04. Plotinus (~204-270 A.D.) and Neoplatonism

- Late antiquity: Hellenistic Egypt and Rome (post-Alexander, post-*Pax Romana*).

- Possibly Egyptian - studied philosophy in Alexandria.

- *Enneads* (published by Porphyry in 301 A.D.): 54 treatises organized into six sets of nine ("ennead") each.

- Primary founder of *Neoplatonism*:
  - *Why return to Plato?*
  - *A better fit with Christian doctrine (but note later influence of Aristotle).*

- *Motivating problem*: How is the World of Forms related to the World of sensible objects?
  - *How is the Problem of the One and the Many solved within Plato's metaphysics?*
I. Plotinus' Metaphysics

1. The three hypostases (levels):

The One
ineffable, transcendent
- The source of all things: Pure unity.
- Ineffable (knowable only through what it is not).
- Plato's the Good.

Intellect
- The World of Forms (Forms = thoughts in Intellect).
- A "One-in-Many".
- Aristotle's Prime Mover (self-thought thought).

Soul
- Seminal reasons (logoi spermatikoi) = copies of Forms.
- A "One-and-Many".
- Immanent in physical world and transcendent to it.

The Physical World of Becoming
bare matter
- Generated by Soul imparting Forms onto matter via seminal reasons.
- bare matter: source of evil.
On the One and Intellect

- Why posit the One? Why not stop with Intellect?

**Intellect is not a true unity:**
- It can be spoken of.
- It contains multiplicity.
- It contains the subject/object distinction (thinker/thoughts).

**Claim:** A first principle must be a **radical unity**.
- Why? If not, there will always be something prior to it.
  (Anticipation of Christian doctrines of God.)

**Note:** In Aristotle's cosmos, there are as many first principles as there are heavenly spheres (all serve as final causes for terrestrial change).
- Why do they all coordinate with each other? (Why is there Order admit Chaos?)
- For Aristotle, order is "built into" natural objects (encoded in their natures) and there's no (external) explanation of why it is present.
- Plotinus (and Plato) appeal to an external explanation of order.
On Soul

- Three distinctions:
  - *Soul* (the third hypostasis).
  - *World soul* (soul of the physical world/cosmos in the sense of *Timaeus*).
  - *Individual souls*.

- Individual souls have two parts:
  (a) "*higher part*" - remains in the realm of Intellect
  (b) "*lower part*" - descends to inhabit a corporeal body in the physical world.

- **Thus:** Humans are directly connected to the One via the Intellect.
  - Humans are amphibians: the link between the realms.

---

*Comparison with Stoics*

- Stoicism = Hellenistic school of philosophy.
- Stoic cosmos = Soul (*i.e.*., just one "level").
- Mediator = *pneumena* (air)
- Individual souls are fragments of World soul.
- *Plotinus:* Both individual souls and the World soul are on equal footing as aspects of Soul.
Comparison with Plato and Aristotle

Plato:
- individual souls are immaterial and immortal (but not Forms).
- "fall" into trap of body (the body is an instrument and a prison for the soul).

Aristotle:
- individual soul = form.
- body = matter.
- human = indiv. soul (form) + body (matter).
- no "afterlife": soul (form) is destructible (except for intellect).

Plotinus:
- human = individual soul + body.
- body = form + matter (after Aristotle).
- So: human = indiv. soul₁ + (indiv. soul₂ + matter).

"higher part": immaterial and immortal and linked with Intellect.
"lower part": form of body and in physical world.
II. Doctrine of Procession and Reversion

- How are the three hypostases linked?
  - How are the Many derived from the One?
  - How do physical objects "participate" in Forms?

- Two aspects of all things:
  (i) inner act = substance or essence of the thing.
  (ii) outer act = image or likeness of inner act; a necessary expression of inner act.

- Procession = Process in which outer act emmantes from inner act.
  
  Example: Heat as the essence of fire (its inner act) vs. heat that flows out (emmanates or procedes) from fire (its outer act).

- Reversion = Process in which outer act contemplates (reverts to) inner act and thereby establishes itself as an actual, independent but inferior, existant.
  
  Possible interpretation: Inner act is a final cause for outer act. Thus reversion is more pronounced the higher up in the chain of being.

- Key characteristic: Procession and reversion are atemporal.
How this is supposed to explain the relations between the hypostases:

- Each hypostasis is the complete cause of the next lower one.
- The lower emmanates (procedes) from the higher as its outer act.
  - Procession accounts for the material existence of the lower (its matter).
  - Reversion accounts for its form (its true being): The matter of the lower is informed through the act of contemplating (reverting to) the higher.

Procession as necessary, undeliberate, and undiminishing

- Procession must be undeliberate and undiminishing in order for it to apply to the One (and thus account for the generation of Intellect).
- But: Why must the One emmante necessarily?

Argument from Analogy: All things generate necessarily:
- Fire generates heat.
- Snow generates cold.
- Animals generate offspring.

- Is necessary emmanation undiminishing?
  - Does this impose a constraint on the supposed omipotence of the One?
III. Dynamics of Plotinus' Metaphysics

1. *How Intellect is generated from the One.*
   - Potential Intellect (outer act of the One) procedes necessarily from, and without diminish to, the One.
   - Potential Intellect contemplates (reverts to) the One and brings itself and the Forms into being.
   - Forms are the representations in Intellect of the One, produced through the act of reversion.

2. *How Soul is generated from Intellect.*
   - Potential Soul (outer act of Intellect) procedes necessarily from, and without diminish to, Intellect.
   - Potential Soul contemplates (reverts to) Intellect and brings itself and the seminal reasons into being.
   - Seminal reasons are the representations in Soul of the Forms.
3. How the physical world is generated from Soul.

- The physical world, as the outer act of Soul, proceeds necessarily from, and without diminish to, Soul.
- The physical world contemplates (reverts to) Soul and brings itself and physical objects into being.
- Physical objects are imperfect copies in the physical world, mediated by the seminal reasons, of the Forms.

• Question: Is the Plotinian cosmos created (à la Plato) or eternal (à la Aristotle)?
  - Created: Plotinus stresses that his doctrine is just an articulation of Plato.
  - Eternal:
    - Procession and reversion are atemporal processes.
    - Soul does not act on matter like Demiurge; rather, Soul acts as a final cause to produce physical objects.
IV. Knowledge of the One

- Individual souls have become separated from the One:
  - Reverence for Earthly things and lack of respect for themselves are the causes.
  - They can regain their connection with the Intellect and the One, and hence their true natures, by being reminded of their parentage.
  - To do so, they must turn inward.

- Turning inward:
  - An overpowering experience: non-sensory, non-temporal, non-spatial, turning point of life, etc.
  - Plotinus experiences this three times...

- Plotinus and Gnosticism:
  - Pessimistic Gnosticism: The world is inherently evil. The goal of the soul is to escape the physical world to commune with God.
  - Optimistic Gnosticism: The world is inherently good. Humans contain within them this goodness.