
UNIT 4 NEO-PLATONISM

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

The originality of Plotinus lies basically in the elaboration of a harmonious system out of the main insights that he took from his predecessors. After the death of Plotinus, Neoplatonism continued to flourish in the Syrian School especially, in the School of Athens, in the School at Pergamum and in the Alexandrian school. The influences of Platonism can be seen in the early Christian theologians like St. Augustine.

In this unit we shall briefly examine

- the life and writings of Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism,
- the central themes of his philosophical system,
- the earlier philosophies from which his system borrows ideas
- some philosophical problems of the system and
- The post-Plotinian developments of the system in various Schools of the ancient world.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Neoplatonism was the last flowering of the Greek thought in late antiquity. Its birth place was Alexandria, that great city which was founded by Alexander the Great in Egypt and which became a major centre of intellectual activity of the ancient world. Situated at the intersection between the East and the West, Alexandria became the crucible in which the Eastern religious and mystical tendencies freely intermingled with Greek philosophical thought. This cross-cultural fecundation had given birth to Jewish Hellenistic philosophy (founded by Philo) and Neopythagoreanism. And in the third century A.D. the same tendencies gave birth to Neoplatonism.

The system was founded by Plotinus. The name Neoplatonism is of later origin; it was in the eighteenth century that this name was given to Plotinus's system. He

himself understood it as authentic Platonism, an elaboration of the fundamental insights of Plato's philosophy. Basically it is a metaphysico-religious system which attempts to give a holistic picture of reality with the soteriological aim of attaining salvation through the practice of asceticism. The system has been so pervasively and profoundly influenced by Neopythagoreanism, Platonism and Stoicism that some scholars consider it yet another eclectic attempt of late antiquity.

4.2 THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF PLOTINUS

Plotinus's distinguished pupil Porphyry has written a biography of his master. Plotinus was born in 205 A.D. in Lycopolis, Upper Egypt. It was at the age of twenty-eight that he came to philosophy. We do not know much about his life before this period; Porphyry says his master was reticent about this period of his life. He came to philosophy in search of truth. None of his early teachers was able to satisfy his inner thirst. He changed teachers one after the other. At last one of his friends led him to Ammonias Saccas. He was deeply impressed by the philosophy of Zaccas and remained with him for eleven years. Then motivated by the desire to obtain first hand knowledge about Persian and Indian wisdom, he joined expedition against the Persians led by Emperor Gordianus. However, the Emperor was assassinated in Persia, and the expedition came to naught. Plotinus fled from the army to Antioch and in the same year reached Rome. In Rome he set up his school and began to teach philosophy. After ten years he began to write. He gained the confidence of emperor Gallienus. Wanting to set up a commune where the members would live together practicing philosophy and asceticism in search of salvation, he approached the emperor for the grant of land. The emperor himself was positively disposed, but some influential courtiers prevented the royal grant of land to Plotinus. It is said that towards the end of his life he became a leprosy patient. He spent his last days in the estate of his friend of Arabic origin accompanied only by one pupil and a physician. He died in 270.

All his works were composed in a span of sixteen years beginning in 253. They have come down to us in an edition prepared by his illustrious pupil Porphyry. He arranged the entire work of Plotinus into six sections; each section is called an *Ennead*, because it contains nine treatises.

4.3 THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLOTINUS

As it is already mentioned that Plotinus did not think of himself as the founder of a new school of thought, Neoplatonism, but as a genuine Platonist, that is, as an interpreter and follower of Plato. For him Plato possessed the truth in its entirety. Therefore it is only to be expected that certain insights of Plato form the backbone of his philosophical system. The other influences such as Aristotle, Neopythagoreanism and Stoicism are combined with the dominant thought of Plato without sacrificing its kernel.

Central to Plato's thought is the doctrine that besides the sensible world there exists a world of the intelligible. The latter is a world that is inhabited by Ideas, which are immaterial and eternal. This world alone has the true being (*ousia*); the world of the senses has no real existence; it is a mere shadow. The doctrine of an intelligible world in separation from and in opposition to the sensible world is central also to the system of Plotinus. However, Plotinus's world of the intelligibles is richer than that of Plato: it consists of three *hypostases* or three strata of realities.

