

PLOTINUS AND THE ECSTATIC STATE.

BY WALLACE N. STEARNS.

NEO-PLATONISM represents the last stand of Greek thought as an interpretation of the world and of life. What speculation had undertaken, and what Christianity claimed through revelation, neo-Platonism as the last effort of Hellenism now sought through illumination. The Greek became a mystic. Another name for illumination is "the ecstatic state."

Despite imperial favor the old state religion declined. Incoming cults either failed of approval or proved wanting. Christianity outlived them all. To the Greek mind—for captive Greece did the Empire's thinking—there was only one way open. This Galilean cult must be fought with its own weapons. The Christian and the philosopher were now theologians, and each regarded his way as the way of salvation.

The first impulse was from Alexandria, the home of Clement and Origen. The first stage was the attempt to formulate a distinct working theory, to determine a new standpoint. Later scholars resorted to eclecticism but this first move was an attempt to move into new ground. Recognizing that there was some truth underlying the success of the new Christian teaching, philosophers sought some such point of view for themselves. For revelation they put illumination.

The first was Plotinus (204-269). This scholar's rare modesty, or at least reluctance to make known any facts concerning his career or to permit himself to be painted, has left us with very few details as to his life and person. While yet a young man he gave himself to philosophy and after trying several masters became a pupil of Ammonius Saccas. At forty he was himself a teacher in Rome. About 253 Plotinus began to write. His treatises, fifty-four in number, were edited by his disciple Porphyry.

His death is obscured by wonderful stories, but he was loved

by a host of friends and revered and trusted by all who knew him.¹ Devoted to philosophy, he was a bit impractical. His fond dream of a philosophers' city, Platonopolis, governed according to the laws of Plato, was, of course, never realized.

A pure life; a scholarly but impractical mind; a pleasing, sympathetic nature: possessed of the fervor and enthusiasm of the true student—Plotinus commands our respect and even our admiration.

I.

The starting-point of the neo-Platonic system as represented by Plotinus, the most typical representative of this school, is the One —τὸ εἶ— (called also God, the Good),² indivisible and non-numerical, found in all things but in no one of them,³ by its nature giving existence to attributes though itself above them.⁴ Transcending existence, this One is unthinkable, ineffable,⁵ and inasmuch as we are compelled to speak of it in our limited terms, is involved in mystery, is as a statue not yet in the round. From this primal one the rest of the scheme is derived by a series of emanations. As at each stage of the lava flow the stream is less than at the point whence the last stage was derived, so these emanations at each removal from the primal source diminish in perfection and significance. This process of emanation is also not wholly explicable, being comparable, among other things, to the rays of light from the sun, or of heat from a fire.

1. Intelligence, the first emanation, is the most perfect, and the only perfect, thing in the universe. Comprised in this though not separable from it, similarly to the two sides of a coin, are the subjective phase—intelligence proper, and the objective phase—the intellectible world.⁶

2. As intelligence emanated, so itself, though of less productive power, gives forth an emanation, namely the soul. The soul also may be considered under two aspects: pure soul, i. e., the world-

¹ The Delphic Oracle, consulted after Plotinus's death, replied (so the legend goes) that "he was partaker of immortality with the blest." His philosophical opponent, Longinus, said that "he loved and revered beyond measure the manner of the writing of Plotinus."

² VI, vii, 23.

³ Cf. Porphyry, *Sentt.*, xxxi.

⁴ V, ii, 1; cf. VI, ix, 6.

⁵ VI, ix, 4.

⁶ VI, vii, 35; cf. V, iii, 7.

soul and the individual forms it has taken on,⁷ e. g., human souls; and soul as formative power. Soul, like intelligence, may be compared to the coin with two sides.⁸ By separating from the soul the desires, as sense and hunger, and such other things as verge to the mortal nature, we come to that residue which may be denominated "the image of the intellect," and which preserves something of its light. Intelligence strives⁹ upward toward the One; soul, toward intelligence. There is here the twofold function: (1) Contemplation of the next higher, and (2) creation, by emanation, of the next lower. Through the agency of souls comes in the generation of physical being: human souls; animal; stars, sun and heavens.¹⁰ Soul not only produced but orders the movings of the universe.¹¹

3. The emanation from soul, body, is farthest removed from God, yet bearing to some degree the impress of the Absolute. Body expresses itself in forms, which constitute its reality, its being, as matter its non-being. Nature (*φύσις*) fluctuates between being and non-being, ever becoming, ever changing.

4. The system of Plotinus is bounded beneath, as by a shadowy horizon, by pure being, existence whose sole characteristic is privation of all attributes. On this, or, better, into this, the rays emanating from the Primal One shine as the ur-light shone on the void, giving to it the semblance of form or quality in so far as it may appear to reflect the rays from the Primal One falling upon it in its order of emanation.

11.

Plotinus held the soul to be immortal,¹² devoid of quantity, indivisible, and everywhere present in its entirety throughout the body. It is incorruptible, allied to a more divine and eternal nature, and though merged in sensible objects has become forgetful of its

⁷ Stoic, *Logos spermatikos*.

⁸ In another place (V, i, 6) Plotinus says: "That which is generated from what is superior to intellect is intellect." As intellect is the reason of the One, so is the soul the reason of the intellect. The reason of soul is obscure, but must be that part of soul which looks back to intellect as intellect looks back to the One. Each stage in the series looks two ways; on its better side to that which generated it, and on its lower side to that which came after. i. e., to that which was generated by it.

⁹ V, iii, 9; see also Proclus, *Quaest. Theol.*, i, 24.

¹⁰ V, i, 2.

