

## PLOTINUS: An Overview

### Background

Classical Platonism: "The father and maker of all is beyond finding out." Therefore a master craftsman (demiurge) makes the visible world, using the Forms as a pattern. The Form of the Good is the head of a hierarchy of *forms*.

Middle Platonism: the Form of the Good is the Supreme Mind itself. The gap between S.Mind and the visible world is filled with a hierarchy of *beings*. The Form of the Good is the S.Mind itself. The S.Mind heads a hierarchy of beings and is itself a being. (Only the Form of the Good is both Form and being.) The S.Mind, then, doesn't wholly transcend the universe as does the Hebrew God; the S.Mind is the topmost level of a graduated order of beings.

The S.Mind has no *direct* contact with the material world; the more remote the S.Mind is from the world, the more intermediary beings are needed if Mind is retain some contact (however indirect) with the world.

73. For Philo, a Jew steeped Gk thought, *the* intermediary between God (whom Philo likens to Mind) and the world is the LOGOS.

Whereas Plato didn't identify the world of Forms with Mind (either the master craftsman or the "maker and father of all"), Philo identifies the world of Forms with Mind, and identifies the LOGOS with the Forms. Therefore Philo brings together Divine Mind + Forms as thoughts of the Divine Mind + LOGOS as the wisdom of God, LOGOS being the instrument of creation and the principle of its order.

NB: script. speaks of the cosmic significance of Christ (the LOGOS) by relating him to Genesis ("In the beginning..." -- Gen.1:1; John 1:1), whereas Philo speaks of the cosmic significance of the LOGOS by relating it to the world of Forms.

## PLOTINUS

The purpose of life is to restore the soul (itself divine), by means of philosophical knowledge of truth (i.e., reality) to its proper place in the supersensible realm.

Because the soul is divine, we have a *natural* capacity to know the divine, ultimate reality.

To know reality, however, one must be pure. (I.e., there's an ethical qualification for knowing the good.)

The reality to be known (essential to the good life) is the intelligible unity of the cosmos.

75. NB what Pl borrows from Aristotle: just as an eye is potentially like its object of perception in that the eye receives the form of the object (not the object itself), so the S.Mind receives the Form of the object it apprehends; i.e., the S.Mind's awareness is *identified* with what it apprehends: Forms

75. Yet higher than this S.Mind of Forms (still reflecting the subject/object distinction) is the One, the absolute and unqualified unity. Nothing can be said of the One literally (i.e., no univocal predication), not even that it *is*; i.e., that it "exists." Still, Pl calls this one GOOD; Good or "God" is a name for the One, and not an attribute of it. ("Powerful" is an attribute in "God is powerful", not a name for God.)

NB: from Plato Pl borrows the notion that the Form of the Good lends unity to all the Forms.

from Parmenides Pl borrows the notion that unity is absolute and unqualified oneness.

76. There are 3 hypostases or individual divine substances that make up the intelligible universe: the One, Mind, and Soul.

**The One** (beyond the subject/object distinction by definition) *emanates* outward to yield **Mind** (which remains characterized by the subject/object distinction). Mind contemplates, and its contemplating gives rise to the world of Forms.

(Note the process here. Mind seeks to know the One, but Mind's knowing the One is an instance of the subject/object distinction, whereas the One is the overcoming of this dist'n.

The Forms (for Pl) are the *way* in which Mind knows the One or Good.)

Therefore the *unity* which Mind knows is the *multiplicity* of Forms, which multiplicity has unity insofar as the Mind which knows the Forms is *identified* with the Forms. Still this relative unity isn't the absolute unity of the One. In other words, the Forms represent the One on the level of contemplative Mind (even as the Forms *aren't* that One.)

**Soul** too thinks but it thinks discursively (successively, point-to-point) whereas Mind thinks intuitively; i.e., Mind *grasps* the Forms at once. Mind has a vision of the truth *at once*. Soul thinks at the level of sensible objects (it doesn't "grasp" at the level of Forms.) At its topmost level, however, soul touches Mind. Soul and Mind can transcend themselves to union with the One. NB: One, Mind and soul are distinct from each other but never separate from each other.

**Logos** is the expression or image of representation of a higher reality on a lower (e.g., soul is the logos of mind.) In other words, each level of reality is represented at a lower level of reality. In each case the logos is the connection between levels of reality. *Reality becomes less real with every descent from unity to greater multiplicity.* At the level of multiplicity of sensible objects there is no subsequent representation or logos upon a still lower level: there is no level of being below the physical.

But "below" the level of being at the physical there is the level of "non-being." This non-b. Pl calls matter. (Plainly, non-b, isn't the "nothing" of a vacuum. It is rather the utter negativity of matter devoid of any Form.)

Human beings are souls. We know the sensible world in that we know the Forms of the Mind, which Mind we humans are akin to. While humans are *essentially* soulish, since soul and Mind touch each other, soul always has access to Mind and therefore to the One.

The "lower soul" relates to the sensible world, the "higher soul" to Mind. When we leave the sensible world (by dint of phil'l training and discipline) our lower soul disappears; our higher soul moves unambiguously into the realm of Mind. (Lacking phil'l training/discipline, lower souls are reincarnated, even into non-human bodies.)

At any point in this life we can direct our attention "up" or "down", up to Mind (eternal Forms, the manner in which Mind thinks of the One) or down to matter (the utter negativity of non-being.)

The wellbeing of the true self has to do entirely with our intuitive grasp of the Forms: no sensible good can enhance such wellbeing, and no bodily suffering can diminish it.

\* \* \* The philosopher who contemplates the Forms is *conformed* to them. Here the philosopher's soul is united to Mind. \* \* \* (In Shepherd's opinion this is the crucial point in Pl's entire exposition.)