THE REALM OF THE INTELLIGIBLE: THE THREE HYPOSTASES

Plotinus's philosophy begins with the question about the origin of all things. In a throwback to the Aristotelian theory of the existence of a First Cause of all things Plotinus holds that there is a source from which everything that exists originates. Then he speculates about the nature of this first principle. He calls the primal source of everything the One (*Monos*). From the One proceeds, through a process of emanation, Intelligence (or Mind) and from Intelligence proceeds the Soul. These three together make up the world of the Intelligibles. At the lower level of reality is the matter, the world of the sensibles; it also proceeds ultimately from the One. Thus in Plotinus we have a picture of reality that is unified in so far as everything that exists proceeds from one single principle, is sustained by it in being finally returns to it. The question of the One and Many that puzzled the Greek mind from the inception of philosophy is taken up once again and answered in a novel way.

The One (*Monos*): The origin of everything, the first principle is what Plotinus calls 'the One'. But what is the nature of this principle? How to conceive of it with more definiteness? He speculates that it must be beyond being, because the original must be outside the derived; and whatever is derived is being. Thus the primal source of everything is not a being but lies beyond being. It is also beyond thought. He rejects Aristotelian view that the First Cause of all is a self-thinking thought. For him to attribute thought to the source of all things is to abrogate its primacy, because with Parmenides he equates thought and being: "to think and to be are the same thing". Thus if the source of everything is beyond being it should also be beyond thought. The One does not think, neither of itself nor of other things. He derives the absolute absence of thought in the primal source also from the fact that it is a perfect unity, a One having no plurality or multiplicity whatever. The lack of plurality and multiplicity in the primal source is asserted on the ground that if it has to be the ultimate source of everything there should not be anything else besides itself. If that is granted then it can be also argued that there is no thought in him, because to think is to think of something and therefore implies plurality. There is also no volition in the One, for willing too implies the distinction between the one who wills and that which is willed. It has no qualities, for qualities imply the distinction between subject and predicate. Nothing can be predicated of it; even to say that "it is One" or that "the One is", is false, because it is beyond all being and essence. No name can be applied to it; it eludes all definition and knowledge. It is neither in movement nor at rest. Since it has no parts, it is without structure and without form.

The One is not only the source of everything, but is also the ultimate goal towards which everything else strives. Therefore, Plotinus calls it also the Good.

Intelligence:

Plotinus uses the Greek word *Nous* to refer to the second hypostasis. It is variously translated, as "Intelligence," "Intellect," "Mind," "Spirit" etc. It is the first to emanate. Being an emanation from the One it is lower than the One. It is Being, thought and multiplicity.

It is in fact the first and the highest Being, since the One, though prior to it, is not a being but something that lies beyond being. This highest Being thinks or is thought itself. But its thought is not discursive thought, but intuition or contemplation. While discursive thought proceeds in time (the premises are thought first and then the conclusion is derived from it) intuitive thought is timeless; it is immediate apprehension.

The object of Intelligence's thought is two fold. On the one hand it thinks of the One; but even this most perfect thought is unable to get a uniform idea of the One. On the other hand, like Aristotle's First Cause it thinks of itself.

Plotinus's Intelligence roughly corresponds to Plato's world of Ideas. It is in Intelligence that the Ideas or Forms exist. In holding this view he departs from Plato for whom Ideas are self-subsisting entities which do not need a thought or intelligence to exist. He explicitly argues against Longinus who defended the view that ideas can exist outside thought. However, on this point Plotinus has predecessors in Platonic school, especially in Antiochus of Ascalon who had interpreted Ideas as thoughts of God. In yet another departure from Plato Plotinus holds that there are Ideas corresponding not only to each species but also to each individual. Plotinus also conceives of these ideas as active forces with life or as spirits. He further identifies Ideas with numbers.

Plotinus also maintains that some kind of matter, which he calls 'Intelligible matter', exists in Intelligence. This kind of matter is different from sensible matter, which comes into existence only at the end of emanation. It is difficult to pinpoint with any degree of accuracy why Plotinus introduced intelligible matter into his system. Some scholars like Eduard Zeller holds that it is to account for the plurality or multiplicity in Intelligence: it is on account of intelligible matter that the Intelligence is resolved into different Ideas. However, according to some other scholars Plotinus introduced intelligible matter to explain the interconnected unity of the ideas within Intelligence.

In spite of the multiplicity and plurality in Intelligence it remains a unified whole. In it everything is contained in everything else without losing its identity. It is like the unity of a deductive system: every theorem contains all the others, and thus, the totality of the system.

