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PLOTINUS
PORPHYRY ON PLOTINUS
ENNEAD I



Translated by
A. H. ARMSTRONG

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WITH AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY
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HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
LONDON, ENGLAND

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First published 1966
Reprinted 1978
Revised 1989
Reprinted 1995, 2000

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ISBN 0-674-99484-1

*Printed in Great Britain by St Edmundsbury Press Ltd,
Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, on acid-free paper.*
Bound by Hunter & Foulis Ltd, Edinburgh, Scotland.

NOTE ON REVISION

THE text and translation of this revision (1987) are now in accordance with the latest published changes and corrections in the Henry-Schwyzler text as recorded in the *Addenda et Corrigenda ad Textum* in the third volume of the Oxford Classical Text (*Plotini Opera* III, Oxford 1982, pp. 304–7).

Section III of the Preface has been completely revised.

PREFACE

I. THE ENNEADS

PLOTINUS, as Porphyry tells us in his *Life* (ch. 4), did not begin to write till the first year of the reign of Gallienus (253/4), when he was forty-nine years old and had been settled at Rome and teaching philosophy for ten years. He continued to write till his death in 270 in his sixty-sixth year. His writings thus all belong to the last sixteen years of his life and represent his mature and fully developed thought. We should not expect to find in them, and, in the opinion at least of the great majority of Plotinian scholars, we do not in fact find in them, any major development. The earliest of them are the fruit of over twenty years' study and teaching of philosophy. (He came to Alexandria to study philosophy at the age of twenty-seven, in 232.) There is a good deal of variation, and it is even perhaps sometimes possible to trace a genuine development, in his repeated handling of particular problems. Plotinus had an intensely active and critical mind, and was not easily satisfied with his own or other people's formulations. But in all essentials his philosophy was fully mature before he began to write; and we have very little evidence indeed upon which to base speculation about the stages of its growth.

Plotinus's writings grew naturally out of his teaching. He never set out to write down a sys-

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tematic exposition of his philosophy, but as important and interesting questions came up for discussion in his school he wrote treatises on the particular problems involved (Porphyry, *Life*, 4. 11, 5. 60). Thus it seems likely that the treatise V. 5, *That the Intelligibles are not outside the Intellect; and on the Good* was the result of the discussion which Porphyry records in chapter 18 of the *Life*; and III. 4, *On Our Allotted Guardian Spirit*, was, Porphyry says (*Life*, 10. 31), provoked by the conjuration of Plotinus's guardian spirit in the temple of Isis. The treatises were not intended for publication, but for circulation among carefully selected members of the school (*Life*, 4. 14-16). They give us, therefore, an extremely unsystematic presentation of a systematic philosophy. No reader of the *Enneads* can long remain unaware that Plotinus has a fully and carefully worked-out philosophical system. But neither his writings nor Porphyry's description of his teaching (*Life*, 13 and 18) have any suggestion of the dry, tidy, systematic, authoritarian presentation of the scholastic text-book. His teaching was informal and left plenty of room for the freest discussion, and in his writings we find his philosophy presented, not step by step in an orderly exposition, but by a perpetual handling and rehandling of the great central questions, always from slightly different points of view and with reference to different types of objections and queries.

Plotinus appointed Porphyry to take charge of the revision¹ and arrangement of his writings (*Life*,

¹ διορθώσεις, the word used by Porphyry, need imply no more than the correction of the spelling and supplying of punctuation which he says that he undertook (*Life*, 26. 37).

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7. 51, 24. 2), and the *Enneads* as we have them are the result of his editorial activity. He did not, however, publish his edition till more than thirty years after the death of Plotinus (i.e., somewhere between 301 and 305), and in the interval another edition of the treatises was published by Eustochius, also a pupil of Plotinus and the doctor who attended him in his last illness; of this only a few traces remain.¹ Porphyry has given us a good deal of information about his editorial methods in the *Life*; the full title of the work is *On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of his Books*, and it looks as if one of his main purposes in writing it was to explain, and perhaps to justify against actual or possible criticism, the principles which governed his edition. He adopted the same principle of arrangement, he tells us (*Life*, ch. 24) as that used by Apollodorus of Athens in his edition of Epicharmus and Andronicus the Peripatetic in his edition of Aristotle and Theophrastus; that is, he arranged the treatises according to subject-matter and not in chronological order.² In fact, a division of Plotinus's works

There is no reason to believe that he made any important modifications of the text of Plotinus's treatises as he received them.

