

Introduction

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I A NEW COMPANION TO PLOTINUS

The present volume is the ‘successor’ to *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus* (1996). Over the last twenty-five years, there has been an enormous increase in published work on Plotinus and on late ancient Platonism generally. In addition, many scholars who had not even begun their careers twenty-five years ago are now working intensely in this area. This fact is reflected in the list of authors of this volume, none of whom appeared in the previous work and most of whom had not yet even begun their careers when the original *Companion* appeared.¹

The New Cambridge Companion to Plotinus seeks to cover the fundamental philosophical themes in Plotinus taking into account the most recent historical and philological scholarship. The headings under which all the chapters are placed are: Part I Historical Context; Part II Metaphysics and Epistemology; Part III Psychology; Part IV Natural Philosophy; Part V Ethics. Those who are new to Plotinus are asked to keep in mind that these divisions are fairly artificial. Plotinus has a perspicuous systematic framework within which he treats particular philosophical issues. Thus, all or part of that framework is constantly adduced in the course of his discussions. For example, questions concerning free will or moral responsibility are variously treated throughout the corpus. With a few minor exceptions, almost no topic dealt with by Plotinus is completely contained in one treatise or one part of one treatise. So, his treatment of a topic in psychology has discussions that either presuppose or explicitly argue for claims that can be called metaphysical, epistemological, and so on.

The *New Companion* also includes topics that were not so well explored a generation ago in part owing to the inaccessibility of the

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relevant texts. For example, Plotinus wrote an important treatise attacking Gnosticism. The task of editing and translating the Gnostic treatises is still ongoing and the current work is reflected in this volume. Several other topics, which were reluctantly omitted from the earlier volume, are covered here, including Plotinus' treatment of Platonic philosophy of mathematics, his arguments against Aristotle's theory of categories, providence and fate, and consciousness and the self.

It is hoped that this 'successor' is not taken to be a replacement for its earlier incarnation. Each of those essays can be read with profit and many of them are still regularly cited in the literature. The editors of the present work would be glad to have readers take up the challenge of comparing some of the earlier essays with the current ones. At the very least, one will discover some gratifying convergences and some intriguing divergences, partially due no doubt to the cast of discussions among scholars over the last generation.

2 THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF PLOTINUS

We know rather more about the life of Plotinus than we do about the lives of most ancient philosophers.² 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 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 CE 205, we cannot be certain that he was 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 encountered a somewhat mysterious figure named Ammonius. Little is known about this man, who was perhaps a Christian. In any case, he satisfied Plotinus' 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’ 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 word for the number ‘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 evident. The treatises move from the earthly to the heavenly, from the more concrete to the more abstract. More plainly, they begin with human goods (*Ennead* 1), proceed to discussions of various topics in the physical world (*Enneads* 2 and 3), then on to the soul (*Ennead* 4), knowledge and intelligible reality (*Ennead* 5), and, finally, the One, the first principle of all (*Ennead* 6).

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’ achievement and influence is superior to his own modest assessment of himself. For it is undeniable that Plotinus’ 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, Sceptics, 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 Sceptics belonging to Plato’s Academy, makes contentious claims to be an authentic transmitter of Plato’s true meaning. All of this material, and more (for example, the commentaries on Aristotle), Plotinus knew intimately. Consequently, it is not surprising that his understanding and exposition of the wisdom of Plato should be filtered through his responses to the challenges of Plato’s critics. Above all, in responding to Aristotle’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 mentioned. For Plotinus, Plato was not just the author of the dialogues, but also the author of a number of the letters attributed to Plato that 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 those 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 authors. 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 provide 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 complete 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

late disciples made of him, neither is Plotinus. Precipitous judgments regarding Plotinus' philosophy should be avoided.

