



Neo-Platonism Frederick Meyer

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PLOTINUS

Before ancient philosophy came to a close, a last Indian summer took place in the Neo-Platonic movement. Plotinus was its harbinger. He undoubtedly ranks among the supreme metaphysicians of mankind. His influence on Christian theology, on the Renaissance, and on outstanding poets like Goethe and Emerson can scarcely be minimized.

Among the systems of cosmology, that of Plotinus ranks high, both in speculative depth and in imaginative insight. In many ways Plotinus represents the best strains of his age. In him we find an otherworldly orientation and a mystical impulse, and thus we see that his main endeavor was to obtain an insight into spiritual reality. While other philosophers were appealing to superstition, Plotinus presented a completely intellectual account of the universe. His mysticism was not based on revelation or on adherence to any definite dogmas; rather, it was the product of a systematized philosophy which gave a coherent account of man's relationship to the cosmos.

THE LIFE OF PLOTINUS

Plotinus was born c. 204 A.D. in Egypt. He received his early education at Alexandria, where he studied under Saccas, who was also the instructor of several Christian theologians. He followed the emperor Gordian when the latter undertook a war against the Persians, and he used this opportunity to become acquainted with the religious customs of the East. He is described as a man of saintly character and attractive personality.

When he was forty years old, Plotinus went to Rome, where he was acclaimed as the outstanding thinker of his time. He attracted not only professional philosophers but powerful politicians, and he gained the favor of the emperor. It was his desire to found a new Utopia, based on Plato's *Republic*, which was to emphasize the ideals of religious mysticism. The emperor was interested in the scheme, but court intrigue prevented its success.

Plotinus did not write down his thoughts until he was well along in middle age. His pupil, Porphyry, arranged his fifty-four treatises into six sets of nine. Thus they are called *Enneads*, and they rank among the masterpieces of philosophical literature.

The First *Ennead* is concerned with ethical problems. It deals with such topics as the virtues, happiness, forms of Good, the problem of evil, and the withdrawal from life.

The Second *Ennead* is concerned with the physical universe. It discusses the stars, potentiality and actuality, circular movement, and quality and form. The last part contains a diatribe against the Gnostics.

The Third *Ennead* deals with the philosophical implications of Plotinus' world-view. Such topics are discussed as the problem of faith. Providence, eternity and time, and the constitution of nature.

The Fourth *Ennead* describes the nature and function of the soul. It also discusses the immortality of the soul and takes up the problem of sensation and memory.

The Fifth *Ennead* deals with the manifestations of the divine spirit. It explains the doctrine of Ideas of Plotinus and also contains a notable chapter on intellectual beauty.

The Sixth *Ennead* contains a variety of topics. Among them we find discussions of numbers, of free will, and of the kinds of real Being.

Porphry's *Life of Plotinus* indicates the high esteem in which Plotinus was held by the Romans. He describes the intense concentration of his master and exalts his gentleness. Plotinus was widely known for his charity; for example, he brought up many orphans to whom he taught the principles of philosophy. According to Porphyry, Plotinus died of a disease of the throat. His last words were, "I am striving to give back the Divine in myself to the Divine in the ALL."

PLOTINUS' METAPHYSICS

In many ways Plotinus leaned upon Platonic doctrines. Like Plato, he believed in a spiritual type of love. Furthermore, he accepted Platonic mysticism and the reality of the Ideas. But in Plotinus there are Ideas of particulars as well as of universals. The main difference between the two philosophers is shown in their points of emphasis. Plotinus lacked the social interests of Plato. He did not believe that mankind could be reformed through a philosopher-king; hence, he did not try to apply his metaphysical ideals to politics. He had far less interest in and understanding of mathematics than Plato, and his writings lack the poetry of the Greek philosopher.

In every way Plotinus was much more single-minded than Plato, whose philosophy contains a variety of viewpoints and whose intellectual outlook was extremely plastic. Plotinus, on the other hand, was more consistent; there was one central motive throughout his life the belief that life on earth is essentially a descent from divine purity, and that the soul must regain its union with God.

