



Selections from the *Enneads* Plotinus

The system of Plotinus is contained in the Enneads which have come down to us in somewhat disorganized form as gathered together by his pupil Porphyry. The following compilation from that text, translated by Albert Avey, presents an overview of the Neo-Platonic process of emanation and return arranged systematically. Section numbers are from the older edition of the text by Kirchoff (Leipzig, 1856).

A. On the One

All things that exist do so by virtue of ‘unity’, — in so far as they exist in any ultimate sense and in so far as they may be said to be real. For what would anything be if it were not ‘one’? Without the unity of which we speak things do not exist. There can be no army which is not a unit, nor a chorus, nor herd, unless each is ‘one’. Neither is there a household or ship without unity; for the house is a unit and the ship is a unit, and if one took away the unity the household would no longer be a household nor the ship a ship. Continuous magnitudes would not exist if there were no unity to them. When divided, in so far as they lose unity they lose existence. So also with the bodies of plants and animals, each of which is a unit, if unity is lost — being broken up into multiplicity — they lose the being which they had, and no longer continue as they were. And they become other things even then only in so far as these have unity. Similarly there is health when the body is harmonized into unity, and beauty when the essence of unity controls the parts, and virtue in the soul when it is unified and brought into a single organic whole (9.1)

There must be something prior to all, simple, and different from the things which are posterior to it, self-existent, unmingled with the things which come from it, and yet able in another way to be present with the others, being really one, not something else first then secondarily one, of which it is false even that it is one; but of this One no description nor scientific knowledge is possible. Indeed it must be said to be beyond ‘being’; for if it were not simple, without any composition and synthesis, and really one, it would not be a first principle. And it is wholly self-sufficient since it is simple and prior to all things. What is not first needs something prior to itself, and that which is not simple demands those simple elements which are within it, that it may be composed of them. Such a One must be unique, for if there were another such both together would constitute a larger unit. For we hold that they are not two bodies nor is the Primary One a body. For no body is simple, and a body is subject to generation; it is not an ultimate principle. The ultimate principle is unoriginated, and being incorporeal and really one it is able to stand first. (7.1)

Since substances which have an origin are of some form (for no one could say anything else of what is generated from the One), and since it is not any particular form but all, without exception, the first principle must be formless. And being formless it is not substance; for

substance must be particular and determinate. But this cannot be regarded as particular, for it would not be a principle, but merely that particular thing which you may have called it. If then all things are included among what are generated, which of them will you say is the first principle? Only what is none of them could be said to stand above the rest. But these constitute existing things and Being in general. The First Principle then is beyond Being. To say that it is beyond Being does not assert any definite attribute. It does not define it. Nor does it give it a name. It applies to it only the appellation “not-this”. In doing so it nowhere sets limits to it. It would be absurd to seek to delimit such a boundless nature. He who wishes to do this prevents himself from getting upon its track in any wise, even little by little. But just as he who wishes to see the Intelligible must abandon all imagery of the perceptible in order to contemplate what is beyond the perceptible, so he who wishes to contemplate what is beyond the Intelligible will attain the contemplation of it by letting go everything intelligible, through this means learning that it is, abandoning the search for what it is. To tell what it is would involve a reference to what it is not, for there is no quality in what has no particular character. But we are in painful doubt as to what we should say of it; so we speak of the ineffable and give it a name, meaning to endow it with some significance to ourselves so far as we can. Perhaps this name ‘The One’ implies merely opposition to plurality. . . . But if The One were given positive content, a name and signification, it would be less appropriately designated than when one does not give any name. It may be said that description of it is carried thus far in order that he who has begun his search with that which indicates the simplest of all things may end by negating even this, on the ground that it was taken simply as the most adequate and the nearest description possible for him who used it, but not even this is adequate to the revelation of that nature, because it is inaudible, not to be understood through hearing, and if by any sense at all by vision alone. But if the eye that sees seeks to behold a form it will not descry even this. (29.6)

