Introduction

Stephen Gersh

The almost continuous influence through two millennia of European history of Plotinus' philosophical doctrine or of the philosophical movement that he founded, Neoplatonism, is a generally acknowledged fact. The term *philosophia perennis* was introduced by the Italian Augustinian Agostino Steuco (1497–1548) as referring to precisely this tradition and was understood in the same way at least until Leibniz.[1] Acknowledgment of the continuous influence of Plotinus and Neoplatonism has often been qualified on the part of historians of philosophy by restricting that influence to specific regions and epochs – for example, early twelfth-century France or late fifteenth-century Italy – or else by assigning it rather to "non-philosophical" disciplines such as theology or literature. However, the doctrines concerned have actually reappeared in many places and times besides those most generally noted by historians, while any permanently rigid demarcation between the genres of philosophy, theology, and literature is questionable in practice.

But before proceeding further with the main topic of the present undertaking, which is to understand and trace Plotinus' legacy,[2] it may be useful to state some basic facts about the ancient philosopher himself and his re-emergence on the European intellectual scene at the beginning of the modern era. Plotinus (ca. 204/5 to 270 CE) was the author of the *Enneads,* a set of 54 philosophical treatises grouped in six sets of nine (Greek *ennea* = "nine") and prefaced by a biography of the author by Porphyry. It appears from the biography that much of the organization of the Plotinian corpus, including the assignment of titles such as "On Beauty" or "On Providence" to individual treatises, was due to Porphyry, who had been Plotinus' student in Rome, rather than to the master himself. Plotinus' philosophy is quite systematic although, since it is not

---

[1] On Steuco and his ideas about the history of philosophy see Schmitt (1966), 515–524.
[2] For an excellent introduction to the topic of Plotinus' legacy see O'Meara (1992).

constructed gradually through any organized progression within the
54 treatises but is assumed as a whole in the treatment of each individual
topic, the system[3] can only be grasped through repeated readings.

Plotinus' most notable doctrine is that there are three primary sub-
stances, principles, or "hypostases": first, the One or Good, which is
actually unknowable and can therefore only be named or described in a
provisional way; second, Being or Intellect – a combination of Plato's
world of intelligible forms and Aristotle's agent intellect or unmoved
mover, which is atemporal in nature; and third, Soul, which is primarily
twofold in having a higher part approximating to intellect and a lower part
that animates bodies and is temporal. The three principles are linked in a
causal sequence for which various conceptual models are employed,
including especially that of "emanation," i.e. the diffusion of light. Since
Intellect and Soul are both simultaneously unities and multiplicities, they
exist on both macrocosmic and microcosmic levels as the intellect and soul
of the world and as the intellect and soul of an individual human being
respectively. On the microcosmic level, the human being is primarily
twofold in that its higher part, which consists of intellect, reason, and
higher imagination, is essentially independent of body, whereas its lower
part, which consists of lower imagination, sense, and the vegetative

---

[3] This raises the question whether it is legitimate to speak of a "system" in Plotinus' philosophy –
something that has recently been considered by Catana (2013). This author argues that there is not
(as many modern interpreters – especially since Eduard Zeller – have assumed) a "system" of some
kind in Plotinus' thought and that it consists rather of an exploration of philosophical problems.
Despite its illumination of many interesting questions, this conclusion is mistaken. Catana adopts a
very narrow view of the notion of "system" derived mainly from the eighteenth-century historian of
philosophy J. Brucker. He then demonstrates quite correctly 1). that Brucker's notion of a
philosophical system (a set of doctrines deduced from one or a few methodological and/or
ontological principles) could not accurately be applied to Plotinus' thought; and 2). that the
technical term *sustēma* and various cognate and similar terms do not occur in a philosophical
sense in Plotinus. However, the "systematic" character of Plotinian thought really depends on
other criteria that Catana entirely ignores: namely, on analogical, harmonic-mediative, and
numerological structures (which are discovered by imaginative as well as dialectical operations)
derived mainly from the Pythagorean tradition. It must be admitted that the Porphyrian version
of the *Enneads* may have been responsible for shifting the original thought in this direction, but – for
better or worse – this is the only "Plotinus" that we have and the only source of later Plotinian
influence. The analogical, harmonic-mediative, and numerological structures that are prevalent in
this Plotinus and other late ancient authors like Calcidius and Macrobius are the foundation of all
medieval Platonism (which becomes thereby "systematic"), and this mode of thought continues and
is expanded in Ficino, through whom it is transmitted to other Platonists of the early modern period.
From late antiquity onwards this approach was massively reinforced by the Christian dogma of the
Trinity – which is seen by later interpreters and probably was genetically connected with the
Plotinian "systematic" doctrine of the "three primal hypostases" (to use the Porphyrian title of
Ennead V.1) – and especially by the all-pervading structural function of the *Logos-verbum*
transmitted through Origen and Augustine. On the centrality of these doctrines in Ficino see
Gersh (2017), §§1.1–1.2 and 4.1–4.4.