The metaphysical system of Plotinus is characterized by the concept of transcendence. According to him, there are three realities: the One, the Mind, and the Soul. The One is like the God of Philo; it cannot be understood according to the categories of science. It is beyond existence, beyond truth, and beyond all values. If we try to define the One, we are bound to fail, for no intellectual predication is adequate when applied to it.

The One, Plotinus believed, is at the summit of all Being: "We may think of the One as a light before the light, an eternal irradiation resting upon the Intellectual; This, not identical with its source, is yet not so remote from It as to be less than Real-Being; It is the primal Knower. But the One, as transcending intellect, transcends knowing.

"The One is, in truth, beyond all statement; whatever you say would limit It; the All-Transcending, transcending even the most august Mind, which alone of all things has true being, has no name. We can but try to indicate, if possible, something concerning It."

Thus, we cannot express what it is in its essence. We know only that it is a principle which is beyond reason and mind and which is the author of all Being.

"Those who are divinely possessed and inspired have at least knowledge that they hold some greater thing within them though they cannot tell what it is; from the movements that stir them and the utterances that come from them they perceive the power, not themselves, that moves them; in the same way, it must be, we stand towards the Supreme, when we hold Divine Mind pure, knowing that this is the mind within, that which gives Being and all else of that order; but we know too that Other, know that it is none of these, but a nobler principle, fuller and greater; above reason, mind and feeling, conferring these powers, not to be confounded with them.

“The All-Transcendent, utterly void of multiplicity, is unity’s self, independent of all else, That from which all the rest take their degree of unity in their standing, near or far, towards It. It is the great Beginning and the Beginning must be a really Existent One, wholly and truly One. All life belongs to It, Life brilliant and perfect. It is therefore more than self-sufficing. Author at once of Being and self-sufficiency.”

The One is not to be approached through sense experience, nor can it be understood through the intellect. We ought not to ask where it comes from, Plotinus averred, or where it goes. We can appreciate its greatness through a vision:

“Only by a leap can we reach to this One which is to be pure of all else, halting sharp in fear of slipping ever so little aside and impinging on the dual: for the One does not bear to be numbered with anything else; it is measure and not the measured. The First cannot be thought of as having definition and limit. It can be described only as transcending all things produced, transcending Being. To seek to throw a line about that illimitable Nature would be folly, and anyone thinking to do so cuts himself off from the most momentary approach to Its least vestige.

“As one wishing to contemplate the Intellectual Nature will lay aside all representations of the senses and so may see what transcends the realm of sense, so one wishing to contemplate what transcends the Intellectual attains by putting away all that is of the intellect, taught by the intellect, no doubt, that the Transcendent exists, but never seeking to define It. Its definition could not be ‘the Indefinable,’ for This is a Principle not to be conveyed by any sound; It can not be known on any hearing, but if at all, by vision.”

The second reality of Plotinus is called Nous, a term which is best interpreted by Mind. It is the image of the One and contains within it the Platonic Ideas. These Ideas, however, do not merely have an intellectual existence; they are the archetypes of individuals. The content of the Nous is completely unitary. To appreciate the divine spirit, we must use self-contemplation, for the soul is a microcosm of the divine mind.

Plotinus’ third reality is the soul. As the architect of the phenomenal world, it contains a world-soul and a multitude of lesser souls. The world-soul can be seen in two aspects. It is the energy behind the world and at the same time forms the body of the universe. The human soul also has two parts—one intellectual, which is subject to reincarnation; and the other, irrational and part of the body.

The soul, however, is not dependent on matter, since matter is purely passive whereas the soul is active. Thus the soul is the essence of the material body.

According to Plotinus, the world of matter can also be interpreted in two ways. The corporeal part contains the principle of Non-being and is full of evil and limitation. It is far removed from the majesty and perfection of the One. This belief does not imply, however, that the visible world is to be disregarded and shunned, as the Gnostics thought.

“Yet we must not think the world of unhappy origin because there are many jarring notes in it. What image of the Intelligible Realm could be more beautiful than this world of ours? What globe more minutely perfect or more admirably ordered in its course? Or what other sun figuring the Divine Sphere than this sun we see?

“This universe is a life organized, effective, complex, all-comprehensive, displaying an unfathomable wisdom. How, then, can anyone say that it is not a clear image, beautifully formed, of the Intellectual Divinities? This earth of ours is full of varied life-forms and of immortal beings; to the very heavens it is crowded. And the stars moving in their ordered path, circling the universe, how can they be less than gods?”

