

PLOTINUS AND THE THIRD HYPOSTASIS

Plotinus is considered to be one of the greatest spiritual philosophers of Western Civilization. There are many parallels in his system to the Vedānta of Eastern thought. This essay was written by Raphael as an introduction to Giuseppe Faggin's book on Plotinus, published by Edizioni Āśram Vidyā, Rome. It covers five critical elements of Plotinus' philosophy: 1) What is the One and how can it be known? 2) How do the Hypostases, or secondary principles, proceed from the One? 3) That both Eastern and Western doctrines speak of a principle of Being, and a principle of Beyond Being which cannot be grasped by thought and 4) How the *Noûs* or Spirit arises within the One. The fifth point has two elements, that Spirit- *Noûs* is not divided while containing many beings-ideas within itself (it is a One-Many), and how the Soul returns to its origin.

We have divided this meditation in three parts: The One-Good, The Spirit-*Noûs* and the individual Soul. We start with the section on the individual Soul.

5) The hypostasis represented by the *Noûs*, pure Spirit or supreme Intelligence, is the Being from which ideas originate and which, although manifold, are in perfect unity (One-many; see V 3, 15). On this plane we have alterity, but no separation.

Here is a passage of Faggin which is particularly expressive: «In this intuitive vision of the Being there is no place for the notion of “part”; only in the sensible world things are separate, extraneous to one another and excluding themselves reciprocally. But the noetic cosmos is beyond time and space, and in it we find no opposition or parts excluded. Here every idea, every being, every intelligence is not a thing that opposes a thing, but intelligence that involves everything. Every idea is all and it contains in itself the totality of ideas, and all the ideas form the unity of the intelligible world».

Plato considers the “World of ideas” as one-many, as opposed to the sensible world which is “one *and* the many” – here the unity becomes fragmented, there instead the many are contained in the undivided unity, like the seed of a flower contains, in unity, the entire flower.

From the universal Soul, as the intermediary between the sensible and the principal *Noûs*, the individual soul proceeds.

Because the One and the *Noûs* are omnipresent, the individual Soul can, no less than the universal Soul, turn to them since, at the latent state, it finds them as essence within itself. Hence the return of the soul to the principal *Noûs* and to the One-Good. The individual soul has a twofold and free possibility: it can contemplate and “form” the world of conflictual multiplicity; or it can contemplate its “parent” as universal Soul. Its destiny wavers between these two extremes. One possibility is in the direction of

non-being, where one contemplates appearances and simulacra wandering in their search for quiet, and emerging from a dark cave. To the sensorial eye, these appearances possess just a visual value, but to the noetic eye they appear as prisons from which to escape in order to return to “our beloved homeland”. The other possibility is to contemplate the “parent”, the universal Soul and the *Noûs* itself as “door” that leads to the One-Good.

In any event, the destiny of the soul is that of reorienting itself towards the peaks of the intelligible; and sooner or later the moment will come in which its very own thinking becomes a powerful tension (*Eros*) that sweeps away the lover and drives him to the end of finding himself united with the beloved object. The contemplative finds himself in the contemplated, reconstituting thus the unity. This implies dying to oneself in order to find oneself as Soul contemplating the radiant Sun of the powerful light of the principal *Noûs*, and then of the One-Good.

Returning to the One is equally proposed by the divine Plato in all its various realizative phases (this also confirms the continuity of Tradition), till we arrive at the identity with the supreme Beauty that coincides with the One-Good. About these last phases, for both Plato and Plotinus we can talk of “philosophical experience” or “philosophical realization”, intending Philosophy as means fit and *operative* to ferry us across from the world of appearances to the One-Good. For both philosophers at times, we talk about “mystical experience”, but the word “mystic”, in the meaning that it has acquired over time can be misleading because it may be likened to a typically sensorial and emotional phenomenon. However, things change if mysticism is understood in its more appropriate valence. In fact the term mystic derives from $\mu\upsilon\omega$ which means, “I close, I keep my mouth shut”, involving above all a secret of sacred nature. It can also be conceived as a driving force (*Eros*) leading, by direct way, to the unveiling of the Divine in us.

