorded. Searching for a teacher of philosophy he came to Alexandria where he
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encountered Ammonius. Little is known about this man, who was perhaps a Christian. In any case, he satisfied Plotinus’s thirst for learning for a decade. In 243 Plotinus decided to study Persian and Indian philosophy and to that end attached himself to an expedition of the Emperor Gordian III to Persia. That expedition was aborted with the assassination of Gordian by his troops. Evidently abandoning his plans to travel east, Plotinus established himself in Rome in 245, where he lived until his death in 270 or 271.

Porphyry tells us that during the first ten years in Rome Plotinus lectured on the philosophy of Ammonius, writing nothing himself. Thereafter, he began to set down his own thoughts in a succession of “treatises” of various lengths and complexity. They are frequently occasional pieces, written in response to questions raised in “class” by Plotinus’s students. For that reason, they are intensely dialectical, that is, they consider the strengths and weaknesses of opposing arguments before coming (usually) to some resolution. These treatises were arranged by Porphyry into six groups of nine each (hence the title *Enneads* from the Greek work for “nine”). This arrangement ignores the actual chronological order in which the works were produced, an order that Porphyry scrupulously records in his *Life*. Although the division into fifty-four treatises is somewhat artificial (some larger works are split up in order to make the groupings even in number), the thematic arrangement is fairly perspicuous. The treatises move from the earthly to the heavenly, from the more concrete to the more abstract. More plainly, they begin with human goods [I], proceed to discussions of various topics in the physical world [II–III], then on to the soul [IV], knowledge and intelligible reality [V], and, finally, the One, the first principle of all [VI].

Plotinus thought of himself simply as a disciple of Plato. He probably would have been deeply disturbed to be characterized as the founder of something called “Neoplatonism.” But perhaps our hindsight regarding Plotinus’s achievement and influence are superior to his own modest assessment of himself. For it is undeniable that Plotinus’s Platonism is not a simple meditation on the master’s work. First of all, between Plato and Plotinus a great deal of philosophical activity occurred, including the work of Aristotle, the Stoics, Epicureans, Skeptics, and various lesser figures usually referred to with the somewhat pejorative sobriquet “Middle Platonists.” Much of this work is critical of Plato. Some of it, like that of the Skeptics belonging
to Plato’s Academy, makes contentious claims to be authentic trans-
mitters of Plato’s true meaning. All of this material, and more (for
example, the commentators on Aristotle), Plotinus knew intimately.
Consequently, it is not surprising that his understanding and expres-
sion of the wisdom of Plato should be filtered through his responses to
the challenges of Plato’s critics. Above all, in responding to Aris-
totle’s criticisms of Plato, Plotinus was moved to say many things
that are arguably Platonic in spirit, though not explicitly found in the
dialogues. One additional complication in this regard should be men-
tioned. For Plotinus, Plato was not just the author of the dialogues,
but also the author of all the letters we possess in the corpus and the
“unwritten doctrines” testified to by Aristotle, among others. For
this reason, Plotinus had a somewhat more capacious conception of
what Plato taught than that of many contemporary scholars.

The treatises in the Enneads make many demands on the reader.
They are packed with allusions to various ancient and contemporary
philosophical positions and quotations from the works of major au-
thors. Their style modulates from the literary to the dialectical to
the intensely analytical. One not infrequently has the impression of
passing from the clear light of expository prose into a dense fog of
allegory and abstraction and then out again. These features can all be
very discouraging. It is hoped that the essays in this book will pro-
vide some support and inspiration for those who have not yet taken
up the challenge of actually reading Plotinus. Perhaps they will also
serve those who have read some of his works before, but without
much profit. In any case, they are intended to provide a fairly com-
plete introduction to the thought of Plotinus, who is probably the
dominant philosopher in the 700-year period between Aristotle and
Augustine of Hippo. If it is true that Plato is not responsible for what
later disciples made of him, neither is Plotinus. Precipitous judg-
ments regarding Plotinus’s philosophy should be avoided.

III FROM PLATO TO PLOTINUS

When Plato died in 347 B.C., the headship of his Academy passed on
to his nephew Speusippus and then, upon his death in 339, to
Xenocrates. These two philosophers were in a sense the first Pla-
tonists. They developed Plato’s thought in ways which are both
understandable and highly contentious. In particular, they empha-
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sized what we would call the “reduction” of Forms to first principles, a One and a Dyad or principle of multiplicity. The more one believes that Plato had an unwritten teaching and that Aristotle basically describes this accurately in his works, the more sympathetic one will be to the claim that the views of Speusippus and Xenocrates are authentic expressions of Platonism. But the doctrine of first principles is not completely absent from the dialogues, at least, we must add, on some interpretations. Obviously, in the first generation after Plato there were already efforts under way to systematize his thought.

