

## Platonism and Neoplatonism

PLATO said that life was a journey from appearance to reality. For Plotinus, the soul travelled downwards to the body and upwards to spirit. It moved between the phenomenal world of which it was the principle and the world of spirit which, in turn, was its principle.

Neoplatonist philosophers were mainly concerned with elaborations of Plato's doctrines concerning mind, soul, and the ultimate nature of the cosmos. There was a strong focus on the spiritual and mystical, with much elaboration of Plato's themes.

Neoplatonism had three main developments—the Jewish Platonism of Philo, the Christian Platonism of Clement and Origen, and the Hellenic Platonism of Plotinus, Proclus and Porphyry. This paper is concerned with the third group.

All neoplatonic philosophers were agreed on Plato's doctrine of perfect forms or archetypes and on his epistemology. They were not empiricists. They held that knowledge comes to us not only through the senses but from other eternal sources as in the case of mathematics and logic. One of these sources, according to Plato, was recollection.<sup>1</sup>

Plato, says H.P.B., taught that the

interior man was 'constituted of two parts—one immutable and always the same' formed of the same substance as Deity, and the other mortal and corruptible.<sup>2</sup> He explains that when the soul (*pushe*) 'allies herself to the Nous (divine spirit or substance)<sup>3</sup> she does everything 'aright and felicitously', but the case is otherwise when she attaches herself to *anoia* (folly, or the irrational animal soul). Here, then, we have Manas, or the soul in general, in its two aspects: when attaching itself to *anoia* (*kamaraupa*, or the animal soul in Esoteric Buddhism) it runs towards annihilation as far as the personal ego is concerned; when allying itself to the Nous (*atma-buddhi*) it merges into the immortal imperishable Ego and then its spiritual consciousness of the personal ego that was, becomes immortal.

Plotinus (205-270) says that in its voyage of return to the One the soul touches everything from the Absolute to matter. 'It is always between the phenomenal world of which it is the principle and the world of spirit which is its principle.' (W.R. Inge)

Plotinus was born in Egypt and studied in Alexandria for nine years under Ammonius Saccas, regarded as the

Dr Hugh Gray is General Secretary of the English Section.

founder of Neoplatonism, and by H.P. Blavatsky as a founder of Theosophy. He did not publish any books and swore his students to secrecy as to his teachings. He then travelled, on the expedition of the Emperor Gordian III, with the intention of studying the religions of the East. About the year 244 he settled in Rome and began to teach and it was there that, at the age of forty-nine, he began to write. His writings were edited and arranged by Porphyry and written down in 301 under the title *The Enneads*.

Porphyry (232-306?) propounded the philosophy of Plotinus but laid more stress on salvation, piety through works, and soul perfection by asceticism.

The admiration of Plotinus for Plato was very great, but his Plato is somewhat restricted. What is missing are Plato's aesthetic sensitivity, his political and social interests, his search for the definition of virtues and states, his pleasure in mathematics, the dramatic and affectionate relationships between men, the stories and the myths. Plato appears to us as a human being of balance and harmony; Plotinus seems to be more ascetic and puritanical. Both philosophers are great literary artists.

Plotinus describes the way of mysticism. When the divine is contacted, 'At the moment of touch there is no power whatever to make any affirmation; there is no leisure; reasoning upon the vision is for afterwards. ... the light is the proof of the event. ... to see the Supreme by the Supreme and not by the light of any other principle. ... But how can this be accomplished? Cut away everything.' (*Enneads* V. 3, 17)

Plotinus frequently experienced the state of 'ecstasy':

Many times it has happened. Lifted out of the body into myself; becoming external to all other things and self-centred; beholding a marvellous beauty; then, more than ever, assured of community with the loftiest order; enacting the noblest life, acquiring identity with the divine; stationing within It by having attained that activity; poised above whatsoever within the Intellectual is less than the Supreme: yet, there comes the moment of descent from intellection to reasoning, and after that sojourn in the divine I ask myself how it happens that I can now be descending, and how did the Soul ever enter into my body—the Soul which, even within the body, is the high thing it has shown itself to be.

(*Enneads* IV. 81,1)

This divine mind contains the potential of the intelligible universe.

At the last level is the All Soul, or Logos, which includes all souls, and is the eternal emanation of the intellectual principle from Nous. It is dual in manifestation, having a celestial soul looking upwards to the divine mind and a lower or generative soul bringing into being the material world.

Plotinus sees men as miniature universes, replicas of macroworlds, seeking to rejoin divinity by making themselves one out of manyness. Men must purify themselves by separating their intellectual-souls from their body-souls and by enlarging the territory of the former at the expense of the latter.

The body obscures the truth which is revealed to the intellect. Thought is superior to the sense, and intuition to observation. The soul is in the body through appetite and the body obscures the truth in order to keep the soul a prisoner.

For Aristotle, the soul is the entelechy

or form of the body; for Plotinus, it contains the essence of the divine and the eternal.