3 PLOTINUS' PHILOSOPHICAL WORLD

Let us imagine a Roman citizen, young or old, man or woman, attending for the first time one of Plotinus' 'seminars' in the year 260. Plotinus was by then well established in Rome and had just begun to put into writing the version of Platonism that he had inherited from Ammonius and from his own extensive readings of Plato along with the deliverances of some 600 years of philosophical work. This unnamed Roman citizen attending these seminars would no doubt have heard the reading of one or another Platonic or Peripatetic commentary. Perhaps the reading from one of the commentaries would have led to discussion of some Stoic doctrine mentioned therein. Porphyry in his *Life* tells us that the *Enneads* are packed with Stoic and Peripatetic doctrines, meaning not that Plotinus was necessarily advancing these (although he agreed with his predecessors on many fundamental claims), but that by the mid-third century the defense of the Platonic world view typically entailed engagement with Platonism's main opponents. So, a passage would be read, questions would be raised, and, finally, Plotinus would give what he understood to be the correct Platonic response. We have a good idea that this is more or less how the sessions went since the *Enneads* themselves reflect such a process of give and take, ending with a proposed resolution. These are in some respects not unlike Scholastic *quodlibets*. So, the writings are basically occasional essays, meaning that they reflect Plotinus' thinking about countless philosophical issues, both large and small, as these were brought up by members of his immensely diverse audience.

By the middle of the third century, it would be fair to say that Platonism had triumphed in the Hellenic intellectual world. By this I mean that, although there were certainly many who continued to desire to lead a life inspired by Stoicism and Epicureanism – and to a much lesser extent Peripateticism and Skepticism – there were no

prominent proponents of these schools still teaching or writing. Nevertheless, the writings of the great Stoic and Peripatetic philosophers threw up multiple challenges to someone like Plotinus, who wanted to articulate and defend the version of Platonism he thought was eminently defensible and also the foundation of a life informed by philosophy. It should be added that the idea of ‘versions’ of Platonism needs to be taken with the utmost seriousness. Beginning in the Old Academy itself, Plato’s philosophy was variously understood even by his closest associates. Over the course of the intervening 600 years or so, and no doubt as a result of encounters with anti-Platonists of various kinds, ‘Platonisms’ arose, some bearing the marks of one or another strategic concession to Stoicism or to Peripateticism, especially as a result of Aristotle’s criticisms of Plato. Indeed, Porphyry notes in his *Life* that a number of contemporaries of Plotinus, calling themselves ‘Platonists’, were more than willing to dissent from Plotinus’ own systematic accounts. It should be added that disagreement or dissent from Plotinus continued steadily among the Platonists who succeeded him, even though his understanding of Plato was always the bedrock for further philosophical reflection.

Let us consider first the central philosophical challenge to Platonism from the Stoics. The Stoics inherited from the Pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle a budget of philosophical problems. These concerned, among other issues, the unity, if any, that the cosmos possessed, the nature of human knowledge, the nature of action, human freedom, and moral responsibility, the place of divinity in the universe, the nature of a political community, and so on. A fundamental principle of Stoicism was that all these problems had to be solved within a materialistic framework. That is, for the Stoics, only bodies – three-dimensional solids – and their properties can be appealed to as causes for any phenomena that were to be explained. Thus, for example, consciousness must be a state or condition of a body, and the apparent phenomenon of conscious activity was in reality only that of bodies in motion. The Stoics were not the only materialists in antiquity; Atomists, including the Epicureans, were

also committed to a form of materialism. But the Stoics had provided the most sophisticated answers to the philosophical problems embedded in the tradition among all those who espoused materialism. Hence, it is hardly surprising that Plotinus turns again and again to challenge the cogency of the Stoic account of the universe and especially the place of human beings in it. As will be evident in many of the papers in this volume, Plotinus' response to the Stoic challenge will always appeal ultimately to the immaterial, intelligible world for the explanations of phenomena here below. It is a fundamental feature of Plotinus' systematic expression of Platonism that, whether the problem be metaphysical, epistemological, psychological, ethical, political, or even logical, the identical intelligible architecture of the universe will be adduced on behalf of a solution.