¹¹ To further illustrate the members higher up in the series: Intelligence was held to be by nature what soul could be only by effort, and to proceed intuitively while soul was compelled to have recourse to logical procedure.

¹² IV, vii, 10; cf. V, i, 1.

source, yet needs only to be reminded of its divine origin. Individual souls are subordinate to the world-soul, which is ever transcendent, a certain portion of their essence being limited to this terrene abode, and by mergence into bodies. All souls are proximate to the world-soul, but some more nearly so than others by virtue of a more certain, energizing desire strengthened by memory's promptings.

III.

Departing on the one hand from the method of pure reason as represented by the Greek philosophers, and on the other hand deprived of the aid of revelation as represented by the Christians, the neo-Platonists, religionists as well as philosophers, had recourse to illumination. Illumination like revelation was a divine gift, but whereas revelation represented something handed down to man, illumination was rather an elevation of the human until it was *en rapport* with the divine.

This illumination is a "suprarational apprehension of divine truth, an apprehension which the individual man comes to possess in immediate contact with the deity itself; and though it must be admitted that there are but few who attain to this, and even these attain only in rare moments, a definite, historically authenticated special revelation, authoritative for all, is nevertheless put aside."¹³ The spiritual quality of the soul is the avenue by which illumination becomes possible. The soul becomes God, not by intellectual perception¹⁴ but by contemplation, by associating, and, as it were, by so conversing with God that there would be a content to communicate to others. This contemplation must be rapt, continuous, absolutely forgetting self in its vision of the divine.¹⁵ The soul becomes one with the deity, like him. This involves no change from self to some one or something else. The soul becomes elated without loss of identity, and, as it were, snatched up, enthused,¹⁶ filled full of the divine efflatus, and so, as it were, borne up by it, loses passions and desires, and even mental perception; settles down in unmoved and solitary union, in this respect being even as the One Itself (God Himself). Nothing excites the soul now, not even that which is beautiful. The gaze is fixed on divinity itself—"just as if some one having entered into the interior of the adytum should leave behind all the statues in the temple, which on his departure

¹³ Windelband, *History of Philosophy*, p. 227.

¹⁴ V, xi, 7.

¹⁵ VI, ix, 7.

¹⁶ VI, ix, 11.

from the adytum will first present themselves to his view, after the inward spectacle, and the association that was there, which was not with a statue or an image, but with the thing itself."¹⁷ These images which before shadowed forth to the soul the real thing itself, now become second matter. This state Plotinus calls ecstasy, "an expansion and accession of himself, a desire of contact, rest, and a striving after conjunction."¹⁸

This attaining to the vision of God is not an act of the intellect nor does it come through the intellect. It must come, if at all, through virtue. "Virtue, therefore, indeed proceeding to the end and being ingenerated in the soul in conjunction with wisdom, will present God to the view. But to speak of God without true virtue, is to utter nothing but a name."¹⁹ The soul, then, finds itself at a certain stage in the progression of emanations, but belongs to a higher world, and finds its highest mission to be free itself from the sensuous and to live in that highest world. The perfect life is the life of thought, of reflection, of contemplation. This life of thought is the perfect life: merely external things play no part in true happiness. The soul finds here helps, as sensuous beauty, and, far better, mediated thought. The *summum bonum* is to become completely buried in ourselves, and disregarding all else, to be elevated even above thought in a state of unconsciousness (as to things external and other), ecstasy and singleness. Whoever reaches this perfect state is filled with the divine light, becomes so immediately one with the divine being (the One) that all distinctions between the two disappear. Ecstasy is thus a certainty of God, the Divine, the One, a blessed rest in Him, a sinking into the divine essence.²⁰ This is not the direct result of man's own effort: it is a divine gift. It comes not of reasoning but of faith; hence, there is great need of prayer.

Constant abiding in this ecstatic state may be possible, but is not actual. The common, the average man, is not equal to it: only the philosopher attains and he only at intervals. "How, then, does the soul not abide there? Is it not because it has not wholly migrated hence? But it will when the soul has continuous vision being no longer troubled by the hindrance of the body."²¹

¹⁷ So Taylor's translation, VI, ix, 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ II, ix, 15.

²⁰ It is fair thus to personify the primal being. The philosophy of Plotinus was a religious philosophy, and the ecstatic state as thus attained would be impossible were not a personal relation thought of. Cf. VI, vii, 15.

²¹ VI, ix, 10.

There is now a change in the soul's relativity. It now becomes not a seer but a thing seen. Indeed, we talk of perceiver and thing perceived because compelled to use language familiar to us in earthly affairs. But soul is one with God. The soul does not see or distinguish by seeing or imagining the existence of two things. The soul becomes wholly absorbed in God, conjoining center with center.²² Several times this experience came to Plotinus, and he obtained it by "an ineffable energy." Porphyry says his master enjoyed this experience four times to his knowledge, and adds on the authority of an oracle that the gods often directed Plotinus in the right path by extending to him rays of divine light, so that his books were composed in the contemplation of the Divine. Porphyry states that he himself enjoyed this experience at the advanced age of sixty-eight.²³ The occasional, fitful enjoyment of the soul while in the flesh is only a shadowing of the life of the soul after physical death, if we may so style liberation from the body. Supreme souls, as Plotinus, Plato, Pythagoras, dwell together in perpetual peace and joy. They even approach the judges of the dead, not expecting judgment, but that they may enjoy conversation with them.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ For estimate of neo-Platonism see Harnack, *Expansion of Christianity*, III, pp. 133ff; Wendland, *Christentum und Hellenismus*, p. 12.