Purification is achieved by the separation of the intellectual-soul from the body-soul. There is a spiritual essence of light that can illumine for us the nature of being.

Man's pilgrimage through many lives is to reunite himself to a primeval source in the divine realm of being. Individual souls are distinct without being separate from one another and from the soul of the universe.

At the centre of the metaphysics of Plotinus is a Trinity or three aspects of divinity called Hypostases of the One, Spirit (Nous), and Soul. The One is supreme, Spirit ranks second, and Soul third.

The One is the principle of the universe, of which no quality can be predicated. 'We refuse,' says Plotinus, 'to attribute being to the One in order to establish a relation between him and derivative beings. Consequently, when you have had an intuition of the Supreme do not assert that he is this or that, otherwise you virtually reduce him to the category of determinate beings.'

He describes the divine as 'the absolute measure of all things, the occult well-spring of reality.' He says, 'we discuss the divine nature, not in the hope of defining or comprehending it, but in order to awaken and stimulate the soul and thus rekindle its innate desire of the divine—this ultimate experience.'

Man's essential nature is that of an intelligent spirit in a material body. His task, through many lives, is to find his way back to the divine.

'All that one can say of the divine is that "it is".'

The next level down is Nous, which means spirit and mind. It is described as the light by which the One sees itself, 'the First emanation or divine intellection', a meditation of the unknowable, the beginning of plurality. It contains Plato's divine forms or archetypes.

Proclus (410-485) proclaimed a primary principle transcending Being, Unity, Cause and Good. He held that we can only say what it is not.

From this primary principle proceed divine beings of which goodness is to be predicated. From them proceeds the sphere of Nous which subdivides into further spheres of Being, Life, and Thought. At the next lower level is the sphere of the Soul, which is the intermediary between the super-sensible and the sensible worlds, mirroring the former as a copy and serving as a pattern for the latter. This sphere of soul is subdivided into three sub-spheres, that of divine souls, that of demoniac souls, and that of human souls. The world is a living creature, formed and guided by the divine gods. Evil is an imperfection which is inseparable from the lower strata of the hierarchy of being.

Proclus attributed to the human soul a unitive faculty which, in ecstasy, can attain the ultimate Principle. He also attributed to it an ethereal body composed of light, which is midway between the material and the immaterial and is imperishable. It is with the eyes of the ethereal body that the soul perceives the Theophanies, or the manifestation of the gods to man. There are three stages in the soul's ascent to ecstasy—Eros, Truth, and Faith. Truth leads the soul beyond the love of the beautiful and fills it with knowledge of true reality, while Faith

consists in the mystical silence before the Incomprehensible and Ineffable.

The individual soul is invisible, intangible and unextended. The body derives its form from the soul, not vice versa. The nature of the soul admits of no explanation in terms of the body.

The intellect produces the soul of the whole and this produces all other existences.

The One emanates the universal intellect or mind. (The lower is always explained by the higher.)

Mind is the eternal 'irradiation' of the One.

Plotinus says that Aristotle deprives primal reality of first rank by the assertion that it thinks itself. To think belongs to the mind, not the One which transcends all known attributes.

'We can know by intellect that the One is, but not what it is. To call it One is to deny it plurality rather than to assert any truth regarding it.'

Above the One of Plotinus, Iamblichus (born 330) asserted yet another One, which exceeds all qualifications whatever and stands beyond the Good; Iamblichus

1. See Plato's dialogue with the slave Meno.

2. *Key to Theosophy*, p.63. 3. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

claimed that Plotinus made his One identical with the Good. He also multiplied the members of the hierarchy of beings, holding that from the super-terrestrial Soul proceeded two others, followed by a host of spiritual beings arranged according to numbers.

Plotinian neoplatonism is described by Frederick Coppelston as 'one of the supreme achievements of the human race' and 'the evolution of the final creative effort of ancient thought'.<sup>4</sup>

In the comparative study of philosophy for Theosophical purposes we should never forget that the richest versions of the Secret Doctrine are listed by H.P. Blavatsky as Advaita Hinduism, Esoteric Buddhism, and Platonism. The Western student should be as conversant with the works of Plato (said by H.P.B. to be an Adept) and his successors in philosophy as the Eastern student is with Advaita, the Bhagavad Gita, Sankara and the Upanishads.

As well as being philosophically rewarding, there is great aesthetic and literary pleasure in reading Plato and Plotinus. □

4. *A History of Philosophy*, Frederick Coppelston; vol. 1, part 2, p. 229.

Now if the heart of man has been set in the love of learning and true wisdom and he has exercised that part of himself above all, he is bound to have thoughts immortal and divine, if he is to lay hold upon truth, nor can he fail to possess immortality in the fullest measure that human nature admits; and because he is always devoutly cherishing the divine part and maintaining the guardian genius that dwells with him in good estate, he must needs be happy above all.