

Neoplatonism and Christian Thinking Leading the Self to the Good in Plotinus' Philosophy

Oana Ispas

Lecturer PhD, Scientific Researcher, "Acad. Andrei Rădulescu"
Legal Research Institute of Romanian Academy, Bucharest, Romania
oana.ispas@icj.ro

ABSTRACT: This article brings to the fore the problem of becoming a human being and consequently seeks an explanation for the mind-body ontological duality. The analysis considers the prism of the Plotinian vision. The author interprets the work *Enneade* extracting the argumentative scheme of Plotinus through which the dual nature of the human being seeks to reconcile the two ontologies. In *Enneade*, Plotinus expounds on the ways in which the human being tends to become the being, to his rational purpose, without denying the beauty of the sensitive world. The conclusion of the study identifies in Plotinus' work the mystical ecstasy as the common element of the components of the human being, this being also the path to becoming.

KEY WORDS: Plotinus, becoming being, mystical ecstasy

Unlike the early philosophers of Greek antiquity, and even contrary to Plato's theory, who Plotinus states that continues and merely explains, he constructs a doctrine of the First Principle, of the One, which is clearly distanced from its predecessors, but without completely innovating. In his vision, Plotinus builds his theory on elements already acquired in philosophy, such as the need for the existence of an arché (from the pre-Socratics), the need for a

unique, indivisible and immovable principle – introduced by Parmenides in the context of the two paths (Path of Truth), preserves the condition of transcendence taken from Plato's monad (but rejects synagogue as being hen) and also preserves Aristotle's interpretation of the theory of the transcendence of the Good in the Republic, and notes that Plato identifies the One with the Good. The novelty elements that Plotinus stopped at, although they seem paradoxical, look at the macrocosm on the one hand, locating the universal principle of all things, the motionless Center, as being beyond the Being, as a separate element outside the world (just as Anaxagoras understood Zeus as Nous orderly outside the constituent elements of the world), and on the other hand attributes to it a position in the deepest depths of being, where by introspection the being, alone and free from vices can contemplate the principle of all things and therefore the soul has a chance to reunite with the Good.

In view of these first elements and observing that the thesis of Plotinus' doctrine is the same as that of Plato, the mystical journey of the soul to the supreme intelligible world, the theme of this essay seeks to highlight briefly the reasons why Plotinus thinks that the soul aims to lead the self towards the absolute good, which are the ways to achieve this, if possible, and to what extent the self reaches the contemplation of the good, either by its actions or by its passivity, indifference and rejection of the sensible, and what happens if it succeeds.

The Plotinian ontology establishes, in the work of Enneade, the hierarchy of becoming of the being starting from the self, from the eternal matter of the sentient world, passing through the next step of the soul (Psyche) to reach the higher level of intelligence (Nous), the last level before the Absolute good, presented as One (To Hen). The first question that may arise is how an autonomous, indeterminate, immovable principle that does not become, does not transform, is not positively identified as something but rather as One with the meaning of its opposite, the one that is not multiple, can generate motion so that from it can generate all that is, has been and will be. The answer seems to lie, for Plotinus, in a double picture of divine reality: the superlunary world of intelligence and the sublunary, the sensitive world.

Plotinus originally divided the eternal cosmos into forms of hierarchical representation, so that each form is subject to a higher principle, and more importantly, each form is fit to be the object of a rational thought (noeta). In this way, the basis of Plotinian theory is intelligence, which is born of the desire of thought to move, by attracting to and from the Good (V. 5,6).

Between the three hypostases of reality, Nous holds the central place as being the principle of the soul. The nous is the energy and logos of the One, who, not being able to bear all the power received from the Good to conceive, will multiply this power to bear “part by part” (VI 7:15), thus giving birth to a plurality of absolute units of the good because “through One all beings come into existence”; it must be shown here that all that begets the intellect will contain traces of the Good, even the matter, the thing, “in so far as it is able to receive it” (IV. 8,6).

The next hypostasis, in the order of the Good, is represented by Psyche as a principle of the self, having the function of animating and illuminating the matter. Plotinus considers that every human soul, being hypostasized between the sensible and the intellect, has an upper part unaltered by the mixture with the body and which aims at theory, but also a lower part, Physis, which loses the power of intuitive activity, does not contemplate and degenerate into dianoia and then even in praxis.