The third and the last stratum of the Intelligible world is the *Soul*. It proceeds directly from Intelligence, but ultimately from the One. The emanative process which is conceived by Plotinus as the radiation of light fades further as it comes out of Intelligence; the result is a new realm of being, namely, the Soul. This realm is therefore, less perfect than Intelligence.

The realm of the Soul consists of the higher or the first World-Soul, the lower or the second World-Soul and the individual souls of gods, stars, demons, humans, animals and plants. The first to emanate from Intelligence is the World-Soul or the Universal Soul. It does not communicate directly with matter. This task is performed by a second World-Soul which proceeds from the first. This second or lower World-Soul combines with matter and becomes the soul of the phenomenal world; Plotinus calls it nature (*physis*). Thus according to Plotinus the entire world is an ensouled being. Then ensues the emanation of a plurality of individual souls, namely, the souls of gods, of stars of demons and the earthly beings of humans, animals and plants. With the production of the individual souls the lowest limit of the Intelligible world is reached. When the Divine descends still further, matter is created as its most imperfect manifestation.

Prior to the production of matter the souls exist without intermingling with the material universe, forming a unified realm by themselves in the Intelligible world. The World-Soul comprehends within itself all the individual souls which are connected with it as their origin. This realm forms a connecting link between the Intelligible world and the sensible world. It not only looks upward towards Intelligence from which it emanated but also looks downward towards the sensible world.

Check your progress I

Note: a) use the space provided to write your answer
 b) check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What is Neo-Platonism? Explain.

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2) In Plotinus' view What is 'One' and what are its characteristics?

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THE REALM OF THE SENSIBLE WORLD

Light as it travels farther and farther away from its source fades away gradually until it becomes complete darkness. In the same manner emanation as it continues its journey after the realm of the soul, becomes weaker; it becomes complete darkness. For Plotinus this total darkness at the far end of emanation is matter. It emanates from the lower World-Soul. It is the fundament of the sensible world. In itself it is totally indeterminate: it is formless and without quality; it is mere potentiality for being and not being; it is a mere shadow. The physical universe is born when the lower World-Soul illuminates and informs this matter, with itself and the seminal ideas (*logoi spermatikoi*) that exist in it. The soul pours itself first into heaven. So the noblest and purest souls dwell there. They have ethereal bodies. Stars are created next, whom Plotinus conceives of as ensouled beings. Plotinus calls them invisible gods; their souls too are noble. They transcend time and change. The space between the stars and the earth is the dwelling place of demons. On the earth dwell the souls that have taken human, animal and plant bodies. Thus according to Plotinus not only man but also animals and plants are ensouled beings.

RELIGION AND SALVATION OF THE SOUL

As we mentioned above Plotinus's is a metaphysico-religious system. Its metaphysics is closely associated with the religious idea of the salvation of the soul. It is metaphysics in service of salvation of the soul. Philosophy is not just a matter of intellectually knowing the real, but its final goal is to liberate man.

But how does Plotinus conceive of salvation? Existence in the body is not a happy existence for the soul. Like the Pythagoreans and the Orphics, Plotinus conceives of the embodied state of the soul as an 'imprisonment'. In the dungeon of the body it does not enjoy full freedom and happiness. Matter is evil and any entanglement with it makes the soul miserable. Salvation is primarily liberation from the body; it is the return of the soul to its original abode, which is the supernatural world where it contemplates the One and becomes united with it.

Since the original and the natural abode of the soul is the supernatural world, it can find happiness only by returning to it. But unfortunately it finds itself entangled in the material universe. It has inclinations towards the sensual. To attain its original state of happiness, it has to resist these inclinations and free itself from the body and everything that is connected with it. In other words, it has to undergo purification (*catharsis*). To effect this purification Plotinus advocates several things, Firstly one should practice virtues. Secondly, one should practice mediate thought and dialectic. This thinking has to do with the truly real, with ideas and the essences of things. In the third place comes immediate thought or contemplation of the divine *Nous*. But this level is not sufficient. Still there is the distinction between the contemplator and the contemplated. The highest point is ecstasy. Here we are raised above thought. We are filled with the divine light and become one with the One: all distinctions disappear. Plotinus himself attained this ecstatic experience four times in his life.

RE-INCARNATION

Plotinus believed in the re-incarnation of the soul. Souls that have not attained complete purification at the time of the death of the body cannot go to its original supernatural abode. They transmigrate to other bodies. They will have to take lower or superior bodies depending on their level of purification. Some migrate into plant bodies; others into animal bodies and others into other human bodies.