B. Emanation

If there exists anything beside the First Principle it must be derived from it, either immediately or through connection with it by way of what is between them ; and there must be a second and a third order of beings, the one dependent upon the first, the other upon the second....If then there be any second thing beside the First, it cannot be simple; for the one would then be many. Whence then is this latter? From the First; it does not exist by chance; for then the First would not be the Principle of all things. How then does it come from the First? If the First is perfect, the most perfect of all, and the primary power, it must be the most powerful of all things, and other powers must resemble it in so far as they have power at all. Now in the case of other things we see that whatever reaches its perfection becomes creative, and does not permit itself to remain alone, but creates another. Not only is this true in the case of what has power of choice, but also those things which produce without choice, even lifeless things imparting their being so far as they are able; for example, fire warms, snow cools, and drugs work their effects upon other things, and so in all other such cases, working after the manner of the First Principle to their utmost capacity in duration of influence and in excellence of quality. How then could the Most Perfect and Supreme Good remain by itself as if begrudging its influence or lacking in power, — when it is the generator of all? How could it then be the First Principle? And something must be begotten of it if there is also to be any from those things which are sustained by it. For that they should come from it is unavoidable. The begetter must be of highest rank; and that which

is begotten, and is second in rank to it, must be superior to the rest. (7.1)

The One is all things and yet not one of them. The source of all things is not identical with all, and yet in a sense it is; for from it things sprang forth as it were. Rather, it is not yet all, but will be. How then could all things spring from the One, when it is simple, presenting no variety nor duplicity whatever in it? It is because there was nothing in it that all things sprang from it. And in order that the real might exist it was itself not real, but the generator of the Real, And this was as it were the first act of generation. Being perfect in that it sought nothing; possessed nothing, and wanted nothing, it overflowed, and its superabundance caused the creation of another essence. This product turned back toward it, received fullness of being, began to reflect upon itself, and thus became mind. Its position in relation to the One made it real, its contemplation of itself made it mind. Since it has taken its stand so that it may contemplate itself it has become both mind and reality at once.

Thus then being like the First Principle, it creates likenesses through its superabundance of power. And this is a likeness of it just as that which is prior to it produced a likeness of itself. And this development of essence became soul, arising out of the other without its being destroyed thereby. Mind also originated without affecting that which preceded it. The soul however does not create without being affected at all, but by changing it begot a likeness. Looking to the source from which it came it receives fullness of being; but going forth into another movement in the opposite direction it generates an image of itself, — sensation and such life as is found in plants. But nothing is detached or cut off from that which preceded it. Wherefore the soul of man seems to extend down even to the level of plants. In a certain sense it does because a part of it is in plants. It is indeed not all in plants, but it is generated in plants so far because it descended thus low, forming another level of substance in its process, and in eagerness for what is below. For that which is prior to this and dependent upon mind allows mind to remain by itself.

So procession occurs from the first to the last, each stage being left in its own place, that which is generated receiving the next lower rank. (11.1-2)

How' must we conceive this Immovable? We must imagine a radiance proceeding from it without affecting it, like the bright light surrounding the sun, being continuously generated from it without its being affected. And all real things so long as they last give off from their substance a peculiar emanation dependent upon them, surrounding them and proceeding from their power, being a likeness as it were of the original from which it sprang. Fire gives off heat. Snow does not retain its coldness within itself. But especially do fragrant things illustrate this; for so long as they last there goes forth something from them into the surrounding air, an emanation which all things near enjoy. (10.6)

C. Intellect

All things which have attained their perfection procreate. That which is eternally perfect eternally begets something, and that a thing eternal. But it begets something inferior to itself. What then shall we say about the Most Perfect? Nothing arises from it except what is next greatest after it. But the greatest and second after it is mind. For mind contemplates it and feels need of nothing else. But the Most Perfect has no need of mind. That which is begotten of what is superior to mind is mind, and mind is superior to all other things; other things are posterior to it. . . . But mind contemplates its source not because it is separated

from it, but because it is next after it and there is nothing between; and this is true also in the case of soul and mind. Everything has a longing for and loves that which begot it, and especially when there are only the one that begot and the one begotten. And when the Supremely Good is the one who begot, the one begotten is necessarily joined to Him so intimately that it is separated only in so far as it is a second being.