The universe itself is created by a process of emanation, Plotinus asserted. This creation, in itself, is a timeless process. It can best be compared with the light of the sun, which illuminates the world with its brightness. Darkness, therefore, is nothing positive; it merely indicates the absence of light and distance from the One. Throughout the process of

emanation the One remains the same, changeless and eternal.

It must be emphasized that the One is beyond space and time, in Plotinus' philosophy. Time itself is an image of eternity. "To bring this cosmos into being, the Soul first laid aside its eternity and clothed itself with Time; this world of its fashioning it then gave over to be a servant of Time, setting all its progressions within the bournes of Time. Putting forth its energy in act after act, in a constant progress of novelty, the Soul produces succession. Time, then, is contained in differentiation of life; the ceaseless forward movement of life brings with it unending Time; and life, as it achieves its stages, constitutes past Time.

"It would be sound, then, to define Time as the life of the Soul in movement as it passes from one stage of experience to another. For Eternity is life in repose, unchanging, self-identical, always endlessly complete; and there is to be an image of Eternity—Time, such an image as this lower All presents of the Higher Sphere. Therefore over against this oneness without extent or interval there must be an image of oneness, a unity of succession; over against the whole in concentration there must be that which is to be a whole by stages never final. The lesser must always be working towards the increase of its being, and this will be its imitation of what is immediately complete, self-realized, endless, without stage."

Time, Plotinus taught, must not be conceived as being apart from soul; rather, it is an inherent part of the soul. If it achieved its original unity, time would disappear, for it is connected with the sensible universe.

In the universe of Plotinus we find an emphasis on oneness. All things are connected and bound together by cosmic sympathy. The parts of creation accordingly are affected by this wholeness in the universe. There is no isolated fact; nothing occurs in a chaotic way.

The scientific ideas of Plotinus were not very advanced. Subordinating science to his metaphysical interests, he maintained that the heavens are superior to the earth, for they are the resting place of the most sublime souls. He assumed that the stars are the abodes of gods; and he accepted the reality of demons, who live in the space between the earth and the stars.

In every way Plotinus was an enemy of naturalism. He objected to the Stoic view, which regarded the material principle as primary and held that God, himself, has a material form. Plotinus made a definite distinction between body and soul, and he was emphatic in his insistence that the soul cannot be interpreted according to the categories of the body. Any valid explanation, he asserted, must depend on the higher scale of values. What is sublime in nature, then, cannot be viewed according to natural facts; on the contrary, all natural facts must be interpreted according to their spiritual tendencies.

PLOTINUS' CONCEPT OF THE SOUL

To understand the philosophy of Plotinus we must appreciate his concept of the soul. He made it clear that the soul is a divine force and the source of all Providence. It is incorrect to believe, he said, that the world-soul is scattered in the universe; rather, the universe is in the world-soul. Furthermore, it is impossible to divide the souls quantitatively, for all souls are one. The universe, in short, consists of an indivisible unit:

"That the soul of every individual is one we deduce from the fact that it is present entire at every point of the body—not some part of it here and another part there. Are we to hold similarly that your soul and mine are all one, and that in the universe the soul in all the several forms of life is one soul, an omnipresent identity?

"If the soul in me is a unity, why need that in the universe be otherwise, seeing that there is no longer question of bulk or body? And if that is one soul and yours and mine belong to it, then yours and mine must also be one."

Plotinus appealed to moral reasons to portray the oneness of the soul: “Reflection tells us that we are in sympathetic relation to each other, suffering at the sight of others’ pain, melted from our separate moulds, prone to forming friendships; and this can be due only to some unity among us. There is, then, nothing strange in the reduction of all souls to one.

“Invoking the help of God, let us assert that the existence of many souls makes it certain that there must first be one from which the many rise. This one is competent to lend itself to all yet remain one, because while it penetrates all things it cannot itself be sundered; this is identity in variety, like a science with its various sections standing as a whole; while the portion selected for meeting a particular need is present actually and takes the lead, still the whole is in every part; the part invites the immediate interest, but its value consists in its approach to the whole.”