function, is a life emanated into the body. The true "human being" is the higher part. Its ethical goal is to distance itself from the lower and bodily state as much as possible, this process being accomplished by "conversion" of the lower faculties towards the higher, of the microcosm towards the macrocosm, and ultimately of the fully intellectualized and universalized soul to the One or Good itself. The traditional virtues are understood as types of purification.

According to Porphyry's account in the *Life of Plotinus*, the system of his master was derived in the first instance from the writings of Plato, whom Plotinus revered as his true philosophical master – and indeed there are many passages from the dialogues that appear as verbal citations or allusions in the later author. The *Timaeus* is especially prominent and provides most of the groundwork for the Plotinian system with its teachings regarding the divine craftsman, the intelligible paradigm, the world that he fashions from soul and body, the composition of the soul from various quasi-logical and quasi-mathematical elements, the delegation of certain creative tasks to secondary divinities, the providential distribution of individual souls to bodies, and the domestication of the recalcitrant force of matter. Other dialogues are the sources of specific doctrines of central importance: the *Symposium* together with the *Republic* furnishes the notion of a psychological ascent through levels of perception; the *Republic* the notion of a first principle called "the Good" that lies beyond Being itself; the *Parmenides* the notion that this same first principle can be called "the One"; the *Phaedo*, together with the *Phaedrus*, the teachings concerning the human soul's detachment from the body, its immortality, and its transmigration; and the *Sophist* the internal dialectical structure of intellection, and so forth.

According to the account in Porphyry's *Life,* the system of Plotinus was also developed through reflection on many philosophical ideas not originated by Plato himself. Porphyry notes that Aristotle's *Metaphysics* appears in a compressed form in Plotinus' writings, that all available commentaries by writers of either Platonic or Peripatetic persuasion were studied in his school, that Stoic teachings were concealed in Plotinus' treatises, and that in all these cases Plotinus always approached the ideas of others in a manner consistent with his own personal viewpoint. Porphyry does not specifically identify which Aristotelian or Stoic doctrines had the greatest impact on his master's thinking. However, it is easy to see from Plotinus' writings that the Aristotelian technical terminology of substance and accident, of formal, efficient, and final causality, and of potentiality and actuality is everywhere employed in addition to or in place of the

non-technical vocabulary of Plato, although with respect to the use of Aristotelian *doctrine* as such Plotinus adopts a more circumspect approach, in which – for instance – Plato's and Aristotle's views concerning the relation between the One and Intellect or between the categories of the intelligible and sensible worlds are contrasted rather than assimilated. Among the concealed Stoic doctrines to which Porphyry refers, that of the universal *Logos*, which Plotinus identifies with nature or the lower phase of the world-soul, is perhaps the most significant.

