

THE WAY OF PLOTINUS: Remembering and Returning*

Our previous article on the Enneads explored the nature of Reality as The One or Good. We read about the paradoxes of its intrinsic nature as autonomous, self-awakening, at once passive and active perfection. Here we look at some consequences of that discussion in relation to our own practice on the way of remembering. Let us start with the presence of reality in tractate 6.9. Speaking of the ultimate reality, Plotinus says “From none is that Principle absent and yet from all: present, it remains absent save to those fit to receive...” And in 6.9.8 “the Supreme as containing no otherness is ever present with us; we with it when we put otherness away.... We are ever before the Supreme... but we do not always attend:”

So we have this essential idea for our journey: the ever presence of Reality makes realization ever possible, but the fitness of the aspirant makes recognition actual. If we don’t recognize the presence of the good: what “good” is it? If you don’t recognize One, Tao, or Reality, you will not find it in the tree, in the atom, even in your beloved friend. If you DO recognize reality, you will find it in the beloved, in the tree, in each atom, everywhere.

In many tractates Plotinus explores how we become “fit to receive,” learning to “put otherness away” and remembering to “attend.” For example, tractate 5.1.1 begins with the question: “what can it be that has brought soul (us) to forget and ignore our divine nature?” Plotinus reminds us there: we have taken appearances as more important than ourselves, we look outside to fill us up, and we ignore the Divine within. What can we expect! But: what is to be done about this situation?

There is the method, which we amply exhibit elsewhere, declaring the dishonor of the objects which the Soul holds here in honor; the second teaches or recalls to the Soul its race and worth; this latter is the leading truth, and, clearly brought out, is the evidence of the other. 5.1.1

Through these two modes--discriminating the unreal and remembering the real—we ripen and become “fit to receive” the presence of One. The first mode is the same as “putting aside otherness:” Stop giving attention to images--whether they are inner thought and feeling contents, or outer sense contents. We can see this as parallel to the Advaita practice of discrimination of the real from the unreal (viveka) and “refusing to be taken in by the unreal” to “detachment”.

DIALECTIC AND REMEMBERING

The second mode of realization, which “recalls the soul” to its true worth, can begin with reading the words of the Sage which point these things out to us. In many tractates Plotinus takes us on a dialectical journey to ultimate reality. Often, as in the rest of 5.1, the path follows three broad phases of deepening remembering which he calls Soul, Intelligence, One. Is this dialectic only words? Not “only:” these inspired words are pointers, and more. Words which come from reality carry an inspired energy. As he said in 1.3.1, in his tractate on dialectic, “even the reasoning which brings us to the One is an initiation.” Plotinus provides inspiration and guidance for the actual journey—the dialectic of remembering in thought will evoke a deepening remembering into contemplation.

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NOTE: passages are from The Enneads. Mckenna translation. Larson Publications. 1996

In the advancing stages of Contemplation rising from that in Nature, to that in the Soul and thence again to that in the Intelligence itself, the object contemplated becomes progressively a more and more intimate possession of the Contemplating Beings, more and more one thing with them 3.8.9

TAKE IT TO HEART

It is for us to make the rational exploration into more than words: we need to become fit for the vision. So we will explore a few of the practices Plotinus suggests that can make us fit to receive reality. In tractate 5.1.2, the first stage of remembering is huge: remember that you are vaster than the whole universe, and the Universe is a thought in Soul: in You.

“Let every soul take to heart at the outset the truth that soul is the author of all living things...” If, then, it is the presence of soul that brings worth, how can we continue to slight our true nature and run after other things? You honor the Soul elsewhere; honor then yourself. 5.1.2:

You can practice this in life. You can decide to “take to heart” the clues. Just turn experience inside out: see that there is nothing you can ever experience that is outside experience, and experience is in and for and of the living consciousness. You are not a local person.

LOOK WITHIN

Everyone can begin this path immediately. It takes a big heart to do this: or our hearts will get bigger through the journey. Instead of looking outside ourselves, turn attention within. Be still.

Withdraw into yourself and look...

This is not a journey for the feet; the feet bring us only from land to land; you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use. ... labour to make all one glow of beauty 1.6.8,9

BEAUTY AND AFFINITY:

Plotinus continues to unfold a secret of the Platonic way of Beauty. Make yourself like the divine you seek. Practice making yourself beautiful, and act as the Good. This affinity will invite the vision of the Beautiful and Good.

To any vision must be brought an eye adapted to what is to be seen, and having some likeness to it. Never did eye see the sun unless it had first become sun-like, and never can the Soul have vision of the First Beauty unless itself be beautiful.

Therefore, first let each become godlike and each beautiful who cares to see God and Beauty. 1.6.9

SELF-KNOWING OF INTELLIGENCE

Another route to remembering is through self-awareness. In 5.3 we learn how the Soul becomes self-aware. Start where you are. Take note of the fact we can perceive the world is a mark of the knowing principle in us. Even in our everyday experience, awareness remains inviolable: “impartible even in its partibility” (4.1.1) Turning attention back on itself, we become awareness of awareness of itself, and eventually to being-awareness. Following the principle of 1.6.9, our turning attention invites the response of awareness. That in us which is truly knowing, comes to recognize itself in us.

may we not appropriate that principle--which belongs to us as we to it--and thus attain to awareness, at once, of it and of ourselves? Yes: this is the necessary way... And a person becomes Intelligence when, ignoring all other phases of his being, he sees through that only and sees only that and so

knows himself by means of the self--in other words attains the self-knowledge which the Intelligence possesses. 5.3.4

Plotinus says: “our way is to teach the soul how Intelligence has self-knowing.” 5.3.4 My teacher Anthony commented that “universal intelligence is teaching soul” and thus “You are becoming wisdom.”

PUT ASIDE NON-BEING

A profound practice from tractate 6.5 on Omnipresence gives us a final clue, for now, to remembering. Since reality is present, there is nothing to add which can make us whole. Put aside otherness, your sense of being limited, and recognize your universal identity.

you cease to think of yourself as under limit but, laying all such determination aside, you become an All. No doubt you were always that, but there has been an addition and by that addition you are diminished; ... ***It is not by some admixture of non-Being that one becomes an entire, but by putting non-Being away.*** By the lessening of the alien in you, you increase. Cast it aside and there is the All within you; engaged in the alien, you will not find the All. Not that it has to come and so be present to you; it is you that have turned from it. And turn though you may, you have not severed yourself; it is there; you are not in some far region: still there before it, you have faced to its contrary. 6.5.12

Here we have a beautiful reminder: put aside all that is foreign, all thoughts of limitation, all images, and sensations, and allow the presence of being to make itself felt. In response to a question: “how to remember the divine”, my friend Paul Damiani quipped “forget yourself.”

Are these voyages for us? We can counter question: are we not as grand as Plotinus suggests we are? Why not “cease to think of yourself as under limit” ? Why not put these beautiful routes into practice here and now. The possibility of oneness is based on the fact of presence: when we turn from “otherness” reality can make itself known.

When we recognize and remember ourselves, we don’t become something more or something foreign. We become our true self: when soul puts aside non-being, and even puts aside being, “it [soul] comes not to something alien but to its very self: thus detached, it is not in nothingness but in itself...” 6.9.11

We encourage the reader to take the passages to heart and go on an adventure of discovery. Next time we follow the way of Plotinus through knowing-being and Loving beyond-being.