

The One-Good in Plotinus

1) To comprehend the philosophy of Plotinus, and also that of Parmenides and of Plato, it is considered necessary to reawaken that supra-rational faculty that the entity possesses but generally does not use. In addition, one can also explain the state of consciousness of Plotinus himself, and how he went up the way of return till he arrived at the «end of the journey».

What is the One that Plotinus talks about? From the VI *Enneads* we deduce that supreme Reality is beyond Spirit (*Noûs*) and therefore transcends this ontological causal principle. This means that the One-Good is the metaphysical foundation of both the intelligible and the sensible. At the same time between the One-Good and the causal principle there is no break, nor is a discontinuity created, because Being (*Noûs*) finds its *raison d'être* precisely in the One. The supreme Spirit, or Being, is not aseity¹, it is already determined (*πρόσθεσις*), while the One is incorporeal (*ἄσώματος*), infinite, non-born, and therefore the process of derivation of all the existent comes from the One. And, even though It is the foundation, the non-originated origin, of the visible, yet it is above and dominates all. But in order to return to the source, the entity must first assimilate himself to the pure Spirit, and then transcend it.

Since the One-Good, for Plotinus, is beyond thought, and cannot therefore be conceptualized, He designates it by way of “negations”. In other words, he denies any property that configures it as “something”; i.e. «it is not this, it is not Him», and so on.

Plotinus asks himself: why does the One exist? This is a very daring and problematic question – it would be like asking why a supreme and final Principle exists. Aristotle also addresses this problem and rightly answers that of everything we can ask why, except of the absolute or non-principled [non-originated] Principle, because the enquiry would take us into an infinite regression without solution; and this with the consequence that we would have to ask why of the Principle of the preceding principle, and so on. On the other hand, the One-Good has no second, or other, to which to refer, since the other, as referred to the One, is the *nil*.

Plotinus in any case poses the question again, and answers that the One-Good is there, and that it exists because it is *absolute Liberty* and is *causa sui*; that is to say, it is free to be what it is. Not having any alterity [otherness], it has no second to which to refer, nor a something that can oppose it. It draws the Unity from itself.

«This He is, and no other, as He is what he must be», because «He has no extent nor quality, since no form, not even intelligible, can be in Him, and

¹ From medieval Latin *aseitas, a se*, from oneself: i.e. quality of absolute self-origination self-sufficiency.

not even any relation with other. He in fact is in himself, and was before any other thing» (*Enneads* VI, 8, 9 & 11)*

The *Vedānta* would say that this is because it is the One without a second. The supreme Being is what it must be, and cannot be but that which it is.

This absolute Freedom does not constitute an attribute, rather it is the One-Good himself, and the attributes come after It.

«We can see that liberty is not an accidental thing for Him but, starting from the liberty which is there in the other beings and feeding the opposites, we observe *Freedom in itself...*» (VI 8, 8. Italics added).

2) In what way does the “procession of the hypostases” occur? Plotinus furnishes an emblematic example; He interrogates *nature* directly, and she answers:

«If someone asked her why she produces, and if she wanted to listen to the question and then answer, she would speak in this fashion: “Better would be not to interrogate but rather to comprehend and keep silent as I do, since I am of the habit of not speaking.”

“What to comprehend?”

“That the generated Being is an object by me contemplated and a natural object of my contemplation; and I myself who was born of a similar contemplation have a natural tendency to contemplation; *that which contemplates in me produces an object* of contemplation like geometers trace out figures: instead I do not trace any figures, *I just contemplate and the lines of the bodies come true, as if they were coming out* <of me>. I have the disposition of my mother [the universal Soul] and of my parents [the other hypostases]: they themselves derive from a contemplation and I was born *without them acting*, but I have been generated because they are superior reasons [pure intellects] and they contemplate themselves»

(III 8, 4. Italics and square brackets are ours).

Plotinus knows the power of *creative contemplation*: by remaining still in oneself, and with the simple power of silent contemplating, creation takes place.

What an extreme and profound indication the divine Plotinus is offering!

The principal intelligence-*Noûs* does not act, does not move, and it keeps still and silent, because its faculty by excellence is contemplation.

It contemplates and the object of contemplation *appears*.

* All reference to the *Enneads* are translations from *Enneadi*, edited by Giuseppe Faggin, Bompiani, Milano (Italian edition).