We say that mind is an image of the First Principle; but we must speak more clearly. First, that which is begotten must be in a sense that which begot it, and retain many features of it and be a likeness of him as the light is of the sun. But that other is not mind. How then does it generate mind? — In that it turned back toward it and beheld it, and this contemplation is mind. (10.6-7)

Let us understand then that intelligence existed without connection with any particular, nor acting upon anything, so that it was not a specialized intelligence, but was like knowledge before it takes a particular form, and generic knowledge prior to any particulars under it. Knowledge in general, though no one of the particulars is the potentiality of all, and each of them is that particular in actuality, and potentially it is all things; and with intelligence in general it is so. Those forms are generic which lie potentially within the whole, and which while including what is of special form, are potentially the whole. For the whole is predicated of the part, but not the part of the whole. The latter must remain unrestricted, by itself. So in a sense mind as a whole must be said to exist prior to the actual particulars, in a sense the particulars prior, they being pervaded by the universal, and mind in general being the source of supply for the particulars and on the other hand their potentiality, and containing them in the universal. They on the other hand which are partial contain the universal as particular sciences contain science in general. The Great Mind exists of itself; and each particular intelligence by itself as partial; the partial are involved in the whole and the whole in the parts. Each exists by itself and also in the other, and the other is by itself and in them ; and all are potentially in it, which exists by itself and is actually all at once but potentially each one apart, and the particulars are actually just what they are but potentially the whole. In so far as they are what they are said to be they are actually that; in so far as they are that genus they are potentially it. But in so far as mind is genus it is the potentiality of all the forms which are under it though actually no one of them, but all are latent in it. In so far as it actually is what it is prior to any special form, it is not particular. But if they are to be in actuality such as they are in general form some power from it must become the cause. (39.50)

When” life is rational and not an imperfect actuality it omits none of the things which we find to be works of reason, but it has all things in its power, holding them as real and as intelligence would. Mind holds them as in reflective thought, but not in discursive reason; and nothing is omitted which is in any degree rational. But there is as it were one Reason, supreme, perfect, embracing all, entering into all from its own original being, or rather which has always entered into them in such a way that the process is never evident. For absolutely everywhere whatever one would find in nature as a consequence of deliberation this one would find existing in reason without deliberation, so that one would think a deliberating mind had created what is, as in the case of the principles which produce living things. For as the most careful reasoning would calculate as accurately as possible that things should be so are they in the principles which exist prior to deliberation. (39.51)

D. Soul

Soul is an image of intelligence. As the word uttered is the likeness of the word in the mind so also is soul the expression of intelligence, and its whole actualization, the life which it sends forth as the substance of another type of existence, just as of fire one part is the heat which remains with it the other that which it gives off. We must conceive it in that case not as leaving it, but as partly remaining within it, partly constituting another existence. Being therefore originated from intelligence soul is intelligent, and its intelligence is shown in reasonings, and its perfection is derived from intelligence as from a father who nourishes the offspring he begot, — an imperfect thing in comparison with himself. Its basis, then, is in intelligence and it is the reason expressed in actuality when intellect is contemplated by it. When it looks in upon reason it has within itself as its own that which it is thinking of and realizing. And we must say that those alone are the true activities of the soul, which are intellectual and from within. Inferior things are from elsewhere and are accidents of such a soul. Mind then makes the soul much more divine both through being its progenitor and by its presence within it. For nothing separates them except the difference of their natures, so that they are in contact and are as the one content the other form. The matter of intelligence is beautiful being of intellectual form and simple. (10.3)

In the intelligible world there is true Being. Mind is the best part of it. But souls are also there; for they are there and come from there. And that world contains souls without bodies, but this one contains those which have taken on bodies and have been divided among them. There all mind is together, and no separation or partition has been made; but all souls are together in the one world, without spatial separation. Mind is always undivided and not parted. And soul is there undivided and unseparated. But it has a nature subject to division. And its division is the process of descending- and entering into bodies. It is reasonable to say that it is divisible in connection with bodies, because thus it descends and is divided. How then is it also indivisible? It has not wholly descended, but there is a part of it which has not come down, which has not the nature to be divided. That which is indivisible and that which is divisible in connection with bodies are the same through its being both above and below and being suspended from there but having extended down to this realm as a radius from a center. Having descended hither it has, the power of contemplation through the very same part through which it retains the nature of the whole. For not even here is it merely divisible, but in a sense also indivisible. For that part of it which is divided is indivisibly divided. For entering into the whole body without being divided it is divided in that it as a whole is in the whole body. (21.16)