Self-declared Platonists were not the only opponents of Stoic materialism. One of the commentators most frequently cited by Plotinus was the Peripatetic Alexander of Aphrodisias, himself an opponent of Stoic materialism, especially in regard to the human mind and to the divine intellect. Plotinus will often appeal to Alexander (though never by name) and especially to Aristotle himself in order to argue for the immateriality of intellect and for the causal powers of the divine and the intelligible world generally. But, according to Plotinus, Peripatetics and even many soi-disant Platonists did not understand Plato correctly in their own articulation of the intelligible world. Aristotle's first principle of all, the unmoved mover, is an intellect or, more correctly, intellection itself. Many Platonists, including some of the so-called Middle Platonists, saw in the unmoved mover a version, more or less inadequate, of Plato's demiurge, as described in the *Timaeus*. Plotinus concurred in conflating these. But he argues, again and again, against those who follow Aristotle and misinterpret Plato in supposing that the demiurge or unmoved mover could in fact be the absolutely first principle of all. For Plotinus, the decisive argument is that intellect or intellection must have an object of intellection, an object that is at least minimally distinct from the thinking of it. But the first principle of all must

be absolutely simple, in which case it follows that no intellect or activity of intellection can be the first principle of all. So, although Intellect will frequently be adduced in Plotinus' explanatory framework, its causal scope is clearly defined and inferior or subordinate to the unlimited causal scope of the first principle. Whether we call this, as Plato explicitly does, the Idea of the Good, or whether we call it the One, as Aristotle reports that Plato did in his unwritten teachings, the Good or One is the ultimate *explanans* for Plotinus, encompassing Intellect and Soul in the universal framework of causality.

Many scholars today would resist the idea that Plato was a systematic thinker or that Platonism is a system. Plotinus himself was well aware of the literary integrity of each dialogue. But this did not prevent him from (a) seeing a common philosophical position behind all of the dialogues and (b) availing himself of the testimony of Aristotle, and the indirect written and oral tradition, to see the systematic framework of that position. In this regard, it is perhaps helpful to compare Plotinus' systematic representation of Platonism with Thomas Aquinas' systematic representation of Christian revelation. It should perhaps be added that the gap between, say, the Gospel narratives and the *Summa Theologiae* is somewhat greater than is the gap between even Plato's least technical dialogues and the systematic representation of Platonism in the *Enneads*. For Plato, usually but not always in the person of Socrates, presents *arguments* against materialism as well as other misguided philosophical positions of his predecessors. Plotinus would certainly maintain that the hypostases One, Intellect, and Soul are not alien accretions to the body of Platonism, but rather in fact perspicuous expressions of principles repeatedly used by Plato to answer the questions we find raised in the dialogues.

It should be added that Plotinus is himself not always certain that he has understood Plato correctly. At one point he says – somewhat ruefully, one imagines – that Plato sometimes speaks 'enigmatically' about the soul. In such cases, Plotinus will go back to first principles, as it were, and deduce the answer to the question he is

facing that the Platonic system seems to demand. On other occasions, he will allow that these principles can be underdetermining for a particular answer and that the student is free to embrace one or another answer as seems appropriate. And in other cases, for example, when dealing with technical issues that arose in Plotinus' own time, Plotinus will for his response appeal to general logical principles that are not particularly Platonic. Thus, there is nothing especially Platonic in his refutation of the explanatory power of astrology or in his refutation of the Stoic doctrine that two bodies can be in the same place at the same time. In short, the Platonic system upon which Plotinus relies is somewhat flexible in its application to evolving contemporary philosophical issues.