In Plotinus we also find a doctrine of reincarnation. Like Plato, he stressed the existence of the soul before birth and its immortality. Reincarnation, he held, is determined by our action in this life. The evil man is punished; a murderer is murdered; and the tyrant becomes a slave. What is the destination of the soul. Where does it go after leaving the body?

“The space open to the soul’s resort is vast and diverse. No one can ever escape the suffering entailed by ill deeds done; the Divine Law is ineluctable, carrying bound up, as one with it, the foreordained execution of its doom. The sufferer, all unaware, is swept onward towards his due, hurried always by the restless driving of his errors, until at last, wearied out by that against which he struggled, he falls into his fit place and, by the vehemence of his self-will, is brought to the lot he never willed. The law decrees the intensity and the duration of the suffering, while it carries with it too the lifting of chastisement and the faculty of rising from those places (of pain)—all by power of the harmony that maintains the universal scheme.

“Souls, body-bound, are apt to body punishment; clean souls, no longer drawing to themselves at any point any vestige of body are, by their very being, outside the bodily sphere; There where Essence is, and true Being, and the Divine within the Divinity, among Those, within That, such a soul must be.”

Do we retain memory of our previous existence? Plotinus asserted that memory represents a lower category of existence, for it indicates multiplicity.

“The memory of friends, children, wife, country, the lower man retains with emotion, the authentic man passively. The loftier soul must desire to come to a happy forgetfulness of all that has reached it through the lower. The more urgent the intention towards the Supreme, the more extensive will be the soul’s forgetfulness, unless indeed when the entire living has, even here, been such that memory has nothing but the noblest to deal with.

“In this world itself, all is best when human interests and the memory of them have been put out of the way. It is not essential that everything should be laid up in the mind; the soul does not take into its deeper recesses such differences as do not meet any of its needs or serve any of its purposes. Above all, when the soul’s Act is directed towards another order, it must utterly reject the memory of such things, things over and done with now, and not even taken into knowledge when they were present. In this sense we may truly say that the good soul is the forgetful.”

ETHICAL AND ESTHETIC DOCTRINES

In his ethical doctrines Plotinus started with political virtues. While he asserted that it is necessary to fulfill the functions of citizenship, he in general was uninterested in political problems. Unlike his later followers, Plotinus did not believe strict asceticism is necessary; rather, he affirmed the importance of contemplation. Like Buddha, he searched for spiritual

enlightenment.

In this connection he raised the problem of freedom. Freedom, he asserted, lies in our inner being. It cannot be traced to external things. The wicked man is a serf to his passions and thus lives in a state of slavery.

“Soul becomes free when, through Divine Mind, it strives unimpeded towards the Good; what it does in that spirit is its free act; Divine Mind is free in its own right. But the Good is the sole object of desire and that whereby the others are self-dispossessing. Thought insists upon distinguishing between what is subject to others and what is independent, bound under no allegiance, lord of its own act. This state of freedom belongs in the absolute degree to the Eternals in right of that eternity and to other beings in so far as without hindrance they possess or pursue the Good which, standing above them all, must manifestly be the only good which they can reasonably seek.”

In our search for spiritual emancipation, Plotinus declared, we must be moved by love. At first we love sensible things, but finally we come to appreciate the source of all love and thus turn to immaterial essences. Like Plato, Plotinus felt that love refers to a higher level of existence and thus turns us away from transitory things and concentrates upon reality.

Beauty, said Plotinus, likewise has a spiritual significance; hence esthetics is intimately connected with our moral life. The essence of the beautiful lies not in harmony or symmetry; rather, the beautiful represents an intimation of divine perfection. There is an ascending scale of beauty, leading from the senses to the emotions and then to the immaterial structure of the universe.

“Beauty addresses itself chiefly to sight; but there is a beauty for the hearing too, for melodies and cadences are beautiful; and minds that lift themselves above the realm of sense to a higher order are aware of beauty in the conduct of life, in actions, in character, in the pursuits of the intellect; and there is the beauty of the virtues. What loftier beauty there may be yet, our argument will bring to light.