It emerges as obvious that the end for the entity is to reacquire his nature, his true essence: and we can understand why Plotinus insists on detachment from the body as an essential element, and also on the “escape” from “matter”, which occludes, obscures, and muffles the incorporeal essence of the soul.

Referring to Orphism, Plato says that the corporeal is a prison for the soul: «And therefore it is also necessary to do the utmost to escape as soon as possible in order to go up there, and escaping is to make oneself similar to God». (Plato: *Thaetetus* 176 B. Bompiani, Milano. Italian edition).

In any way, seen from a certain perspective, the error does not lie in the physical body as such, but in the *identification* with its properties, such as: desires, passions, sense of separateness, egoism, and so on. Hence the need for detachment from these things that trouble the very nature of the entity, Nature that, nevertheless, cannot be shattered as the soul is and remains of the intelligible.

«The sensation in fact is of the soul, which is asleep in the body; true awakening consists in rising without the body and not with it. Rising with the body means going from one sleep to another sleep, nearly from one bed to another bed; instead truly rising means completely separating from the bodies that, since their nature is contrary to the Soul's, they have for their essence the opposite of the Soul's. Of this bear witness their generation, their becoming, and their corruption that is not of the nature of Being» (III, 6, 6).

«Why then must we try to make the Soul impassive through philosophy, if from the very beginning it has no passions?» (III, 6, 5).

Here we have it: philosophy as an act of catharsis and awakening bringing to Soul back to be what it is. This is the “divine philosophy” Plato talks about.

«But what is purification, if the Soul has never been polluted at all? And what does it mean to separate the Soul from the body?»

«Purification consists in isolating <the soul> so that it does not <unite> to other, and does not look at other, and no longer has extraneous opinions, be they opinions or passions, as we said, and does not look at those shadows... It is also separation of the Soul that is not in the body as if it belonged to it, as the light that no longer is in the fog but is nevertheless impassive in the fog as well. For the passive part <of the soul> [as its reflection], purification consists in *awakening* from the dream of senseless shadows and in no longer seeing them...» (III 6, 5. See also VI 9, 11. Square brackets and italics are ours).

And here is how Plato in the *Phaedo* expresses the same things already proposed in the Orphic Teaching:

«And purification, as it was said in an ancient doctrine [the Orphic one], does it not perhaps depend on separating the soul from the body as much as possible, and in training it to draw inwardly and to remain alone in itself, released from the bonds of the body, and to remain in the time present and in the future alone in itself, loosened from the body as if from fetters?...

And is it not perhaps this what we call death, i.e. the release and the separation of the soul from the body?...

And, as we were saying, those who ardently desire to release it, always and alone, they practice philosophy in the correct way. And precisely this is the task of the philosophers, to loosen and to separate the soul from the body. Is it not? So it seems”» (*Phaedo*, 67, C-D).

It is interesting to notice that the Hermetic Tradition puts as the primary element of its teaching release, or separation, of the soul (Mercury) from the body (lead).

Therefore, the ultimate aim of the soul is that of reuniting again to the One-Good. Hence the need for separating from that which is not essence, going beyond thought itself that is movement and alterity.

«...putting out all knowledge, first through one's own disposition, then, in actual fact, in the thought contents themselves, and likewise putting out the knowledge of one's own being, he must abandon himself to the contemplation of Him» (VI 9, 7).

«...and the contemplative becomes non-essence, but "beyond essence" because he unites to Him.

If one sees oneself already transfigured in Him, he thus already possesses an image of Him within himself, and if he passes from himself, which is a copy, to the original, finally he has touched the *end of his journey*...

This is the life of the gods and of the godlike and blissful humans. Detachment from the remains of things down here, and life taking pleasure in wordly things no more, escape of alone to alone» (VI, 9, 11. Italics added).

TO BE CONTINUED

Readers interested in consulting an English translation are referred to the Stephen McKenna translation published by Larson Press.