Hence we can recognize that the force that truly creates is not *πραξις* [action] but *θεωρία* [inner contemplation].

And so it is for the universal Soul, the third hypostasis.

The highest expression of contemplation we have when one is able to contemplate or *see* the Entire («The seeing is identical to the thing seen», V 3, 7) from which all things derive, and for Plotinus this Entire is the One, and we ourselves are this One as living contemplation.

«But to God supreme the Cities turn, and all of the earth and all of the sky; for It and in It they subsist, and from It they draw their being. The real entities, down to the Soul and the Life, hang from It and, in the unextended infinitude, attain the One» (VI 5, 12).

And hence the One, as the founding factor of the all.

It can appear that Plotinus belittles or ignores the sensible world by considering it a place from which to leave as soon as one can.

To comprehend such a vision it is necessary to have no preconceived ideas, which are often grounded to our own particular convictions. It will instead be necessary to understand *why* Plotinus considers this world as a source of conflict with no way out, and from what dialectical *position* he can affirm these things. The only acceptable way is to immerse oneself into his teaching, to strive to comprehend it, and only subsequently draw conclusions.

We can give just a simple “image” to be taken into consideration.

When we comprehend through noetic intuition, “a faculty that each one of us possesses”, that a radiant sun exists that makes all the existent shine; when, through the “divine Philosophy”, we are even able to contemplate it till we assimilate ourselves to it, who then is the being that will be content to observe, through the “corporeal view”, the feeble rays of the moon?

We also want to refer to the “Myth of the cave” exposed by Plato (*Republic*, 514-517).

3) It has to be noted that in the doctrines offered both in the West and in the East there are aspects of both a philosophical and metaphysical order.

The first aspect is when we put a sole causal principle from which all manifest things derive. This would be the creator of the entire life, and to which the name of ontological Being is generally given. And therefore Plato’s “World of Ideas”, Aristotle’s “Unmoved Mover”, Plotinus’ Spirit-*Noûs*, the *saguna Brahman* of *Vedānta*, and so on, belong to such an aspect. This aspect, the Principle-Being, is the most widely considered and suggested.

The second aspect is when a non-principled [non-originated] Principle is put forth, an ultimate and non-born absolute Reality that is not in becoming, and is verily the metaphysical foundation, meaning that it is beyond manifestation that is time-space, and also beyond the very principal Being, which initiates manifestation. It is *causa sui*. This implies that the principled Being must presuppose something to give it its *raison d’être*.

To this supra-intelligible Reality, which goes beyond thought, is given the name of One, One-Good, One without a second, and so on.

Plotinus' One belongs to this last aspect, similarly Plato's One-Good and, if we want to see things from a certain perspective, which seems the most appropriate, also Parmenides' Being, the non-born.

The dianoetic mind can speculate endlessly about the ontological aspect, without reaching any final solution, and thus it cannot take us to the "end of the journey" either; rather, in order to realize that aspect [Oneness] we also have to go beyond thought. And by removing thought, and conceptualization, we find ourselves on the plane of pure contemplation.

Western thought has provided enormous contributions of a speculative nature with great possibilities of reflection, but this type of thought, albeit useful to the human mind (subject-object), has its own decline, its own decay, due to the very nature of its being. This is precisely what has happened in the West where philosophy no longer has the relevance and value it had in the past; nor is philosophy proposed as "way of life", which is what it used to be in ancient Greece.

The metaphysical One is ineffable, says Plotinus, and is beyond thought, and beyond the concepts that stem from the subject-object dualism.

Let us read what Plotinus, who has contemplated the One, states:

«Here is why the vision is difficult to be expressed. In fact, how could one give an account of It as a different, when whoever *saw* it did not see it as different during contemplation, but saw it as a sole thing with itself?

This is the significance of the famous precept of the Mysteries "do not divulge anything to the non initiated": and exactly because the Divine must not be divulged, it was prohibited to manifest it to others, unless that person already had for himself the good fortune to contemplate» (VI, 9, 10 and 11).

It is also because of this that Plato, although he mentioned the One-Good beyond the Being, did not talk much about it, rather, to the person who asked him about it, he would put off answering.

In the *Corpus Hermeticum* (X, 5) it is said: «When you will not say anything any more about It; only then you will see it, since knowledge of God is divine silence, and is the ceasing of all our senses»