

Does the mystic care? The ethical theory of Plotinus

The first thing that should be made clear is that Plotinus, although he claimed to be simply a follower of Plato, differed greatly from him in one major respect; Plotinus was a *mystic*. Not only did he believe in a metaphysical construct which revealed another level of reality, as for example with Plato's Forms, he also believed that the philosopher was actually capable of making an ascent to the highest point in this other world. In fact Porphyry, his biographer, claims that Plotinus actually made such an ascent on four occasions: "for his end and goal was to be united to, to approach the God who is over all things. Four times while I was with him he attained that goal" (*Vita Plotini* 23. 15ff.).

We can hear from Plotinus himself exactly what such an ascent was like: "Often I have woken up out of the body to my self and have entered into myself, going out from all other things; I have seen a beauty wonderfully great and felt assurance that then most of all I belonged to the better part; I have actually lived the best life and come to identity with the divine; and set firm in it I have come to that supreme actuality, setting myself above all else in the realm of Intellect. Then after that rest in the divine, when I have come down from Intellect to discursive reasoning, I am puzzled how I ever came down, and how my soul has come to be in the body....." *Ennead* IV. 8 [6] 1.1ff

You can see the basic Platonic idea of our souls belonging to a higher world but for some reason becoming ensnared in the material sphere. Why we come down is another matter that could be debated. But this metaphysical structure contains all the essentials. We have the freedom to leave the sensible world if we choose. Thus the duty of the philosopher is, as it was for Plato, to break out of that tomb that is the body and regain our proper metaphysical level. This is the stated objective of the Plotinian sage.

Since God One is within us, our efforts should tend towards an internal spiritual journey. The body, if not evil, is simply something that has attached itself to our soul, and so should be ignored as much as possible. It cannot be ignored completely: "He must give to this bodily life as much as it needs and he can, but he is himself other than it and free to abandon it..." (*Ennead* I.4[46]16.17-18).

It is clear that the focus must be on the ascent to the Divine. This is in keeping with the Greek philosophical tradition to which Plotinus belonged. For Plato the objective was “to become like God” (*Theaetetus* 176b). Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* begins book one by asking what is it that everyone strives after. The answer he arrives at is *eudaimonia*. This is not simply happiness but rather the highest and best possible life for a human being. This consists in the contemplation of God: “but we ought so far as in us lies, to put on immortality, and to do all that we can to live in conformity with the highest that is in us...” (EN 1177b31ff).

The philosophy of the *Enneads* is in general agreement with these views. But how exactly do we accomplish this? How do we break out of the body? Here Plotinus certainly goes beyond Plato. Plato advised the philosopher to pay as little attention to the body as possible while imprisoned in it and to be unconcerned at having to abandon it. In the *Enneads* the instructions are clear. We must, Plotinus tells us, strive to “bring back the god in us to the Divine in the All”.¹ We are the souls who have chosen to desert the higher levels of reality and live in the world of images that is this sense world. We are whatever conscious level we choose to operate on. We can choose to be beguiled by the images that come from the sense world thinking them to be real and so spend our time being concerned with the body. We have also the option of ignoring the images that come to us from sense objects and the freedom to choose to focus on the realities of a higher life above. We are, in a wonderful phrase by E.R. Dodds, “a fluctuating spotlight of consciousness”.² The *Enneads* are a handbook designed to help one make this mystical ascent, to help one become conscious on the highest level, and there to make contact with God. This we can do.

Plotinus in the tractate termed *On Dialectic* by Porphyry, describes what sorts of things the ordinary aspirant should pay attention to and what steps s/he should follow. In fact the road he describes is very similar to the one so beautifully outlined by Plato in that wonderful passage in the *Symposium* where he portrays the ascent to the form of beauty.³ Part of the background training for this is the four cardinal virtues laid out in the Plato’s *Republic*, Courage, Wisdom, Temperance and Justice. So what sort of a person does the sage become?

¹ VP 2.26

² Dodds, E.R., *Les Sources de Plotin* (Entretiens Hardt, v, 1960) 385-386.

One would assume that s/he would be quite indifferent to the matters of daily life. The only genuine help that the sage could give would be to turn those who are capable of it into philosophers and prepare them to become conscious on the level of real Being. One would assume from the *Enneads* that the sage would hardly bother with non-philosophers. What could s/he do for them? It is hard to see the sage then as a friend to all. This has indeed been the view of a number of scholars.⁴ The most recent has been Dillon. He suggests with regard to the Plotinian sage: “All earthly concerns such as love for family or kin, not to mention care for the poor and oppressed, and all passions, such as pity or grief, must be shaken off (like clothes at an initiation ceremony) in the process of purification”.⁵ He adds: “One feels of Plotinus that he would gladly have helped an old lady across the road - but he might very well fail to notice her at all, and if she were squashed by a passing wagon he would remain quite unmoved”.⁶

This is a reasonable comment to make based on the philosophy expounded in the *Enneads*. For instance in *Ennead* I. 2 [19] 7. 19-27 Plotinus has this to say: “Perhaps the possessor of the [civic] virtues will know them, and how much he can get from them, and will act according to some of them as circumstances require. But when he reaches higher principles and different measures he will act according to these. For instance, he will not make self control consist in that former observance of measure and limit, but will altogether separate himself, as far as possible, from his lower nature and will not live the life of the good man which civic virtue requires. He will leave that behind, and choose another, the life of the gods: for it is to them, not to good men, that we are to be made like”.

The point that I want to make is that I do not see how Plotinus the philosopher who espouses this philosophy in the *Enneads* can be easily reconciled with Plotinus the man as he appears in Porphyry’s *Life*. The problem is this: the imperative of the *Enneads* is: “Try to bring back the god in us to the divine in the All” (*VP* 2.26). This would, one imagines, demand a somewhat reclusive lifestyle for the sage. This does not seem to be the lifestyle that emerges from Porphyry’s biography. Indeed I am not the only one who

³ *Symposium* 209e5ff.