¹ For a discussion of the evidence that the edition of Eustochius existed, and that Eusebius in several places in the *Praep. ev.* cites Plotinus according to it and not to Porphyry's edition see P. Henry, *Recherches sur la Préparation Évangélique d'Eusèbe*, pp. 73-80, and *États du Texte de Plotin*, 77 ff. (where the Eusebius texts are printed), and H-R. Schwyzer's article *Plotin* in *Pauly's Realencyclopädie* B. XXI. col. 488-490.

² He gives us, however, the chronological order of the treatises in chs. 4-6 of the *Life*.

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according to subject-matter is bound to have a great deal that is arbitrary in it because Plotinus does not, as has already been remarked, write systematically; there is no tidy separation of ethics, metaphysics, cosmology, and psychology in his treatises. Porphyry's arrangement therefore is by no means altogether satisfactory and should not be taken as a safe guide to the content of the treatises; the student of Plotinus's ethics must be familiar with the Sixth (and all the other) Enneads as well as the First, and anyone interested in his metaphysics will be very ill advised to neglect the so-called "ethical" and "psychological" treatises. It is however interesting, if not very useful, to the student of Plotinus to understand how Porphyry made his division. He arranged the whole body of treatises into six Enneads, or sets of nine, forming three volumes (*Life*, chs. 24-26). The treatises on the Categories and those of which the principal subject is the One form one volume (the Sixth Ennead), those dealing chiefly with Soul and Intellect another (the Fourth and Fifth Enneads), and all the other treatises go into the first volume (the First, Second, and Third Enneads); the First Ennead has an ethical emphasis, the Second is predominantly cosmological, the Third has a greater variety of subject-matter than any of the others. It is clear from what Porphyry says in ch. 24 of the *Life* that his reason for adopting the six-nine division was nothing better than the pleasure in the symmetry of sacred number characteristic of his age. To achieve it he had to do some vigorous cutting-up of the treatises as he received them. He subdivided a number of the longer treatises (III. 2-3, IV. 3-5, VI. 1-3, VI.

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4-5); more curiously, he not only cut up one treatise but also put the pieces into different Enneads (III. 8, V. 8, V. 5, and II. 9 were written by Plotinus as a single treatise¹); and it is possible, though not certain, that it was he who, to make up his number, collected the short notes on various subjects which constitute III. 9 into a single treatise.

II. THE THOUGHT OF PLOTINUS

A

Plotinus is, like other philosophers of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, a practical religious and moral teacher and also a professional philosopher, engaged in the critical interpretation of a long and complicated school-tradition which we are beginning to know and understand a good deal better than formerly,² and working in an intellectual *milieu* which included not only those esoteric pietists the Gnostics and Hermetists, with whom he is sometimes rather misleadingly coupled, but a considerable number of other professional philosophers (about whom we know next to nothing) of very varying schools and points of view.³ His philosophy is both an account of an ordered structure of living reality, which proceeds eternally from its transcendent First

¹ On the problems raised by the appearance of these subdivisions as separate treatises in Porphyry's chronological list see Schwyzer, art. cit., col. 487.

² Some important modern books dealing with this tradition are listed at the end of this *Introduction*.

³ Cp. Porphyry, *Life*, ch. 20 (the preface to Longinus's book).

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Principle, the One or Good, and descends in an unbroken succession of stages from the Divine Intellect and the Forms therein through Soul with its various levels of experience and activity to the last and lowest realities, the bodies perceived by our senses: and it is also a showing of the way by which the human self, which can experience and be active on every level of being, is able, if it will, to ascend by a progressive purification and simplification to that union with the Good which alone can satisfy it. There are two movements in Plotinus's universe, one of outgoing from unity to an ever-increasing multiplicity, and the other of return to unity and unification: and closely connected with these two movements is what is perhaps the deepest tension in his thought. This results from two opposed valuations of the movement from unity to multiplicity and two correspondingly different ways of regarding the First Principle. When Plotinus's attention is concentrated on the great process of spontaneous production by which the whole of derived reality streams out from the First Principle, he sees that First Principle as the superabundant spring of creativity, the Good which is source of all goodness, the One from whose rich unity all multiplicity unfolds: and to emphasise the goodness of the splendid multiplicity of derived being is all the more to exalt the goodness of its source. The One as creative source of all being is properly described in the language of positive transcendence, as better than all good existing and conceivable. But when his mind is bent on the ascent to the Good by the stripping off of our lower and the transcending even of our higher self, when the First Principle appears