Since the tradition of a Platonic Academy was to continue to exist in some form up until A.D. 529, there was ample opportunity for friends and enemies alike to define and redefine Platonism. Among those who found it desirable to be identified with Plato in some way were the Skeptics in the Academy in the third and second centuries B.C.; the syncretic philosopher Antiochus of Ascalon (c.130–c.65 B.C.), who, against the Skeptics, argued for the underlying agreement of Platonic, and certain Aristotelian and Stoic doctrines; and Philo of Alexandria (c.20–15 B.C.–c.45 A.D.), the Jewish philosopher who claimed to find in Plato and the Stoics the appropriate understanding of the revelation of the Old Testament. This list could be expanded considerably. If Plato was not all things to all men, he was at least the beginning of wisdom for many with markedly different agendas.

IV Plotinus’s Platonism

Perhaps the only thing many people know about Plotinus, if they know that name at all, is that he was a Neoplatonist. Usually thinkers are referred to as “neo” with a bit of a sneer. This seems to me rather odd, since for a long time “new” has been practically a synonym for “good” in our culture. In any case, many are surprised to learn that the terms “Neoplatonism” and “Neoplatonist” are actually of eighteenth-century vintage, terms of the historian’s art intended to indicate a perceived development within the history of Platonism. By that token, one might suggest that Speusippus and Xenocrates are Neoplatonists, but for the fact that it is thought necessary to discover some anti-Platonic agent in the interim for the “neos” to react to. There have even been eminent scholars who have spoken only half in jest of Plato’s Neoplatonism.
If “Neoplatonist” does not stand for anything Plotinus would recognize, what then is the difference, if any, between Plotinus’s Platonism and Plato’s? The answer to this question of course depends on our deciding what exactly Plato taught, if anything. Even if we limit ourselves to what F. M. Cornford called “the twin pillars of Platonism,” the theory of Forms and the immortality of the soul, a myriad of delicate exegetical issues come readily to mind. I believe the best way to distinguish Plotinus’s Platonism both from Plato’s and from the versions of Neoplatonism that came after Plotinus is to focus on Plotinus’s responses to the most serious objections raised against Platonism. These objections – principally Aristotelian and Stoic – naturally presume specific interpretations of Plato’s claims. Plotinus’s Platonism is, roughly, the reformulation of these claims in response to these objections. These reformulations rarely correspond with exactness to anything to be found in the dialogues. The crux of the issue is whether they represent unexpressed meanings of Plato’s own words or plausible inferences from them or genuinely new claims that share with Plato’s own some more general commitment – or perhaps an amalgamation of all these.

For example, it is now widely recognized that to speak of the theory of Forms is both inaccurate and unhelpful. So, rather than asking whether Plotinus adheres to the theory of Forms it is better to ask whether he adheres to the principles underlying any theory of Forms. The answer to this question is emphatically and unequivocally yes. Among these principles are: that eternal truth exists; that eternal truths are truths about eternal entities, and that eternal truth is complex. In addition, Plotinus shares with Plato the principle that eternal truths and the reality which grounds them have a paradigmatic status for the sensible world, such that the latter represents or imitates or shares in the former. Finally, and this is only slightly more controversial, he shares with Plato the principle that eternal complexity or multiplicity cannot be ultimate. That is, there must be some first principle of all that is absolutely simple and stands in some sort of causal relation to the complex that accounts for eternal truth. Now it will be granted that philosophers who share these principles can nevertheless concoct theories or hypotheses on the basis of these that differ in subtle and not so subtle ways, all the while recognizing the common ground they share. So it is with Plotinus and Plato.
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A similar point can be made about the immortality of the soul. No one would bother about the soul’s immortality unless that meant the immortality of the person or self. Unquestionably, both Plato and Plotinus share the view that persons are not bodies, that they have a destiny which is nonbodily, and that this destiny is superior to any bodily state. This sets them apart from Aristotelians, Stoics, Epicureans, Christians, and others. But exactly what Plato taught about the incarnated self and that self’s discarnate status is controversial and obscure. Plotinus evidently thought so as well, sometimes ruefully admitting that Plato’s meaning was anything but obvious. So, we can ask, is Plotinian soul–body dualism identical to the Platonic version or a new creation? Plotinus probably thought he was defending claims that Plato meant to be accepted as true or perhaps would have expressed if he had been faced with the sorts of criticisms Plotinus himself squarely addressed. Was he right in thinking this? It is hoped that this volume will provide some help in formulating an answer to this question and ones like it.