The philosophy of Plotinus' *Enneads* seems not only to have influenced the work of actual members of his school such as Porphyry but also to have had an immediate impact on the wider Greek and Latin philosophical milieux, and this fact is of particular relevance to the question of the precise form in which this philosophy was revived at the beginning of the modern era. The most prominent of the later Greek philosophers influenced by Plotinus was undoubtedly Proclus (ca. 412–485 CE). While taking his predecessor's system as a general foundation for his own thought, this writer broke new ground by producing lemmatic commentaries on specific Platonic dialogues, in further subdividing the levels of reality through the imposition of a dialectical triadic structure, and in supplementing the philosophical ascent to the higher realm with a quasi-sacramental *theurgic* one. Among Christian writers, Plotinus influenced Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) directly and pseudo-Dionysius "the Areopagite" (late-fifth to early-sixth century CE) at least indirectly via Proclus. Augustine mentions Plotinus by name in some of his earliest dialogues, refers to him cryptically under the rubric of "books of the Platonists" in the *Confessions*, and quotes specific passages of Plotinus' writings in the *City of God.* Important philosophical doctrines concerning the community of the angelic intellects, the ascent to the divine through successive levels of perception, the strictly active nature of sensation, and the production of natural things through seminal reasons are drawn from Plotinus by Augustine. The unknown theologian who published under the pseudonym of one of Saint Paul's converts the treatises *On the Divine Names, On Mystical Theology,* and *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, in which the theology and angelology of later Platonism are remoulded in Christian form, does not expose his own imposture by citing Plotinus by name. However, the Plotinian influence on such of his doctrines as the necessity of approaching God primarily through negative utterances and the understanding of the creator and the created world through a circular transmission of emanative energy is absolutely unmistakable. Given that some of Proclus' writings had become available in Latin translation before the end

of the thirteenth century, that Augustine was the most revered Western church father, and that "Dionysius" was already accessible in five medieval Latin translations, potential readers of the revived Plotinus himself in the Italian Renaissance had their minds well prepared for such a reading with an abundance of Plotinianism.

Now, it is well known that even the best educated people in western Europe during the Middle Ages were unfamiliar with the Greek language, with the result that such access to Greek philosophy as was possible for them was – at least until the twelfth century and the initial influx of Arabic versions of Aristotle – confined to that provided by a few Latin translations that had survived from the end of antiquity. This scanty remnant consisted of a translation of Plato's *Timaeus* and a version of Aristotle's logical writings, neither of which was actually complete, while if Augustine's reference to Platonic books translated into Latin by Marius Victorinus refers to Plotinus, the scope of these translations, which had been lost by the end of antiquity, is totally unknown.[4] It was therefore, at least for philosophers, a momentous event, which Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) himself describes, when he informs us that Cosimo de' Medici, the ruler of Florence who had earlier been profoundly impressed by the expositions of Plato's thought by the eminent Byzantine philosopher Gemistos Plethon at the Council of Ferrara-Florence, hired the youthful Ficino in 1463 to translate the Greek texts of the Hermetic corpus and of Plato that he had recently acquired.[5] According to the same report, Cosimo did not add a translation of Plotinus' *Enneads*, which he also very much desired, to the other assignments, wishing not to overburden the young scholar. The impulse to take up the latter project in earnest only came twenty-one years later in 1484 from another source, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who had arrived unexpectedly at Ficino's house in Florence in order to inquire about the progress of the Plato translation.[6]

As far as the chronology is known, Ficino began the work of translating Plotinus in 1463 on the basis of the manuscript supplied by Cosimo (the *Laurentianus 87.3*) and another one (the *Parisinus graecus 1816*) copied

[4] For example, we do not know whether all the *Enneads* or only some were translated, and whether the translations were accompanied by commentaries of any kind. For details regarding the Victorinus question see O'Meara (1992), 56 and 67.

[5] See the *prooemium* to the translation and commentary on Plotinus (Ficino [1576], 2: 1537–1538). On the historical circumstances surrounding the appearance of Plotinus in Italy see Garin (1974).

[6] An early draft of Ficino's commentary on Plotinus (dated 1484) exists in the MS Florence, Conventi Soppressi E 1. 2562. This MS has annotations that can be linked with Giovanni Pico. See Wolters (1986).

from it, both these extant manuscripts containing annotations in his hand. Although there is abundant evidence of Ficino's thorough mastery of Plotinus' doctrine in the original works that he published during the 1470s and 1480s, such as the *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love* and the *Platonic Theology,* the actual writing of a formal commentary on the *Enneads* as a complement to the translation was largely carried out during his later years. The narrative of its composition is somewhat convoluted.[7] Working in the order of the Porphyrian edition, Ficino had completed the commentary up to the first two treatises of the *Third Ennead* by 1487. Then a two-year gap intervened, in which he worked instead on translations of various works by other Neoplatonists such as Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus, and Synesius.[8] After this interruption, he returned to Plotinus but decided shortly thereafter to write only shorter commentaries in order to prevent the whole project from becoming too massive and too repetitive.[9] The entire commentary reached its final form and was presented together with the translation in a luxurious manuscript to its dedicatee, Lorenzo de' Medici, in the spring of 1490 (*Biblioteca Laurenziana, Plutei 82.10* and *82.11*). The printed edition appeared in May 1492.