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no longer as superabundant source but as the goal of pure unity which we attain by a radical simplification, by putting away all the varied multiplicity of being: then in comparison with that One and Good so passionately desired everything else seems so hopelessly inferior that he can think of its very existence as due to a fault, and represent the timeless coming forth of the Divine Intellect¹ and of Soul² as acts of illegitimate self-assertion. Plato, when he fixed his mind on God, had a very poor opinion of the human race:³ and Plotinus, when he fixes his mind on God, sometimes seems to have a very poor opinion of the whole of existence. But in neither philosopher was this way of looking at things a settled conviction, governing the whole of their philosophy. Plato's whole life and work show that he did, after all, usually think the human race worth taking seriously: and the positive view of derived reality, as good from the Good, greatly predominates over the negative in the *Enneads*. The tension between the two attitudes of mind is most apparent when Plotinus is considering the lowest level of reality, the material world. There is a very noticeable fluctuation in his thought about the precise degree of goodness or badness to be attributed to the body and the rightness or wrongness of the soul's descent into it. Plotinus is rightly conscious at this point of a similar tension in the thought of Plato, and in his effort to present Plato's thought as perfectly reasonable and consistent he tries hard, if not altogether successfully, to resolve it.⁴ The same basic tension probably accounts for a certain in-

¹ III. 8. 8.

² III. 7. 11.

³ *Laws* 804B.

⁴ E.g., in IV. 8. 5.

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consistency in his description of the matter of the sense-world. He speaks several times¹ of this matter as derived from the principles immediately preceding it (i.e., Soul), and so ultimately from the Good; which would imply (as the later Neo-Platonists saw) that it was itself good in its own kind, even if that kind was the lowest possible. But for Plotinus the matter of the sense-world is the principle of evil, and in I. 8 in particular he speaks of it as absolute evil in a way which suggests an ultimate dualism and is hardly compatible with its derivation from the Good.² It is possible to produce a philosophical reconciliation of these contrasting emphases, and even of Plotinus's divergent accounts of the matter of the sense-world. But I am not sure that they are ever fully reconciled in Plotinus himself. There are, too, perhaps other fluctuations and tensions besides this major one. There are elements in his experience which do not fit into his system, elements in the tradition he inherited which are not fully assimilated, and lines of thought suggested which if they had been followed up might have led to a radical revision of his philosophy—the same, after all, might be said of almost any great philosopher. But his thought cannot be resolved into a mere jumble of conflicting elements. Tension is not the same thing as in-

¹ II. 3. 17; III. 4. 1; IV. 8. 6.

² And a yet further inconsistency is introduced into his thought at this point by his attitude to celestial matter, the matter of the bodies of the "visible gods," the sun, moon and stars, which he regards, in accordance with the beliefs of the astral or cosmic piety of his time, as not a principle of evil because it is not a principle of resistance to form but perfectly docile and subdued to it, so that it in no way troubles the life of the celestial intelligences. Cp. II. 1. 4; II. 9. 8.

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coherence, as anyone can see who turns from reading the *Enneads* to read the *Hermetica*.

B

It is impossible to read any treatise in the *Enneads* intelligently without some at least elementary understanding of Plotinus's system as a whole, because they are, as has been said already, an unsystematic presentation of a systematic philosophy. I shall therefore try to give here a summary account of how Plotinus conceives his First Principle, the One or Good, and of the stages in the descent or expansion of reality from that Principle, and also to say something about the way of return to the Good, to follow and show which was Plotinus's main object in living, writing, and teaching.

Plotinus insists repeatedly that the One or Good is beyond the reach of human thought or language, and, though he does in fact say a good deal about It, this insistence is to be taken seriously. Language can only point the mind along the way to the Good, not describe, encompass, or present It. As Plotinus himself says (VI. 9. 3), "strictly speaking, we ought not to apply any terms at all to It; but we should, so to speak, run round the outside of It trying to interpret our own feelings about It, sometimes drawing near and sometimes falling away in our perplexities about It." There is, however, a certain amount which ought to be said about the language Plotinus uses about the One if we are not to misunderstand completely the direction in which he is pointing. The One is not, as has sometimes been suggested, conceived as a mere negation, an ultimate void, a

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great blank behind the universe in attaining to which the human personality disintegrates into unconscious nothingness, but as a positive reality of infinite power and content and superabundant excellence. The extreme negativity—partly inherited from the school-tradition—of the language which Plotinus uses about Him¹ is designed either to stress the inadequacy of all our ways of thinking and speaking about Him or to make clear the implications of saying that He is absolutely One and Infinite and the source of all defined and limited realities. Building on Plato's remark in Book VI of the *Republic*, Plotinus insists that the Good is "beyond being," that He cannot properly be even said to exist—surely the extreme of negation. But it is perfectly clear from all that Plotinus says about Him, in the very passages where His existence is denied, that He is existent in some sense, and the supreme Existence. What Plotinus is saying is that the unity of the Good is so absolute that no predicates at all can be applied to Him, not even that of existence; and that as the Source of being to all things He is not a thing Himself. Again, Plotinus insists that the One does not think, because thought for him always implies a certain duality of thinking and its object, and it is this that he is concerned to exclude in speaking of the One. But he is anxious to make clear that this does not mean that the life of the One is mere unconsciousness, to show

¹ Though the terms for One and Good are both neuter in Greek, Plotinus when speaking about his First Principle, even in passages where these neuter terms are used, passes over quite naturally from neuter to masculine pronouns and adjectives. I have followed him in this as closely as possible in my translation.