We can approach the matter from the other direction and ask what is original in Plotinus. Actually, this does not amount to asking what is non-Platonic in Plotinus, for not only was he a direct inheritor of a tradition of Middle Platonism, but even despite his fundamental opposition to Aristotle and the Stoics, he was prepared to learn from them as well. So, Plotinus was not original in calling the first principle of all “the One” nor in making Forms internal to intellect nor even in distinguishing an empirical from an ideal self. Yet, when one begins to probe beneath the surface similarities between what is said in the Enneads and what can be found in earlier philosophers, it is at once evident that Plotinus is rethinking the grounds for the claims he has inherited. He is not content, for instance, simply to insist on the existence of “the One” or to cite Plato as an authority for its existence or to rely on some traditional slogan like “unity is prior to multiplicity.” Rather, he sets himself the analytical task of displaying the weaknesses of opposing views and seeking out his own unassailable arguments for the One’s existence. It must be admitted that on occasion he produces such a veritable avalanche of arguments [usually against Stoic views] that one might be forgiven for suspecting that quantity is being substituted for the knockdown argument that eludes him. But this is not the norm. More typically, his writing glows with the bold and imaginative use
of reason. This is not the place to try to say to what extent his efforts to reach familiar destinations by new paths actually led him to redescribe the destinations themselves. In any case, like Plotinus himself, we should focus on finding the truth and let originality take care of itself.

V TRANSLATING PLOTINUS

Since this book is aimed in part at the Greekless reader, all the texts of Plotinus quoted are in translation, occasionally by the contributor, but more usually by A. H. Armstrong. The translation by Armstrong in seven volumes (Ennead VI takes up two) in the Loeb series with facing Greek text is certainly the best available in English. A translation by Stephen MacKenna, completed more than sixty-five years ago, has achieved a sort of legendary status in some circles, but despite its unquestionable passion and rough beauty, it is not a very reliable guide to Plotinus's actual words. Armstrong's version gives witness to some of the almost insurmountable challenges facing the translator. Plotinus's thought is constantly straining at the discipline of expository prose composition. Porphyry tells us that, owing to his poor eyesight, Plotinus never revised anything he wrote. To my knowledge no one who has read Plotinus's Greek has ever questioned this astonishing statement. In addition, he was basically conservative in his use of philosophical terminology. This means that generally he prefers to use a familiar word in unfamilial ways rather than coin a new one. So, the translator has constantly to face a desperate choice between being true to the letter or the spirit of the text. No doubt, a case can always be made for the latter over the former, as MacKenna's admirers will be quick to point out. But the truly Greekless reader is then entirely at the mercy of the translator's understanding of the text, and it is no insult to MacKenna to say that when the text is Plotinus's, this is indeed a perilous prospect. Probably one cannot find ten sentences in a row anywhere in the Enneads where there is not at least one fundamentally disputable philological issue, that is, words and phrases the basic meanings of which are in doubt. I say this without intending to strike dread into the heart of anyone thinking about reading Plotinus's works. It is simply a fact one has to face, whether in Greek or with the guide of a distinguished scholar like Armstrong.
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One final note on the method of referring to the Enneads used in this book. For example, V.3.5.1–4 refers to Ennead V, the third treatise, fifth chapter, lines 1–4, as found in the critical edition of Plotinus’s works by Paul Henry and H.-R. Schwzyzer. This is the standard method of citation. The titles of the individual treatises in the Enneads are not Plotinus’s, as Porphyry informs us, but those which over time prevailed among the first readers.
1 Plotinus: The Platonic tradition and the foundation of Neoplatonism

1 PLOTINUS AND HIS PHILOSOPHICAL SOURCES

The problem of the relation between Plotinus and Platonism belongs within the wider context of the connection between Plotinus and his philosophical predecessors.

Plotinus has gathered the legacy of nearly eight centuries of Greek philosophy into a magnificently unified synthesis. The philosophers mentioned explicitly in the Enneads are few enough and include no one outside the Hellenic period. They are Phercydes, Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus. Nevertheless, citations and allusions are far more numerous than direct references, and these, along with biographical material, permit us both to deepen and to broaden significantly our knowledge of Plotinus’s sources by tracing the trajectory of speculation through Plotinus’s predecessors. (For a proper evaluation of the relation between the citations and allusions it is crucial to recall with Szlezák¹ that if Plato is explicitly mentioned more than fifty times and Aristotle a mere four times by Plotinus, the number of allusions to each, as listed in the Index fontium of Henry and Schwyzer,² is far greater, around nine hundred for Plato and five hundred for Aristotle).

Within such an exceptionally rich tradition, we should mention Pythagoreanism in particular among the influences on the philosopher of Lycoopolis, for the conception of principles and numbers, for anthropological doctrines, both ascetic and religious; Parmenides, for the identity of being with thinking, on which Plotinus’s second hypostasis rests; Plato, above all in the mystical, theological, and

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