When individual souls are moved by an intellectual desire and turn toward the source from which they originated, but have also a power extending to things below, (just as light depends upon the sun above which does not grudge to dispense it to what is below it), they remain securely with the Whole in the intelligible realm, and in heaven join with the Whole in its administration, as kings associate with a universal ruler in his administration without descending from their royal places; for they are then in the same state together. But descending from the Whole to a partial and separate existence and as it were being weary of associating with another each withdraws into an existence of its own. But when it has done this for some time, fleeing from the Whole and withdrawing by differentiation, and when it does not look to the Intelligible, becoming a particular it grows solitary and weak and troubled and looks to the individual. And through separation from the host on high, having attached itself to a particular body and fleeing all the rest, concentrating upon that

one, which is buffeted by all things it both withdraws from the Whole and attends to the individual with circumstantial care, being already attached to it, and attending extraneous things, associating with and entering deeply into it. Then there comes to it what may be called a molting, and it becomes entangled in the bonds of the body losing the innocence which was its own in the administration of the upper realm, in the region of the universal soul. (6.4)

E. Matter

Emanations from the other levels of Reality occur without their being disturbed, but the soul, we have said, is modified while generating the sense realm derived from it, and nature as far down as plants. It has this nature even in us, but holds it in subordination since it is only partial; but when it enters into plants it is the sole controlling factor. This then begets nothing totally distinct from it; for there is no longer any life beyond it; what is then begotten is lifeless. Everything which was generated before this was generated without form, but received form by turning toward that which begot it as toward its guardian; in this case that which is begotten cannot be a form of soul; for it is not alive, but is absolutely indeterminate. Though in the prior cases also there is indefiniteness, still it is within their form, not entire indeterminateness, but as it were with reference to their perfection; but the present indeterminateness is absolute. Attaining its perfection it becomes body by taking on the form which is fitting to its potentiality, as the receptacle of that which begot and nourished it, it being the very last feature in the body derived from on high but abiding on the lowest level below. (15.1)

But we must return to the consideration of matter as underlying substrate, and to the things which are said to be made of it, in order that the unreality and neutral character of matter may be recognized. Now it is not a concrete body, since 'body' is derivative and compound, and matter along with another factor composes body. From this it has been given the same description (as has Reality) with reference to its incorporeality; because both Being and matter are different from bodies. Being not soul neither is it mind nor life nor form nor reason nor limit ; for it is unlimited ; nor potentiality, for what can it do? But falling outside all these it could not rightly receive the predicate of 'being'; 'non-being' one might reasonably call it, and that not in the sense in which movement or position is non-being; but really non-being, a mere image and appearance of mass and a longing for substance; never standing still, invisible in itself, and ever escaping him who would see it, existing when one does not look at it, but seen by no one who intently gazes at it; always displaying contradictions in itself, being both large and small, less and more, lacking and superabounding, an image not abiding nor capable on the other hand of fleeing. It is not capable of doing even this because it has received no strength from intelligence, but is completely lacking in being. Wherefore it proves false to all its promise, for if it appears large it is really small, and if more it is less, and its existence is in appearance, being non-existence, like a fleeting toy. Whence also the things which seem to be in it are toys, mere images within an image, as in a mirror things situated in one place appear in another and it seems full though containing nothing, and all are mere appearances.

The likenesses and images of real things which enter into and come forth from it do so in a formless image, and because of its formlessness when they are seen in it they appear to be producing something in it, but they really produce nothing, for they are powerless and weak and possessed of no firmness. And since it also has none they go through it

without affecting it as through water or as if one were introducing forms into the so-called 'vacuum'. On the other hand if the things seen in it were of the same kind as those from which they came, perhaps one might suppose that that which takes form in them was effected by them, — attributing to them some of the power of the source which emitted them

But now since the things which cast the reflections are of one kind and those which are seen in it are of a different sort, from these facts one can discern the falsity of its receptiveness, that which is seen therein being false and possessing no similarity at all to the source which caused them. Being themselves weak and false, and falling into a false substance, as in a dream or in water or a mirror, they leave it necessarily unaffected. And yet in the cases mentioned the things seen therein possess a similarity to the things which see them. (25.7)