4 READING PLOTINUS

The present *Companion* is not intended as a substitute for reading Plotinus. The essays in this volume regularly omit details, pass over some obscurities, and more or less remain silent regarding the accuracy of Plotinus' interpretations of his predecessors, especially, of course, Plato. The *Companion* is in the first instance intended to equip the reader with some of the tools necessary for appreciating the details, penetrating the obscurities, and making his or her own assessment of Plotinus' hermeneutical acumen. Porphyry in his *Life* warns the reader that Plotinus, owing to his poor eyesight, never revised anything he wrote, rather setting down in one evidently extraordinary authorial session his vision of the Platonic system as it was to be applied to the solution to the problems that his 'class' had just been wrestling with. Plotinus probably knew the dialogues of Plato by heart as well as much else. He never wrote anything so far as we know until he was about fifty years old. It is hoped that this *Companion* will ease and enrich the reading of the *Enneads* by situating them within the vast and complex web of philosophical discourse that Plotinus had at his disposal. Plotinus was as much shaped by the history of philosophy as he knew it as much later Hegel was to be.

It is also hoped that the *Companion* will convey some of the excitement that Plotinus, his colleagues, and students must have felt as they were doing philosophy. It should not be forgotten that Plotinus' seminars are only in a rather extended sense thought of accurately as academic. There was in his world no university setting and no degree requirements. The Platonism on offer by Plotinus was always assumed by him and his audience to be a way of life or *bios*. Unlike the Stoic or Epicurean way of life, still live options in Rome in the third century, Platonism alone had numerous contemporary theoretical exponents. Platonism seemed to many to be thoroughly elitist, though judging from the diverse 'converts' mentioned by Porphyry this was not absolutely disqualifying. We do see in a couple of places in the *Enneads* the shadow of an impeding mighty competitor to the elitist Platonic way of life, namely, Christianity. In fact, beginning probably with Porphyry himself, Christianity seemed clearly to be *the* competitor, not at first intellectually – Porphyry disdained the crudeness of early Christian thinkers and defenders – but politically inasmuch as the growing Christian presence in the Roman world found it increasingly inconvenient to allow the competition of non-believers. The conflict between Platonism and Christianity is only just on the horizon of the subject of this *Companion*. But that conflict resonates among all the successors to Plotinus over the next 300 years or so. Although so-called Christian Platonism has a rich and complex history, it would perhaps be more accurate to speak of Platonizing Christianity, at least from the fourth century onward.

5 A NOTE ON TEXTUAL CITATIONS

There is a standard way of referring to a passage in the *Enneads*. For example, 5.1.8.5–6 refers to the fifth *Ennead*, first treatise, eighth chapter, lines five to six. Sometimes, the reader will find: 5.1. [10], 8.5–6, meaning that 5.1 is the tenth treatise according to the chronological ordering of Porphyry.³ The line numbers cited almost always refer to the standard Greek edition of the *Enneads*, the so-called *editio*

minor of the *Enneads* by Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolph Schwyzer, three volumes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964, 1977, 1983). Because English translations do not always match the number of words in Greek, sometimes the line numbering in an English translation is a bit off from that of the Greek text. Thus, 5.1.8.5–6 is in the Greek text 5.1.8.4–5.

NOTES

- 1 Of particular note for those who are beginning to get interested in Plotinus is the recent new translation of the complete works of Plotinus, *Plotinus: The Enneads* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). The work is edited by Lloyd P. Gerson and includes translations by George Boys-Stones, John M. Dillon, Lloyd P. Gerson, R. A. H. King, Andrew Smith, and James Wilberding. Also of note is the ongoing series of translations and commentaries of individual treatises, now up to 15. The series is published by Parmenides Press and is edited by John M. Dillon and Andrew Smith, 2013 —. There is also a comprehensive and recent (last updated in 2018) online bibliography of writings on Plotinus curated by Richard Dufour (<http://rdufour.free.fr/BibPlotin/anglais/Biblio.html>).
- 2 This section is a reproduction of the analogous section in the introduction to the original *Companion*.
- 3 In some languages other than English, particularly in French, the chronological number comes first and the *Ennead* number and treatise number are placed in parentheses. Thus: 10 (5.1), 8.5–6.