“What is it, then, that gives comeliness to material forms and draws the ear to the sweetness perceived in sounds? What is it that attracts the eyes of those to whom a beautiful object is presented, and calls them, lures them towards it, and fills them with joy at the sight? And what is the secret of the beauty there is in all that derives from Soul? Is there some one principle from which all take their grace? Finally, one or many, what would such a principle be?

“Undoubtedly this principle exists; it is something which the soul names as from an ancient knowledge and recognizing, welcomes it, enters into unison with it. The soul includes a faculty peculiarly addressed to Beauty, one incomparably sure in the appreciation of its own. So by the very truth of its nature, by its affiliation to the noblest existent in the hierarchy of Being—when it sees anything of that kin, or any trace of that kinship, it thrills with an immediate delight, takes its own to itself and thus stirs anew to the sense of its nature and of all its affinity.”

There was, thus, to Plotinus, a connection between the beauty on earth and the beauty of reality.

“We hold that all the loveliness of this world comes by communion in Ideal Form. All shapelessness whose kind admits of pattern and of form, as long as it remains outside of Reason and Idea, has not been entirely mastered by Reason, the matter not yielding at all points and in all respects to Ideal Form, is ugly by that very isolation from the Divine Thought. But where the Ideal Form has entered, it has grouped and co-ordinated what from a diversity of parts was to become a unity; it has rallied confusion into co-operation; it has made the sum one harmonious coherence; for the Idea is a unity and what it

moulds must come to unity as far as multiplicity may. And on what has thus been compacted to unity, Beauty enthrones itself, giving itself to the parts as to the sum.

“This, then, is how the material thing becomes beautiful—by communicating the thought that flows from the Divine.”

It can be seen that Plotinus had a more sublime concept of beauty than had Plato. Plato, we remember, regarded art merely as a second-rate copy of reality and banished artists from his ideal Utopia.

The esthetic concepts of Plotinus are connected with his view regarding evil. Evil, Plotinus affirmed, is no metaphysical reality. The pessimist will say that life is a process of competition; everywhere he sees war and suffering. How can we deny the existence of evil?

“This devouring of kind by kind is necessary as the means to the transmutation of living things which could not keep form forever even though no other killed them; what grievance is it that when they must go their dispatch is so planned as to be serviceable to others? They are devoured only to return in some new form: the actor alters his make-up and enters in a new role; the actor, of course, was not really killed. If dying is but changing a body as the actor changes a costume, or even an exit from the body like the exit of the actor from the boards when he has never again to play a part, what is there so very dreadful in this transformation of living beings one into another? Surely it is much better so than if they had never existed; that way would mean the bleak quenching of life. As the plan holds, life is poured copiously throughout the universe producing an endless sequence of comeliness and shapeliness, a living pastime.”

Furthermore, what we call evil really contributes to the perfection of the universe. “Now all life, even the least valuable, is an activity, and not a blind activity like that of a flame; even where there is not sensation the activity of life is no mere haphazard play of movement; any object in which life is present is at once enreasoned in the sense that the activity peculiar to life is formative, shaping as it moves. Life aims at pattern as does the pantomimic dancer with his set movements; the mime, in himself, represents life, and besides, his movements proceed in obedience to a pattern designed to symbolize life.

“In the case of music, tones high and low are made consonant by Reason Principles which, being principles of harmony, meet in the unity of the absolute Harmony. Similarly in the universe, we find contraries, white and black, hot and cold, winged and wingless, reasoning and unreasoning; but all these elements are members of one living body, their sum total; the universe is a self-accordant entity, its members everywhere clashing, but the total being the manifestation of Reason.”

THE RETURN TO UNITY

The goal of Plotinus’ philosophy was the achievement of a mystical vision. First, it leads us to nature, in which we find Providence; then we turn to the world-soul. “We find that the contemplation pursued by this, the birth pangs set up by the knowledge it attains, its teeming fullness, have caused it, in itself become all object of vision, to produce another vision (that of the cosmos); it is just as a given science complete in itself produces a miniature science, its image, in the student who has [a knowledge of] all its divisions.

“The primal phase of the Soul, inhabitant of the Supreme and, by participation in the Supreme, filled and illuminated, remains unchangeably There; but a secondary phase goes forth ceaselessly as life streaming from Life; for energy runs through the universe and there is no extremity at which it dwindles out, but, travel far as it may, it never draws

that first part of itself from the place whence the outgoing began. No limit exists either to contemplation or to its possible objects, and this explains how the Soul is universal; where can this thing fail to be, which is one identical thing in every soul? It is not confined within the bournes of magnitude.”