It is possible thus also to understand the necessity of evil. For since the good is not alone existent it is necessary that through departure from it, or, if one should wish thus to express it, through continual descent or withdrawal from it, the final stage (one beyond which it is not possible for anything further to be generated) , should be evil. That which follows the First exists of necessity; so also the last, and this is matter, and it contains nothing more of the First. This is the necessity of evil. (45.7)

F. Sin and Salvation.

Consider a soul that is deformed, intemperate, unjust, full of the utmost desires, of the greatest agitation, in fear because of its cowardice, in envy because of meanness, thinking all the thoughts of mortal and low character, distorted in every way, fond of impure pleasures, living a life of all kinds of bodily experiences, regarding its deformity as pleasant. Shall we not say that this very deformity has come upon it as extraneous evil which has outraged it, and made it unclean, mingled with much evil, having no longer a pure life or feelings, but through the admixture of evil living an obscure life, deeply tinged with mortality, no longer contemplating what the soul ought to contemplate, no longer allowing itself to remain apart, but being attracted always toward the external, the low and the dark. Being impure, doubtless, and borne every way by the attractions of the things which appeal to the senses, heavily weighted with the body, close linked with the material, and having even received it into itself, it has assumed a foreign form through mixture with what is low, like one who had entered mud or mire and who no longer displayed the beauty he once had, but should be seen covered with this mud and mire which he had acquired ; and upon him has come ill-favor through the acquisition of a foreign substance, and it will be necessary for him, if he wishes to be beautiful again, to become what he was through washing and cleansing.

We should be right in saying that the soul becomes ill-favored through mingling and mixing with the body and through inclination toward it, and toward matter. And this is ugliness in a soul: not to be pure and unalloyed, as it is bad for gold to be mixed with soil, which if removed leaves the gold beautiful, purged of other substances, being left in its purity. In the same manner the soul purified of desires which it has because of the body with which it has come into too close association, being freed from other passions and purified of those which it has because of its embodiment, remaining in its purity, puts away all the baseness derived from its other nature. (1.5)

There should therefore be a reascent to the good which every soul desires. If anyone has

seen it he knows what I mean, — how beautiful it is. It must be desired as good, and one's desire must be for this. The attainment of it is for those who rise to higher things and who have turned toward it and have put off the things which we put on in our descent, just as for those who enter the innermost recesses of the temple there are lustrations and putting off of garments until one finally goes up naked, until one in the ascent passing beyond everything which is alien to God, by himself alone sees only that which is unalloyed, simple, pure, upon which all things depend, to which all look, and through which all are and live and think. For it is the cause of life and mind and existence. Then if one should see this, what love would he experience, what desire, wishing to be united with it, and with what joy would he be overwhelmed! It is possible for one who does not yet behold it to desire it as the good. But it is the lot of the one who sees it to be thrilled with beauty, to be filled with wonder and pleasure, painlessly overwhelmed, and to love with a true love, pierced with longing, and to scorn other loves and despise those things which were considered beautiful before. This is the sort of experience which comes to those who have met with the forms of gods or divinities ; no longer can they endure in the same old way the beauties of other bodies.

What should we think if one should behold the very essence of beauty, in its own purity, not joined to flesh or body, not on earth, not in heaven, but where it is pure? For all these things are extraneous, and composite, not first principles, but derived from the First Principle, If then one should behold that which supplies all, and remaining by itself gives out but receives nothing into itself, continuing in the contemplation of such an object, and enjoying it, becoming like it, what further beauty could he want? For this, being the very essence of beauty and its first principle, makes its lovers beautiful, and makes them lovely: The greatest and supreme contest which presents itself to the soul is for this ; in behalf of this is every labor done, that one may not be without a share in the highest contemplation. And he who catches sight of it is blessed, having beheld the blessed vision. Unhappy is he who gains it not. For he is not unfortunate who does not meet with beautiful colors or bodies, nor power nor authority, nor he who does not gain a kingdom, but he who misses this alone for the attainment of which one ought to let go a kingdom, and even authority over all the earth and sea and heaven, if abandoning these things and disdaining them and turning to that Other one might attain the vision of it. (1.7)

Plotinus. "Enneads." *Readings in Philosophy*. Ed. Albert Edwin Avey. Columbus, OH: R.G. Adams and Company, 1921.

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