In the *prooemium* to the translation-commentary, Ficino explains that the philosophy of Plotinus uniquely furthers – as an instrument of divine providence – a project of bringing philosophers who have strayed doctrinally back towards the true religion. In ancient times, there did arise simultaneously a certain "pious philosophy" (*pia philosophia*) – i.e. a fusion of religion and philosophy – among the Persians under the guidance of Zoroaster and among the Egyptians under that of Hermes "Trismegistus." Its teaching was brought from its infancy to adulthood among the Thracians under the tutelage of Orpheus and Aglaophemus, among the Greeks and Italians under that of Pythagoras, and finally among the Athenians under that of "divine Plato" (*divus Plato*). However, the custom of the ancient theologians was to express the divine truths as "mysteries" (*mysteria*) veiled either with mathematical numbers and figures or else with poetic fictions, and Plotinus' unique contribution to the history of this pious philosophy was that he for the first time stripped away the veils and penetrated the mysteries by dialectical means.[10]

---

[7] The narrative was constructed on the basis of references in Ficino's letters by Kristeller (1937), vol. I, cxxvi–cxxviii.
[8] On the interruption see Vanhaelen (2010).   [9] See Ficino, *In Ennead.* IV. 3. 33 (Gersh [2018]).
[10] On the introductory material to the Plotinus commentary see Saffrey (1996).

This account lays down certain premises regarding Plotinus' philosophy that will serve as points of orientation for later readers. Most importantly, Ficino stresses the novelty represented by Plotinus' thought in comparison with all earlier Greek philosophy in providing an adequate explanation – here characterized as the dialectical penetration of certain "mysteries" – of Plato's own doctrine. This adequate explanation corresponds specifically to Plotinus' conversion of mythical or metaphorical material in Plato into metaphysical doctrine articulated in strict technical language. For example, the analogy of the sun in the *Republic* turns into a philosophically argued account of the Good or One's causality of the intelligible and sensible worlds, and the image of the winged charioteer in the *Phaedrus* is absorbed into a precise conceptual analysis of the soul's structure. The Plotinian reading of Plato also corresponds more generally to the systematization of the thought believed to be lying behind the notoriously unsystematic presentations made through the dramatic form of the dialogues. At any rate, the emphasis upon the novelty of Plotinus' approach is sufficient justification for calling the latter not just "Platonism" but "*Neo*-Platonism" and, although Ficino does not himself apply this technical term to his own concept, early followers such as Francesco Giorgi (1466–1540), who introduces the term *platonici novitiores* in this context, had clearly received the message.[11] Indeed, it is quite wrong to argue in a manner that has recently become popular that the term "Neo-Platonism" and the notion that it represents are the inventions of eighteenth-century critics.

Several further aspects of Ficino's interpretation of Plotinus as an innovative figure in the Greek philosophical tradition should also be noted. Thus, the Plotinian system of thought has something that one might term a hermeneutic-historical aspect in that the explanation of Plato's doctrine is associated with an explanation of that of each of his predecessors in the tradition of pious philosophy – Pythagoras, Orpheus, Hermes, and Zoroaster – and also has indissolubly linked with this a hermeneutic-geographical aspect in that these same ancient sages are treated as the leaders of different national traditions of philosophy: Pythagoras of the Italian-Greek, Orpheus of the Thracian, Hermes of the

---

[11] Franciscus Georgius Venetus, *De harmonia mundi totius* II. 1 (Campanini [2010],1088). Being unaware of the Georgi reference, Tigerstedt (1974, nn. 342–343 and 490) concluded that Theophilus Gale, who in his *The Court of the Gentiles,* Oxford 1669–70 refers to the "New Platonicks," was the first writer to use the term *Neoplatonism* (or a synonym), although it becomes common only in German writers (e.g. Tiedemann) about a century later. One could add that Hegel, influenced by the more recent historians like Tiedemann and Brucker, speaks of the *Neu-Platoniker* with due recognition of Plotinus' novelty as the founder of this tendency.