PLOTINUS AND HIS DEBT TO TRADITION

In order to place Plotinus's philosophy in perspective, it is important to note how much his system is indebted to the thought of his predecessors. He is profoundly and pervasively influenced by his predecessors. He is deeply rooted in a long and complex philosophical tradition that begins with the Pre-socratics. He borrowed from Plato, Aristotle, Neopythagoreans and Stoics. His originality lies in his building up of a harmonious system out of the various disparate ideas that he borrowed from his predecessors.

Plato

Plotinus understood himself as a true Platonist; therefore it is only to be expected that we find Plato's influences on him. Plato's establishment of a supernatural world above the natural world becomes crucial for Plotinus's system. His characterization of the supersensibles as the true being and sensibles as mere shadows, are directly borrowed from Plato.

Aristotle

Porphyry tells us that Plotinus's "writings are full of the concealed Stoic and Peripathetic doctrines; Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in particular is concentrated in them (Vita Plotini, 14, 4-7). Aristotle had presented his Uncaused Prime Cause as the thought thinking itself. For him it was the highest being. Plotinus's Intelligence (*Nous*) is nothing but Aristotle's First Cause, made subordinate to the Platonic One. He thinks of Intelligence as the self-thinking thought (*Nous*) and as the highest being. Perhaps, in making his Ideas contents of Intelligence, Plotinus is making concessions to Aristotle who had attacked Plato's conception of Ideas as self-subsisting entities.

Stoics

Though Plotinus constantly attacks the materialism of the Stoics, he has also borrowed much from them. His third hypostasis (the Soul) possesses many characteristics of

the Deity of the Stoics. For Stoics the Deity is the *logos* (reason); it is immanent in the universe; it holds together ‘in sympathy’ all the parts of the physical universe. Stoics believed in the omnipresence of the Divine in the universe. Plotinus’s lower World-Soul is immanent in the physical universe forming its animating principle. However, it should be noted that for Plotinus this immanent principle also transcends the world, while for Stoics it is fully immanent in the world.

SOME TENSIONS WITHIN PLOTINUS’S SYSTEM

It is not entirely correct to say that Plotinus managed to harmonize seamlessly all the elements that were borrowed by him from other sources into his system. There are certain unresolved tensions within it. Firstly, there is a tension between the doctrine of emanation and the doctrine of the fall of the soul. According to Plotinus’s descriptions the emanation is an entirely involuntary process; it does not involve a will. What is full must overflow and what is mature must beget. If it is an involuntary process then it is wrong to impute guilt and fault to the emanating entity. And yet often Plotinus speaks of the emanation as a whole and, in particular the production of matter by the soul and its entanglement with it as an apostasy and fall. He says that it is recklessness and the desire to belong to nobody but oneself that cause Intelligence to break away from the One. The Soul is motivated to break away from Intelligence by the desire to govern; by a craving for that which is worse; by a will to isolation. Soul produces matter because of its wish to belong to itself. Moreover, he calls the lowest kind of soul “the most foolhardy”.

This tension is already present in Plato. Plotinus was trying to do justice to some of the passages of Plato’s writings. On the one hand the myth of *Phaedrus* implies that the souls fall by some kind of failing. In *Phaedo* Plato stresses that the soul must try to flee the body and be polluted as little as possible by it. But on the other hand, in *Timaeus* Plato holds that the first incarnation is the work of the Demiurge and thus a blameless event. And according to the myth of the *Republic* embodiment is the result of a universal necessity. However, Plotinus was not unaware of the contradiction. His responses to it are varied. Sometimes he attempts to prove that there is no contradiction. But finding this attempt unsuccessful he introduces an innovative theory to overcome the problem. According to this theory a true fall has never taken place. Actually, even when in a body the soul still lives its original celestial life and remains unseparated from Intelligence. Only the soul is not aware of this hidden life of its. In other words we are partly unconscious of what happens in our minds. What is true of the Soul in relation to Intelligence is even truer of the relation between our embodied selves and Intelligence. Not even when present in us does Intelligence discontinue its activity.

Secondly, there is also a tension between the two ways in which Plotinus speaks of matter. In the main, matter is spoken of the emanation from the soul; however, sometimes he speaks as though matter was already present for the soul to enter into it.