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that He is more, not less, than Mind at the highest level at which we can conceive it, and so in some passages he attributes to the One a "super-intellection," a simple self-intuition, an immediate self-consciousness higher than the thought of the Divine Intellect.¹ And when he calls the One "formless" he does so because He is infinite, without limits, and because, precisely as One (here Plotinus follows the school-tradition very closely), He is the principle of form, number, measure, order, and limit; and a source or principle for Plotinus is always other and more than that which it produces.

Plotinus, by his use of negative language, stresses the transcendence of the One to an extreme degree. But he is very careful to exclude all ideas of a quasi-spatial sort about this transcendence. The One is not a God "outside" the world. Nor is He remote from us, but intimately present in the centre of our souls; or rather we are in Him, for Plotinus prefers to speak of the lower as in the higher, rather than the other way round; body is in soul, and soul in Intellect, and Intellect in the One (he is quite aware that whichever way we put it we are using an inadequate spatial metaphor). The hierarchical order of levels of being does not imply the remoteness of the One, because they are not spatially separate or cut off from each other; they are really distinct, but all are present together everywhere. And just because the One is not any particular thing He is present to all things according to their capacity to receive Him.

From the One proceeds the first great derived reality, Intellect, the Divine Mind which is also the

¹ Cp. V. 4. 2; VI. 7. 38-9; VI. 8. 16.

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World of Forms or Ideas, and so the totality of true being in the Platonic sense. I have chosen Intellect as the best available translation of Plotinus's word for this second reality, *Noûs*: it should be understood in a sense like that of the Scholastic term *intellectus* as opposed to *ratio*—a distinction which derives from and corresponds exactly to the Greek distinction between *νόησις* (the proper activity of *νοûς*) and *διάνοια*. So understood, Intellect means the activity of direct mental sight or immediate grasp of the object of thought, or a mind which grasps its object in this direct way and not as the conclusion of a process of discursive reasoning (*ratio* or *διάνοια*). I shall say more shortly about the relation of the Plotinian Intellect to its objects.

The procession of Intellect from the One is necessary and eternal, as are also the procession of Soul from Intellect and the forming and ordering of the material universe by Soul. The way in which Intellect proceeds from the One and Soul in its turn from Intellect is rather loosely and inadequately described as "emanation." The background of Plotinus's thought at this point is certainly a late Stoic doctrine of the emanation of intellect from a divinity conceived as material light or fire, and his favourite metaphor to describe the process is that of the radiation of light or heat from sun or fire (he also uses others of the same sort, the diffusion of cold from snow or perfume from something scented). But he is not content merely to use these traditional analogies and leave it at that, to allow the generation of spiritual beings to be thought of in terms of a materialistically conceived automatism. Intellect proceeds from the One (and Soul from Intellect)

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without in any way affecting its source. There is no activity on the part of the One, still less any willing or planning or choice (planning and choice are excluded by Plotinus even on a much lower level when he comes to consider the forming and ruling of the material universe by Soul). There is simply a giving-out which leaves the source unchanged and undiminished. But though this giving-out is necessary, in the sense that it cannot be conceived as not happening or as happening otherwise, it is also entirely spontaneous: there is no room for any sort of binding or constraint, internal or external, in Plotinus's thought about the One. The reason for the procession of all things from the One is, Plotinus says, simply that everything which is perfect produces something else. Perfection is necessarily productive and creative. Here we touch an element in Plotinus's thought which is of great importance, the emphasis on life, on the dynamic, vital character of spiritual being. Perfection for him is not merely static. It is a fullness of living and productive power. The One for him is Life and Power, an infinite spring of power, an unbounded life, and therefore necessarily productive. And as it is one of the axioms which Plotinus assumes without discussion that the product is always less than, inferior to, the producer, what the One produces must be that which is next to Him in excellence, namely Intellect: when Plotinus concentrates his mind on the inferiority of even this derived reality to its source, of any sort of multiplicity to the pure unity to which he aspires, then he comes to think of its production as unfortunate even though necessary, and of the will to separate existence of Intellect and