



## The Neo-Platonists

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The word Neo-Platonism is a misnomer. It does not stand for a genuine revival of Platonism. The Neo-Platonists were no doubt the offspring of Plato, but they were the illegitimate offspring. The true greatness of Plato lay in his rationalistic idealism; his defects were mostly connected with his tendency to myth and mysticism. The Neo-Platonists hailed his defects as the true and inner secret of his doctrine, developed them out of all recognition, and combined them with the hazy dream-philosophies of the East. The reputed founder was Ammonius Saccas, but we may pass him over and come at once to his disciple Plotinus, who was the first to develop Neo-Platonism into a system, was the greatest of all its exponents, and may be regarded as its real founder. He was born in 205 A.D. at Lycopolis in Egypt, went to Rome in 245, founded his School there, and remained at the head of it till his death in 270. He left extensive writings which have been preserved.

Plato had shown that the idea of the One, exclusive of all multiplicity, was an impossible abstraction. Even to say “the One is,” involves the duality of the One. The Absolute Being can be no abstract unity, but only a unity in multiplicity. Plotinus begins by ignoring this supremely important philosophical principle. He falls back upon the lower level of oriental monism. God, he thinks, is absolutely One. He is the unity which lies beyond all multiplicity. There is in him no plurality, no movement, no distinction. Thought involves the distinction between object and subject; therefore the One is above and beyond thought. Nor is the One describable in terms of volition or activity. For volition involves the distinction between the willer and the willed, activity between the actor and that upon which he acts. God, therefore, is neither thought, nor volition, nor activity. He is beyond all thought and all being. As absolutely infinite, He is also absolutely indeterminate. All predicates limit their subject, and hence nothing can be predicated of the One. He is unthinkable, for all thought limits and confines that which is thought. He is the ineffable and inconceivable. The sole predicates which Plotinus applies to Him are the One and the Good. He sees, however, that these predicates, as much as any others, limit the infinite. He regards them, therefore, not as literally expressing the nature of the infinite, but as figuratively shadowing it forth. They are applied by analogy only. We can, in truth, know nothing of the One, except that it *is*.

Now it is impossible to derive the world from a first principle of this kind.

As being utterly exalted above the world, God cannot enter into the world. As absolutely infinite, He can never limit Himself to become finite, and so give rise to the world of objects. As absolutely One, the many can never issue out of Him. The One cannot create the world, for creation is an activity, and the One is immutable and excludes all activity. As the infinite first principle of all things, the One must be regarded as in some sense the source of all being. And yet how it can give rise to being is inconceivable, since any such act destroys its unity and infinity. We saw once for all, in the case of the Eleatics, that it is fatal to define the Absolute as unity exclusive of all multiplicity, as immutable essence exclusive of all process, and that if we do so we cut off all hope of showing how the world has issued from the Absolute. It is just the same with Plotinus. There is in his system the absolute contradiction that the One is regarded, on the one hand, as source of the world, and on the other as so exalted above the world that all relationship to the world is impossible. We come, therefore, to a complete deadlock at this point. We can get no further. We can find no way to pass from God to the world. We are involved in a hopeless, logical contradiction. But Plotinus was a mystic, and logical absurdities do not trouble mystics. Being unable to explain how the world can possibly arise out of the vacuum of the One, he has recourse, in the oriental style, to poetry and metaphors. God, by reason of His super-perfection, “overflows” Himself, and this overflow becomes the world. He “sends forth a beam” from Himself. As flame emits light, as snow cold, so do all lower beings issue from the One. Thus, without solving the difficulty, Plotinus deftly smothers it in flowery phrases, and quietly passes on his way.

The first emanation from the One is called the Nous. This Nous is thought, mind, reason. We have seen that Plato regarded the Absolute itself as thought. For Plotinus, however, thought is derivative. The One is beyond thought, and thought issues forth from the One as first emanation. The Nous is not discursive thought, however. It is not in time. It is immediate apprehension, or intuition. Its object is twofold. Firstly, it thinks the One, though its thought thereof is necessarily inadequate. Secondly, it thinks itself. It is the thought of thought, like Aristotle’s God. It corresponds to Plato’s world of Ideas. The Ideas of all things exist in the Nous, and not only the Ideas of classes, but of every individual thing.