Then we turn to the Divine Mind. “In the advancing stages of contemplation rising from that in nature to that in Soul and thence again to that in Divine Mind, the object contemplated becomes progressively a more and more intimate possession of the contemplating beings, more and more one with them. Hence we may conclude that in Divine Mind itself there is complete identity of knower and known, no distinction existing between being and knowing, contemplation and its object constituting a living thing; a life, two inextricably one.

“This Being is limitless; in all the outflow from it there is no lessening either in its emanation, since this also is the entire universe, nor in itself, the starting point, since it is no assemblage of parts [to be diminished by any outgo].

“In its character as life, as emanation, though, Divine Mind must of necessity derive from some other Being, from one that does not emanate but is the Principle of emanation, of life, of intellect and of the universe. That Source cannot be the All and must not be a plurality but the Source of plurality, since universally a begetting power is less complex than the begotten.”

The principle of reality we find in the One; this is our final destiny. “If we define It as the Good and wholly simple, we shall, no doubt, be telling the truth, but we shall not be giving any certain and lucid account of It. Our knowledge of everything else comes by way of intelligence; but this Entity transcends all of the intellectual nature; by what direct intuition, then, can It be brought within our grasp?

“The answer is that we can know It only in the degree of human faculty; we indicate It by virtue of what in ourselves is like It. For in us also there is something of that Being. Wherever you be you have only to range over against this omnipresent Being that in you which is capable of drawing from It and you have your share in It; imagine a voice sounding over a waste of land; wherever you be in that great space you have but to listen and you take the voice entire—entire, yet with a difference.”

In this way the soul reaches the principle of reality, according to Plotinus. In the ultimate state there is no separateness, no consciousness of time, space, and plurality; it even transcends all categories of personality. Such a state, however, is extremely rare; and Plotinus experienced it only a few times. Since philosophy cannot explain it adequately, he reasoned, and since we cannot give a complete account of it, we had better honor it by silence and the realization that the mystical experience transcends rational understanding.

THE FOLLOWERS OF PLOTINUS

After Plotinus, the Neo-Platonic movement produced only a few outstanding philosophers. Among them we find Porphyry (c. 233-301), who, quite puritanical, castigated the sensual life. He believed in evil spirits and tried to give an allegorical account of Greek religion.

In Porphyry’s philosophy we find a theocentric perspective. In a letter to his wife he maintained, “Let every way of life, let every work and word, have God present as overseer and witness. And for all the good things we do let us give credit to God: but for all the bad things we do the blame is ours, in us who choose; God is blameless. For which reason, when we pray to God let our petitions be worthy of God. Let us ask of him those things only which we could not get from anyone else. Those things in which the initiative belongs to virtuous effort, let us pray that they may be ours, after the due effort has been made; the prayer of the indolent man is vain speech. Things which you cannot retain when you have

got them,
for such things do not pray to God: because no gift of God can be taken away, so that what you will not retain he will not give. Those things therefore which you will no longer need, when you are rid of the body, make no account of: the things on the other hand which you will still need when you are rid of it, these things seek by self-training, beseeching God to stand by you as Helper. Now you will not need then any of the things which fortune gives and fortune takes away again. Nor ought you to make request for anything before the proper time, but only when God reveals the right request as something which is there within you by natural instinct.”

We are to be conscious of God in all our actions. Porphyry asserted. Above all, we are to avoid impiety. “For a wise man honors God even when he is silent; but a foolish man pollutes the Divine, even when he prays and offers sacrifice. The wise man then alone is a priest, he alone loves God, he alone knows how to pray. He who trains himself in wisdom trains himself to know God, not always supplicating and sacrificing, but practicing piety towards God by his works....

“No evil is done to a man by God, for the Divine can only be beneficent; a man does evil to himself, amongst other things, by his wrong opinion about God. He who neglects to tend the images of the gods is not so unholy as he who attaches to God the notions of the multitude. Do you take heed never to entertain an unworthy thought about God or about his blessedness or about his immortality.”