Thirdly, as all pantheistic systems, Plotinus’s system too is unable to account for the existence of evil in the world. Plotinus situates all evil in matter; evil is utter privation; since matter is utter privation it is the source of all evil. But matter is an emanation ultimately from the One-Good. How can the Good be the source of evil?

Fourthly, Plotinus’s theory of emanation too is not free from problems. The problem with the theory is that he has not enunciated this doctrine with any degree of conceptual clarity.

4.4 NEOPLATONISM AFTER PLOTINUS

The various schools that adopted Neoplatonism are the School of Plotinus in Rome, the Syrian School, School of Pergamum, the Alexandrian School and the Athenian School.

The School of Plotinus

Most prominent among the exponents of Neoplatonism in the Plotinian School was Porphyry. He studied under Plotinus for eleven years. In his interpretations of Neoplatonism he laid great stress on the soteriological aspect. The main business of philosophy is to attain the salvation of the soul. He stressed the element of will and guilt on the part of the soul in getting involved with the world; there is also a subsequent stress on the ascetic practices such as abstinence from meat, celibacy, avoidance of theatrical performances and similar entertainment to purify oneself from this guilt. He also devoted many of his writings to the defense of popular religious practices such as the worship of gods and heroes, magic etc. He denied that human souls pass into the bodies of animals after death, as animals do not have reason.

The Syrian School

Iamblichus (d. 330) was the most prominent member of the School. The maxim "Doubt no divine miracle, nor any religious belief" is attributed to him. He was more of a speculative theologian than a philosopher. In his speculations on Plotinian system he divided the first principle into two: one lies beyond all principles and is utterly inexpressible; the second corresponds to the One of Plotinus; we can think and speak about it. Similarly, he divided the Intelligible of Plotinus into two realms: the realm of the Intelligibles (i.e. of the Ideas) and the realm of the Intellectual, that is, of living beings. He also holds the theory of the eternity of the world. He agreed with Porphyry's view that human souls do not enter into animal bodies. Among the other members of the Syrian School are Theodorus of Asina, Edesius, Sopater, Dexippus etc.; but very little is known about them.

The School of Pergamum

It was founded by Edesius of Cappadocia. The other members were Eusebius, Maximus and Chrysanthius. All of them were tutors of the emperor Julian (332-363). This school was also devoted to the defense of popular religion of the time, especially against the criticisms of the emerging new religion, Christianity.

The Athenian School

The final modifications of Neoplatonic philosophy took place under the influence of a renewed study of Aristotle, and interestingly it was the Platonic School in Athens that became the chief centre of the resurgence of interest in Aristotle and the consequent modifications of Neoplatonism. In this school Aristotelianism was combined with Iamblican theology. The Neoplatonism of the 5th and 6th centuries is the result of this combination. It was this brand of Neoplatonism that came to influence Christianity. The main figures of the School are Plutarch of Athens, Syrianus and Proclus. The most influential of them was Proclus. He attempted to unify the whole mass of theological and philosophical doctrines available to him from his predecessors into a uniform system, which in later times served as model for Muslim and Christian Scholasticism. Mercurius was the pupil, successor and biographer of Proclus. Damascius followed Mercurius at the headship of the school.

In Alexandria, the birthplace of Neoplatonism, it survived till the end of the ancient world, till the Arab conquest of this city in 642. In contrast to the enthusiastic following of the religious and mystical aspect of it in other Schools, the Alexandrian School remained sober and busied itself with scientific investigations rather than with theological speculations. The anti-Christian feelings were not present in it. Therefore, both Christian and non-Christian scholars studied and worked in the School. Among its distinguished members the name of a woman philosopher is prominent. She is Hypatia, the daughter of the mathematician Theon.

Check your progress II

Note: a) use the space provided to write your answer

b) check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Explain the idea of mysticism and salvation in the teachings of Plotinus and its relation to the popular religions.

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2. State some of the unresolved issues in the philosophy of Plotinus.

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4.5 LET US SUM UP

Neoplatonism was the last grand philosophical effort of the Greek tradition in the ancient world. Plotinus has gathered up the legacy of nearly eight centuries of Greek philosophy into a magnificently unified synthesis. True, in it the great Greek philosophical impulse of rational-critical inquiry atrophies, to some extent, in favour of an irrational mystical impulse. True again, in it the eclectic spirit predominates over the spirit of original inquiry. Therefore Eduard Zeller's verdict that "this last attempt of ancient thought to fashion our knowledge of the world into a philosophic system bore from the beginning the marks of senility upon its countenance" might contain some element of truth. Yet it will be naïve to dismiss it at as a piece of history with only curiosity value. Some of the problems it grapples with are of perennial philosophical interest.