From the Nous, as second emanation, proceeds the world-soul. This is, in Erdmann’s phrase, a sort of faded-out copy of the Nous, and it is outside time, incorporeal, and indivisible. It works rationally, but yet is not conscious. It has a two-fold aspect, inclining upwards to the Nous on the one hand, and downwards to the world of nature on the other. It produces out of itself the individual souls which inhabit the world.

The idea of emanation is essentially a poetical metaphor, and not a rational concept. It is conceived poetically by Plotinus as resembling light which radiates from a bright centre, and grows dimmer as it passes outwards, till it shades off at last into total darkness. This total darkness is matter. Matter, as negation of light,

as the limit of being, is in itself not-being. Thus the crucial difficulty of all Greek philosophy, the problem of the whence of matter, the dualism of matter and thought, which we have seen Plato and Aristotle struggling in vain to subjugate, is loosely and lightly slurred over by Plotinus with poetic metaphors and roseate phrases.

Matter Plotinus considers to be the ground of plurality and the cause of all evil. Hence the object of life can only be, as with Plato, to escape from the material world of the senses. The first step in this process of liberation is "*katharsis*," purification, the freeing of oneself from the dominion of the body and the senses. This includes all the ordinary ethical virtues. The second step is thought, reason, and philosophy. In the third stage the soul rises above thought to an intuition of the Nous. But all these are merely preparatory for the supreme and final stage of exaltation into the Absolute One, by means of trance, rapture, ecstasy. Here all thought is transcended, and the soul passes into a state of unconscious swoon, during which it is mystically united with God. It is not a thought of God, it is not even that the soul sees God, for all such conscious activities involve the separation of the subject from its object. In the ecstasy all such disunion and separation are annihilated. The soul does not look upon God from the outside. It becomes one with God. It is God. Such mystical raptures can, in the nature of the case, only be momentary, and the soul sinks back exhausted to the levels of ordinary consciousness. Plotinus claimed to have been exalted in this divine ecstasy several times during his life.

After Plotinus Neo-Platonism continues with modifications in his successors, Porphyry, Iamblicus, Syrianus, Proclus, and others.

The essential character of Neo-Platonism comes out in its theory of the mystical exaltation of the subject to God. It is the extremity of subjectivism, the forcing of the individual subject to the centre of the universe, to the position of the Absolute Being. And it follows naturally upon the heels of Scepticism. In the Sceptics all faith in the power of thought and reason had finally died out. They took as their watchword the utter impotence of reason to reach the truth. From this it was but a step to the position that, if we cannot attain truth by the natural means of thought, we will do so by a miracle. If ordinary consciousness will not suffice, we will pass beyond ordinary consciousness altogether. Neo-Platonism is founded upon despair, the despair of reason. It is the last frantic struggle of the Greek spirit to reach, by desperate means, by force, the point which it felt it had failed to reach by reason. It seeks to take the Absolute by storm. It feels that where sobriety has failed, the violence of spiritual intoxication may succeed.

It was natural that philosophy should end here. For philosophy is founded upon reason. It is the effort to comprehend, to understand, to grasp the reality of things intellectually. Therefore it cannot admit anything higher than reason. To exalt intuition, ecstasy, or rapture, above thought--this is death to philosophy. Philosophy in making such an admission, lets out its own life-blood, which is thought. In Neo-Platonism, therefore, ancient philosophy commits suicide. This is the end. The place of philosophy is taken henceforth by religion. Christianity triumphs, and

sweeps away all independent thought from its path. There is no more philosophy now till a new spirit of enquiry and wonder is breathed into man at the Renaissance and the Reformation. Then the new era begins, and gives birth to a new philosophic impulse, under the influence of which we are still living. But to reach that new era of philosophy, the human spirit had first to pass through the arid wastes of Scholasticism.

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