Iamblichus, who died about 330 A.D., stressed especially the supernatural outlook of Neo-Platonism. He described the hierarchy of supernatural beings, who occupied a rather minor place in early Neo-Platonism. His philosophy stimulated an interest in occult matters. To substantiate his faith in miracles, he borrowed from Oriental as well as Pythagorean sources. He thought disbelief a grievous sin, as can be seen from the following passage:

“‘Thou shall not disbelieve any wonderful thing about the gods, or about the divine dogmas.’ This maxim sufficiently commands our reverence and indicates the transcendence of the gods, furnishing our way and reminding us that we must not judge of the Divine Power by comparing it with ourselves: it is likely enough that certain things should be impracticable and impossible for us who are in the body and have a beginning in birth and are perishable and ephemeral, subject to all manner of diseases, to limitations in bulk, to the gravity which carries us towards the center, to sleepiness and want and surfeit, to foolishness and weakness and obstruction of the soul, and all other such things. It is true we have, even so, many excellent endowments from nature, but we are nevertheless in every respect inferior to the gods: we have neither the same power which they have, nor a virtue comparable to theirs. This maxim then specially instils into us knowledge of the gods, knowledge that they can do everything. For this reason it admonishes us not to disbelieve anything about the gods.”

Proclus surpassed Iamblichus in his metaphysical system. Like Socrates, he believed in self-knowledge as the source of all genuine philosophy. He was born in Constantinople but studied at Alexandria. As head of the school in Athens, he was considered one of the outstanding thinkers of his time. In his philosophy we find innumerable series of triads. In it the principles of Neo-Platonism are systematized and synthesized with other philosophies.

While Proclus believed in the existence of the Olympian gods, he accepted also other mediating deities. He thought that man could not be saved without faith; thus religion plays an important part in his philosophy.

Proclus was succeeded as head of the Neo-Platonic school in Athens by Marinus, who distinguished himself in mathematics and was an excellent commentator on Plato.

Damascius is known to us mainly through his work *on First Principles*. He tried to show that the world was derived from a primary Being, which he regarded as utterly

incomprehensible. Even more strongly than Plotinus, he insisted upon the transcendence of reality. While he was skeptical in his technical philosophy, he accepted a variety of superstitions. In this, he reflected the tendencies of his age.

Simplicius, the student of Damascius, spent most of his time in commenting on Aristotle's work, which he interpreted in a Neo-Platonic manner. With him ancient philosophy comes to a close, and the age of faith fully triumphs over it.

The Christian believers looked with contempt upon the Neo-Platonic mode of thinking. To them, speculative philosophy was not merely a waste of time but also incompatible with salvation. This belief sometimes found expression in overt acts. For instance, in 415 A.D. Hypatia, a learned and scholarly woman, an expert in Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, was killed by a mob in Alexandria. The final step was taken by emperor Justinian, who, in 529 A.D., issued an order prohibiting the teaching of philosophy at Athens.

Justinian's order signified the end of an age. Independent speculation, a detached consideration of the universe, objective knowledge—all these attitudes were henceforth abandoned. Instead of reason, faith now was supreme.

It must not be thought, however, that the influence of ancient philosophy was erased. Even during the Middle Ages ancient philosophy stimulated many of the noblest minds of Europe. It kept alive an ideal of life which was based on a secular and naturalistic perspective. When ancient philosophy in all its glory was rediscovered during the Renaissance, it laid the seeds for much of modern civilization. In many ways modern man is more closely associated with the spirit of Greek and Roman philosophy than with the faith of the medieval period.

QUESTIONS & TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Relate the major events in the life of Plotinus.
2. Compare the world-view of Plotinus with that of Plato.
3. Explain Plotinus' concept of the One.
4. What did Plotinus mean by the world-soul?
5. Explain the process of emanation, according to Plotinus.
6. How did Plotinus view the mechanistic concepts of science?
7. What role did intuition play in the system of Plotinus?
8. Who were the main successors to Plotinus, and what did they contribute to philosophy?
9. What are the advantages and disadvantages of Neo-Platonism?
10. Why did faith replace reason at the end of ancient philosophy?

Frederick Mayer. *A History of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*. New York: American Book Company, 1950.
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