80. Since the Forms are the truth and reality of all that *is*, and since as the soul is united to Mind it is united to the Forms (which Mind knows), therefore each soul is united (by means of phil.) to the All. The soul, now united to the All, moves on to a mystical vision of the *All as One*.

Recall: as philosophers contemplate the Forms they are conformed to the Forms and thence to the Good. Now conformed to the Good, they love the Good. Love, however, is distinct from knowing. For knowing is knowing the Forms, while love is no longer to be aware of the Forms but rather to be in ecstasy. In other words, the soul, united to Mind, knows the Forms philosophically even as it is united to the One ecstatically. Therefore the final goal can be reached while we are still in the body on earth. After our death, such knowing/loving is permanent.

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## AUGUSTINE

Pl freed Aug from Manichaeism (unresolvable conflict between two opposed but equal forces, good and evil) as the best explanation of the universe; i.e., Aug abandoned Manich'm for Pl's notion of the

immaterial One/Mind/Soul as spiritual truth. Still, Aug departed from Pl at several significant points: e.g., a doctrine of creation (God and world are categorically different) replaces emanationism; e.g., knowledge, however exalted, *cannot* remedy what ails humankind; grace bridges the gap between God's holiness and our sin. e.g., the problem with humankind isn't that we are essentially immaterial souls trapped in a material body but that we are made in the image of God yet persistently contradict it.

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NB w.r.t. Pl's principle of unity (unity is needed to render multiplicity a universe): it is the highest level of the universe but doesn't wholly transcend it. The Hebrew God *chooses* to create, being under no necessity to create; Pl's One emanates by necessity the lesser levels of reality. The God of scrip. isn't the highest principle of anything. God doesn't need the universe in order to be God.

Some X'n theol'ns took over Pl's Forms as the expression of the mind of God in the creation. Therefore, by probing the creation, we can inform ourselves of the mind of God. (Can we?)

Concerning the One-as-Good (for Pl the Good isn't a Form but is rather the One) Pl insisted *nothing* can be said. In X'n thought we can say as much about God as God has authorized us (through rev.) to say. *This* much allows us to apprehend God without comprehending him.

88. X'ns are to be conformed to JC in the sense that our character is to be the image of God re-engraved. But we are never united essentially to God. (This would eliminate the distinction between creator and created.) The "likeness" to God in which we are created is a likeness to God's *character*, not a likeness to God's *being*.

88. NB the confusion between Platonists and X'ns w.r.t. "knowledge of God." (For X'ns, knowing God isn't characteristically a mental event that grasps the essences of things.)

89. (Shepherd) Allen is very dangerous when he says that the final goal of the X'n life is deification. Surely it's "humanization." (See 2 Peter 1:4)

X'n Platonists always tend to move toward a non-bib'l spiritualization in the sense of anti-materialization: we are spiritual to the extent that we are materially detached. (Then why is marriage the commonest bib'l metaphor for faith?)

## QUESTIONS

1] What is the difference between mysticism in general and bib'l mysticism?

2] (a) How does Philo's LOGOS differ from that of X'y?  
How does his intermediary differ from the mediator?

(b) Philo translates *dabar* as *logos*.  
What dimension of the Hebrew *dabar* does he fail to see?

3] On what two points does Philo's LOGOS agree with John's?  
Where does he differ from John? (73)

4] Plotinus maintains the purpose of life is (how) to restore the soul (itself divine) to its proper place, the supersensible realm.  
Where does scripture differ with this assessment? Why?

5] What influence do you think Pl might have had on Hegel? on Paul Tillich?

6] Tillich says God isn't *a* being or even the Supreme Being (since even the SB is a being.) God, rather is being-itself or the ground of being.

What, then, does Tillich mean when he says God doesn't "exist"? Is being-itself less real than any being?

7] PI maintains that since soul touches Mind (77), soul and Mind can transcend themselves in union with the One.

What influence do you think PI might have had on Hegel?

8] PI says that matter is non-being (i.e., devoid of Form.)

What is the ontological status of non-being?

What does scripture say about matter?

How was Adam produced according to the Genesis narrative?

In human beings how is their mind related to their body?

9] PI says human beings are essentially "soulish."

What does scrip. pronounce us to be essentially?

10] PI says we are direct our attention "up" (i.e., to Mind.)

What does Paul mean when he writes, "Seek the things that are above"?

11] According to a biblical perspective what is the relation between our mind and our faith?

12] PI says that phil'l discipline frees us from our obsession with our "lower selves."

Is our "lower self" what Paul means by "body"? by "flesh"?

When Paul speaks of those "whose god is their belly" (2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy), how is what he says related to PI's understanding of the structure of the human and restoration to humankind's purpose?

13] PI speaks of a mystical vision; namely, that the All is One.

What is the specifically X'n "vision"?

14] PI says that the goal of life can be reached while we are still in the body on earth.

What is the goal of life according to the gospel?

Can we attain it while we are still on earth?

15] PI says that embodiment (representation at a lower level) is a "regrettable necessity" to the One's full emanation, even as the philosopher is to live as if unembodied.

According to scrip., is the Incarnation a "regrettable necessity"?

Are Christians to live as if unembodied, detached from material desires?

16] While seeking to distinguish his thought from that of PI, does Augustine retain elements of PI?

What elements?

What is the significance of the fact that Aug. knew no Hebrew? (Cf. Erasmus and Schleiermacher)

17] When Christian Platonists said that the "Forms" express the mind of God in the creation, did they help or hinder X'n und'g?

Can any perusal of the creation yield a knowledge of God the Redeemer?

18] How do PI and scrip. differ w.r.t the nature of knowledge?