Egyptian, and Zoroaster of the Persian. The theory is derived from ancient sources such as Diogenes Laërtius, who spoke of the *magi* beginning with Zoroaster and of Aristotle's report that the *magi* were more ancient than the Egyptians,[12] Augustine, who described Hermes Trismegistus as a philosopher who preceded the wise men of Greece but was subsequent to Moses,[13] and Proclus, who spoke of Orpheus as the founder of all Greek theology who passed on his *mystagogic* knowledge to Aglaophemus, Pythagoras, and Plato.[14] For Ficino, there are definite intertextual consequences in that the various leading figures are associated with bodies of pseudepigraphic philosophico-religious literature – for example, the Orphic Hymns, the Hermetic Corpus, and the *Chaldaean Oracles* – that were mostly produced in the *post*-Plotinian milieu of late antiquity albeit held to be *pre*-Plotinian by the Florentine himself.[15]

It is not easy to trace something as subtle and variegated as the influence of Plotinus in the early modern and modern periods, and the present undertaking should be seen as representing merely the first crucial steps in such a project.[16] It will therefore be useful to provide ourselves with a few useful categorizations or "signposts." An initial overview of the empirical evidence suggests that we should distinguish at least the following: A). a Ficinian trajectory of Plotinus' reception, and B). a post-Ficinian trajectory, and within A). 1. a direct trajectory of Plotinus' reception, 2. an indirect trajectory, and 3. interactions between the direct and indirect trajectories. These should be called "trajectories" rather than "phases" because, although they are indeed time-sensitive phenomena, they often overlap or run concurrently in different national traditions or in the works of different authors.

---

[12] See Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum* I, prol. 2 and 8. Plato also talks about Zoroaster as a religious teacher at *Alcibiades I,* 122a.

[13] See Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* XVIII. 39. Ficino cites this passage in the *argumentum* of his translation of the *Pimander*.

[14] See Proclus, *Theologia Platonica* I. 5, 25–26 (Saffrey and Westerink, 1968–1997). Cf. Iamblichus, *De Vita Pythagorica* 28. 151.

[15] On Ficino and post-Plotinian thought see Celenza (2002).

[16] In the present undertaking, it has not been possible to study in detail two important areas of Plotinian influence: 1). a further "trajectory" represented by the pseudonymic Arabic work *Theology of Aristotle* – published in a Latin translation in 1519 – which includes paraphrases of *Enneads* IV–VI and some chapter headings. The work influenced several generations of Aristotelian commentators and also the Platonist Francesco Patrizi da Cherso; and 2). the study of Plotinus by an entire roster of Italian intellectuals during the sixteenth century that includes such luminaries as Giles of Viterbo, Francesco Giorgi, and Giordano Bruno. Their studies would have been based entirely on Ficino before the publication of the *Enneads* in the original Greek in 1580. However, for some remarks about the *Theology of Aristotle* see the essay by Corrigan in the present volume.

The direct Ficinian trajectory may be said to consist of the reading of Plotinus exclusively via Ficino's translation, and probably also through his commentary attached to the translation (1492 onwards), together with the continuation of the same habits of mind even after the publication of the Greek text (in 1580).[17] This trajectory was characterized by general acceptance of Ficino's hermeneutical and methodological assumptions regarding Plotinus' status as the uniquely authoritative exponent of Plato's doctrine and of the philosophical-religious tradition culminating in that doctrine. It remained strong in Italy and elsewhere during the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth, although it had broken down – primarily through the desire to find a kind of *Ur*-Plato somewhat analogous to the ambition of finding an original Christianity or scripture – by the last quarter of the seventeenth century. The beginnings of the attempt to separate Plato from Plotinus and Neoplatonism were associated first with the wider dissemination of Plato's own texts in Greek and the possibility of drawing conclusions from the stylistic variety in the dialogues, and second with increased interest in the non-dogmatic tradition of Platonism, i.e. the *New Academy* described by Cicero. Writers such as Vives and Melanchthon could be cited as examples of the former tendency,[18] with Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola and some of the Ramists as instances of the latter.[19] Moreover, once a plausible case has been made for separating Plato from Plotinus and Neoplatonism, it became possible to reclassify the latter not as "Platonists" at all but as "eclectics" – with all the pejorative associations of the latter term.[20] This approach seems to have been initiated in Vossius' *De philosophorum sectis* of 1657,[21] but becomes most common in German historians of the eighteenth century such as Johann Jakob Brucker (1696–1770)[22] and Dietrich Tiedemann (1748–1803).[23] The attempt to downgrade Plotinus and Neoplatonism on