The self and the sensible world dominate the first three Enneades of the total four, the importance being given by the ambivalent attitude of Plotinus: on the one hand, he admires the beauty of the sensible world considered by the belonging of intelligible that illuminate matter, and on the other hand, it is horrified by the “ugliness of matter” unable to fully receive the irradiation of the forms. The sentient world is eternal “as the fountain that never dries up” and therefore has its share of the indivisible principle of good. One descends the souls into the sentient world, giving birth to them for the purpose of their transformation “to be fulfilled they were born” (VII 1), providing them with protective organs and senses to withstand the harsh conditions of the underworld. The interpretation of the complete genesis of man in VI, 5 (by notes 660-662) would lead to three or three stages of development due to different types of souls that intervene and produce the vegetative, sensitive and rational forms. After the final stage of development,

the individual body is prone to receive the transcendent soul which, can project a ray of light through which formal reason is added to man, in order to guarantee a good being.

At this point in the analysis, we can continue with the punctual answers to the suggested questions: Why would the self-need to union with the good, as long as it seems that the soul cares for it in the underworld and does not seem to be alone, and the shadow of goodness which he possesses, as well as the quality of the object known to the intellect, would enable man to reason according to his good pleasure, his will being able to ensure a good life? According to Plotinian theory, the answer is simple: man longs for union with the good “out of longing for God”, out of love for that trace of Good that dominates him and urges him to return to the spiritual womb from which he comes. The erotic component of Platonic inspiration is fundamental in the work of Plotinus, thus ensuring the link between the two worlds. Describing with maximum sensitivity the relationship of love and desire between Soul and Objects, Soul and Intelligence, Intelligence and Goodness, Plotinus attaches fundamental value to beauty. It is acquired through grace, the descending grace of the Good to fill beings with color, goodness, and tenderness, or the very intelligence that without the light of the good remains indifferent to the soul. In its becoming, the self feels that it is not whole in the sublunary world, and by participating in the higher nous it intuits that only the union of love with good can complete it. But the love needed is not the kind of earthly Aphrodite.

But what are the ways allowed by the universal principle of all things by which the self can merge with the good? Distinguishing between two levels of divine reality – the World of Forms and One – Plotinus unequivocally cuts the guideline. In his opinion, the Rational Path, through which the self recognizes itself through reflexive acts, such as self-thinking thinking, in the desire to access the trace of the Good within it, is an undesirable, secondary, derived path mediated by the doubling and perversion of the nous community. Instead, the path considered safe and direct is the path of mystical ecstasy, of contemplation to which higher souls have access through the intuitive act doubled by the Love represented by the heavenly Aphrodite described by

Plato in the Banquet dialogue. The conditions under which the self can reach ecstasy presuppose its detachment in advance from any trace of matter, from anything outside it, from any vice, the need to turn inward, ignoring them all (VI, 7). If in doing all this and being ready to meet the Good, it feels that his movement becomes circular around a center, as in a mystical dance that carries it to his own center, then the self-unites with the One: “it realizes the source of life, as well as that of intelligence, the principle of being good, the root of the soul [...]” (VI, 9). The experience of mystical ecstasy represents for Plotinus the only way of the soul to become what it was, the contemplation of the good not being an objective, rational, but even a transformation, or as P. Hadot shows, a deifying ecstasy, and an inner metamorphosis. The proof that “the one is united with the One” seems to be the desire of the self to remain forever in the state of “sobria ebrietas”. But the soul does not remain in that center of the universe, its state does not last, the ecstasy and union with the Good are temporary, because the doubling has not been achieved definitively and the soul is still trapped in the sublunary world.

The conclusion that Plotinus’ theory of the union of the Self with the Good leads us to be also an exhortation to epoché, chemosis, ataraxia, and expectation. If the soul continues to practice the same type of Plotinian asceticism and does not pervert itself by practicing the sciences that involve demonstrations and proofs even in soul dialogue, its possibilities of continuing contemplation on equally high steps will no longer be hindered.

References

- Bréhier, É. 2000. *Filosofia lui Plotin (The Philosophy of Plotinus)*. Timișoara: AMARCORD Publishing House.
- Hadot, P. 1998. *Plotin sau simplitatea privirii (Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision)*. Iași: Polirom Publishing House.
- Peters, Fr. E. 1997. *Termenii filosofiei grecești (Greek Philosophical Terms)*. Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House.
- Plotin. 2007. *Enneade VI*. Bucharest: IRI Publishing House.