⁴ See Plass, P., ‘Plotinus’ Ethical Theory’, *Illinois Classical Studies* 2 (1982) 253 and Westra, L., *Plotinus and Freedom* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989) 127.

⁵ Dillon, J., ‘An ethic for the late antique sage’ in Gerson, L.P., *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 320.

⁶ *Ibid.* 324.

has found the philosophy of the *Enneads* slightly at odds with the philosopher evoked by the pen of Porphyry.

In 1984 Ferwerda⁷ had this to say: “But deep in our heart we cannot help remembering how Porphyry tells us that Plotinus was a very nice person, a man who showed a great deal of concern for what happened to other people. Does this not indicate a certain dichotomy between doctrine and behaviour?” More recently Bussanich⁸ notes: “Plotinus seems committed to the contradictory position that the philosopher will, on the one hand, be self-sufficient, free of constraining emotional attachments, and fully immersed in contemplation and, on the other hand, that she will also act virtuously and be friendly”.

Bussanich logically goes on to ask how the biographical details of Plotinus’ life can be reconciled with his metaphysical psychology.⁹ This was a man who looked after orphans. A man who patiently attended to the accounts of those who entrusted him with their property and *took care that they should be accurate* (*VP* 9.13ff). Porphyry says that he was gentle and at the disposal of all who had any sort of acquaintance with him (*VP* 9.19). Clearly he was not uncaring in any normal sense of the word. How do we reconcile this apparent ambiguity?¹⁰

This is not a recent problem. As early as 1967 Rist had found difficulty with Plotinus’ ethical theory and practice. Given the metaphysics and psychology of the *Enneads* it is hard to see why the sage would bother with anyone else. Rist suggests that the only real help the philosopher could offer his friends is to demonstrate in his own life that the philosophic ascent is “possible and worthwhile”.¹¹ “The theory of the self-sufficiency of the sage should preclude him from all communal interests....In theory the sage’s only concern should be with teaching; in practice Plotinus both teaches those who can be

⁷ Ferwerda, R., ‘Pity in the Life and Thought of Plotinus’, in Runia, D.T., (ed.) *Plotinus amid Gnostics and Christians* (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1984), 58.

⁸ Bussanich, J., ‘The Invulnerability of Goodness: The Ethical and Psychological Theory of Plotinus’, *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, VI (1990), 182.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ It is by no means easy to see why A.H. Armstrong says “..Plotinus was a complete and consistent character in whom life and thought were so closely related that it is not easy to understand the one without knowing something about the other”. *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (p.3). There is, I suggest, the same uneasy compromise in the philosophy of Epicurus. Epicureans were famous for their friendship but it is not easy to see why this should be so given their ethical philosophy which aimed at invulnerability.

taught and helps those who are not able to enter upon the path of philosophy so that they may avoid troubles which (in theory) are illusory in any case".¹²

Given the metaphysics and psychology of the *Enneads* it is hard to see why the sage would bother with anyone at all. As the quote above indicates, one could possibly argue that the only real help a philosopher could give is to teach.¹³ But as Rist observes: why bother even to teach? "Surely for Plotinus all that should matter is one's own successful career of contemplation".¹⁴ Rist says that there is no answer to this question in the *Enneads* and he suggests that we should not expect one.¹⁵ But surely we are entitled to consistency between a life lived and a philosophy preached.

Rist suggests that Plotinus would not care about others because "the virtues for Plotinus, at their highest level, are purely contemplative".¹⁶ Technically he is right. But the *Enneads* do tell us that the sage has concerns for ordinary people. At I. 4 [46] 11.13 we find: "He would like *all men* to prosper and *no one* to be subject to any sort of evil",¹⁷ imaginary or not one presumes. Plotinus obviously felt an obligation to his fellow humans; it was an obligation born out of his philosophical heritage. In my opinion Plotinus involved himself in the lives of ordinary people because such activity was part of the philosophical tradition that he belonged to. Socrates spent his life arguing with the general public.¹⁸ Plato did not closet himself away. Although he attacked the idea of written philosophy (*Phaedrus* 275d) he still wrote his dialogues that made their way into the hands of non-philosophers. In the *Republic* the philosopher does go back into the cave in an attempt to educate others. Everything comes from God, or the One as he calls it, therefore everything has some value.

The *Enneads* were written for the specialist. But there were basic steps to be taken before tackling those. Thus it seems to me that Plotinus was different things to different people. To a fellow philosopher he was the sage of the *Enneads*. To those who aspired

¹¹ Rist, J.M., *Road to Reality*, 163.

¹² See also Rist, J.M., 'Plotinus and Moral Obligation', in R. B. Harris (ed.), *The Significance of Neoplatonism* (Norfolk, Va.: International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, Old Dominion University, 1976), 217-233.

¹³ Rist, J.M., *Road to Reality*, 163

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Rist, J. M., *Road to Reality*, 166

¹⁷ Armstrong translation.

¹⁸ See *VP* 13.12-17 where Plotinus encourages engagement in Socratic style questioning and answering.

to philosophy he was the Socratic gadfly. To those still too young for philosophy he was a guardian, not only of their souls but also of their material wealth. This he guarded zealously for them in case they failed to become philosophers (*VP* 9.1-22). To lead and coax people to philosophy by example involves first meeting people on their own terms. Plotinus clearly felt the need to do this and it brought him into contact with orphans and senators and qualified him for the task of arbitrator in disputes at Rome for twenty-six years (*VP* 9.20-22). It also made him into the character that emerges from Porphyry's *Life*.