4.6 KEY WORDS

Asceticism : Asceticism (from the Greek: *áskēsis*, "exercise") describes a life-style characterized by abstinence from various sorts of worldly pleasures

(especially sexual activity and consumption of alcohol) often with the aim of pursuing religious and spiritual goals.

- Eclecticism** : Eclecticism is a name given to a group of ancient philosophers who, from the existing philosophical beliefs, tried to select the doctrines that seemed to them most reasonable, and out of these constructed a new system.
- Ecstasy** : Ecstasy is a trance or trance-like state in which an individual transcends normal consciousness.
- Soteriology** : Soteriology is the branch of theology that deals with salvation.

4.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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Zeller, Eduard. *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy*. 1883. 13th edition 1980. Revised by Dr. Wilhelm Nestle. Translated by L.R. Palmer. Dover Publications: New York

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4.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check your progress I

- 1) Neoplatonism was the last flowering of the Greek thought in late antiquity. Basically it is a metaphysico-religious system which attempts to give a holistic picture of reality with the soteriological aim of attaining salvation through the practice of asceticism. The system has been so pervasively and profoundly influenced by Neopythagoreanism, Platonism and Stoicism that some scholars consider it yet another eclectic attempt of late antiquity. The originality of Plotinus lies basically in the elaboration of a harmonious system out of the main insights that he took from his predecessors. After the death of Plotinus, Neoplatonism continued to flourish in the Syrian School especially, in the School of Athens, in the School at Pergamum and in the Alexandrian school. The influences of Platonism can be seen in the early Christian theologians like St. Augustine.
- 2) He calls the primal source of everything the One (*Monos*). From the One proceeds, through a process of emanation, Intelligence (or Mind) and from Intelligence proceeds the Soul. The One (*Monos*): The origin of everything, the first principle is what Plotinus calls 'the One'. But what is the nature of this principle? How to conceive of it with more definiteness? He speculates that it must be beyond being, because the original must be outside the derived; and whatever is derived in being. Thus the primal source of everything is not a being but lies beyond being. It is also beyond thought. He rejects Aristotelian view that the First Cause of all is a self-thinking thought. For him to attribute thought to the source of all things is to abrogate its primacy, because with Parmenides

he equates thought and being: “to think and to be are the same thing”. Thus if the source of everything is beyond being it should also be beyond thought. The One does not think, neither of itself nor of other things. He derives the absolute absence of thought in the primal source also from the fact that it is a perfect unity, a One having no plurality or multiplicity whatever. The lack of plurality and multiplicity in the primal source is asserted on the ground that if it has to be the ultimate source of everything there should not be anything else besides itself. If that is granted then it can be also argued that there is no thought in him, because to think is to think of something and therefore implies plurality. There is also no volition in the One, for willing too implies the distinction between the one who wills and that which is willed. It has no qualities, for qualities imply the distinction between subject and predicate. Nothing can be predicated of it; even to say that “it is One” or that “the One is”, is false, because it is beyond all being and essence. No name can be applied to it; it eludes all definition and knowledge. It is neither in movement nor at rest. Since it has no parts, it is without structure and without form.

The One is not only the source of everything, but is also the ultimate goal towards which everything else strives. Therefore, Plotinus calls it also the Good.

Check your progress II

- 1) The core religion for him was the attainment of this ecstatic union with the Ultimate in a mystical experience. The popular religion of his time was a matter of worshipping the various gods with sacrifices, magical practices etc. It cared less about mystical experiences. And yet Plotinus did not assume a critical attitude towards it. He accommodated the gods of popular religion in his system. He was very critical of those people, especially the Christians who refused honour to the gods. He also attempted to give ‘rational’ interpretations of idolatry, prophecy and magic.
- 3) There are certain unresolved tensions within it. Firstly, there is a tension between the doctrine of emanation and the doctrine of the fall of the soul. Secondly, there is also a tension between the two ways in which Plotinus speaks of matter. Thirdly, as all pantheistic systems, Plotinus’s system too is unable to account for the existence of evil in the world. Fourthly, Plotinus’s theory of emanation too is not free from problems.