---

[17] I am indebted to Tigerstedt's excellent study (Tigerstedt, 1974) for much of the detail in the next two paragraphs, although my classification and conclusions are different from his.

[18] See Tigerstedt (1974), 31–35.   [19] See Tigerstedt (1974), 36–38.

[20] On this nomenclature and the problems attached to it see Dillon and Long (1988), Introduction, 1–5.

[21] See Tigerstedt (1974) 51–52.

[22] On Brucker see Tigerstedt (1974), 57–61. Jacob Brucker's *Historia critica philosophiae a mundi incunabulis ad nostram usque aetatem deducta* of 1742–1744 presents, according to Tigerstedt (1974, p. 61) a "rupture with a millennial tradition," i.e. of Ficinian Neoplatonism, that is "radical and final." A notable feature of Brucker's approach is a kind of historical racism, since a major component of Ficino's eclecticism is said to be its "orientalism" as opposed to the pure Hellenism of the genuine Plato that Brucker admires. On orientalism see below.

[23] On Tiedemann see Tigerstedt (1974), 63–64. On the eighteenth-century approach to Plotinus see also Catana (2013).

grounds of eclecticism is attacked by Hegel – who frequently cites
the aforementioned German historians by name in his *Lectures on the
History of Philosophy* – although Hegel *does* distinguish Plato from
Neoplatonism.[24]

The indirect Ficinian trajectory consists first of the dissemination of
authoritative ancient Christian works that embodied doctrines either
directly or indirectly influenced by Plotinus, and especially the writings
attributed to "Dionysius the Areopagite" and those of Augustine. The
identification of the Dionysian writings as products of the apostolic period
had enabled Ficino as an exegete to explain not only certain striking
doctrinal agreements between them and Plotinus as resulting from the
dependence of the latter upon the former, but even to argue that Plotinus
was a uniquely authoritative interpreter of Plato because he had somehow
imbibed the Christian wisdom of Dionysius.[25] However, this identifica-
tion had already been challenged by Lorenzo Valla in his *In Novum
Testamentum Annotationes* before 1457, when among other arguments of
a more philological nature he noted the absence of references to these
works in any of those by the Church Fathers, and these conclusions were
subsequently confirmed by William Grocyn and by Erasmus, who pub-
lished Valla's work in 1505.[26] The second component in the indirect
Ficinian trajectory consists of the dissemination of ancient (or presumed
ancient) authoritative works whose content can be assimilated to that of
the main Plotinian tradition and can to varying degrees be held to have a
"Christian" content. Here, Ficino's notion of a continuity of doctrine
within a single tradition is supplemented by Giovanni Pico della
Mirandola's notion of a concordance of doctrine between multiple
traditions.[27] Of particular importance within this concordance are the
doctrines of Hermes Trismegistus – which Ficino had already identified
as one of the ancient sources of his *pia philosophia* – and those of the Jewish
cabala. In a number of publications, Frances Yates underlined the import-
ance of the Hermetic-Cabalistic synthesis within the broader context
of Neoplatonism and applied the name "occult philosophy" to this

[24] See Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* II, 400–403 (Haldane and Simson, 1892–1896).
[25] See Ficino, *De Christiana Religione,* c. 11 (Ficino [1576],1: 17).
[26] See Tigerstedt (1974, pp. 22–23) on Valla and pp. 30–31 on Erasmus. Tigerstedt supplies
important further details regarding the explosion of the Dionysian myth but overestimates its
effect on the Plotinian-Ficinian exegetical model itself. As we shall see below, this model continues
to influence substantially the Cambridge Platonists and others even without its Dionysian
component.
[27] On the similarities and contrasts between the approaches of Ficino and Giovanni Pico to
philosophical syncretism see Schmitt (1966), 511–512.