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PLOTINUS

BY THE REVEREND STEWART MEANS, D.D.

NEW HAVEN, CONN., U. S. A.

THE great Gibbon has said: "If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus." Without discussing the correctness of this statement, one can at least say that had he been writing of a century later the words could not have been true. The sombre and melancholy apprehensions which overshadowed the noble brow of the great Aurelius had already become realized. Political decay and social degradation were on every hand. From the death of Marcus Aurelius to the reign of Diocletian there were thirty-eight claimants who wore the imperial purple. Yet the culture of the ancient world was so deeply sunken on the mighty foundations of the past that the spirit still moved in the paths which had been so painfully surveyed and which represented the labours of some of the greatest minds the world had ever known. Though the great intellectual habits had not yet died away, the effect of the great changes which were taking place, and the sense felt, rather than thought, that an age was coming to an end, and that no one could read the future, showed itself in the new elements and the new efforts of science. The great cities still had their schools; and from them flowed a steady stream, which, though it had lost the radiant hope which marked the earlier periods, still furnished the light in which the soul could live and still claim its title to spiritual freedom and intellectual growth. The old Hellenic spirit had not yet died out of the world, and once again it shone out with a new beauty, touched with a pathos and yearning foreign to the serene glow of its immortal home. It was kindled in the city which Alexander planted, and it sprang from a race which Alexander had scorned and conquered.

Plotinus was a Copt and a pagan, but he had drunk deeply of the fountain of Greek culture, which still welled forth on the banks of the Nile. In the Second and Third centuries Alexandria was the spiritual metropolis of the world and the home of the representatives of the greatest religions or religious forces which were then influencing the world. Strange as it may seem, in this spirit of general decline and intellectual sterility there appears one who stands alone and apart, and who by his extraordinary genius has marked a new stage in the history of human thought. One of the latest German students of his thought has said of him: "If Plato is the greatest dialectician and artist, Aristotle the greatest scholar, Plotinus is the greatest metaphysician among the philosophers of antiquity, possibly the greatest of which the history of philosophy gives any account."¹

The language of a recent English critic is no less enthusiastic than his German commentator: "The greatest thinker between Aristotle and Descartes."² The story of his life, like that of most great thinkers, is devoid of any dramatic features, and is altogether involved in the history and evolution of his thought.

He was born in Lycopolis in Egypt about 205 A. D., and died in Italy about 270 A. D. After many wanderings in search of knowledge he came to the school of Ammonius Saccas in Alexandria when he was about 27 years old. After listening to him he said: "This is the man I have been looking for." What the inner relation of his thought was to that of his teacher we are not able clearly to define, and the matter after all is of relatively little importance. For whatever impulse he received from others his thought was his own, and bears upon it the stamp of an original and independent mind. He stayed with Ammonius Saccas for many years, and on leaving Alexandria he went to Rome; and there the pupils he gathered around him testify to the power and influence not only of his thought but of his character. He was careless about any personal reputation or fame, and his system was never presented

¹ *Plotin*, S. 61. A. Drews.

² *The Neoplatonist*, p. 34. T. Whittaker.

by him in a literary form. What we have of it is contained in the *Enneads* which Porphyry arranged both before and after his death. The Greek is difficult and obscure, and the arrangement is more or less arbitrary. A thorough understanding of his system requires not only philosophical training, but metaphysical powers of a high order. However, the distinctive elements by which he influenced the course of human thought, and especially those which entered into the life of the mind, can be fairly well recognized. This, too, because they became forever after forces which conditioned the outlook upon life and the primary assumptions of thought.

He stood in close and organic relations with the past; yet, in a way, all the attempts of his predecessors to solve some of the most difficult problems before them were swept into insignificance, or relative insignificance, by this one who is still regarded as one of the great spirits of the earth. Plotinus represents in the highest degree the transition from a philosophy based upon naturalism to a philosophy based upon consciousness.³ We find also not only a new mind, but a new method. The method of the Platonic school was abstraction, that of Aristotle definition, but that of Plotinus was analysis, a new process in the history of philosophy.⁴ He not only stands at the close of the old, but he also marks the beginning of a new era. "With Plotinus disappeared the last and one of the greatest minds ever inspired by the Hellenic spirit." From one point of view he seems to be supremely modern, inasmuch as the wide current of philosophy flowed into a new channel carved by his directing hand, and has ever since flowed in the same bed. On the other hand, he looked out on the world with the eyes of antiquity, and he loved the ancient beauty of the classic spirit with the ardour of a true Greek.

There is no attempt here to give a thorough and exhaustive analysis of his system, but simply to indicate some of the chief points, as they are related to the history

³ *Plotin*, S. 175. A. Drews.

⁴ *Histoire Critique de l'école d'Alexandrie*, Vol. III, p. 237. E. Vacherot.

of philosophy past and present, and, particularly, to that which is one of the central and cardinal features of his system, his mysticism. In touching upon these various points, it may not be possible to show how they are related to each other, or how they stand in reference to the organic whole of his thought, but simply a setting forth of those factors of it which became of deep and permanent influence in the speculations of the future, and entered into the common mind of the religious thought of later ages. Yet, however great their practical value, and however vast their influence and effect, it must be said that their scientific or theoretical value was even greater. They stood for a new starting point in thought, and a new basis in speculation.

Modern philosophy begins with the immediate experience of subjective thought as its starting point, and from it advances to the conception of the external world, or to an absolute and objective existence, whose thinking is determined by the logic of the mind and the laws of its existence. The starting point of modern philosophy was also the starting point of Plotinus, and in this respect the main current of idealistic philosophy has never varied from the path he marked out for it. The great movement of the inner life which sprang from him, has been one of the most original and puissant elements of all the later history of human thought.

Spirit was the great pre-occupation of his mind, and he plunged into its examination with a tireless energy and a depth and power of speculative analysis such as had never before been brought to bear upon this problem. He was, therefore, in a sense, and a very real sense, the first psychologist of antiquity, and one of the first of all time. Not only was spirit more important and more real than matter, but it was felt, or realized, with an intensity which made matter appear but an incident and an experience in the life of the soul. This very effort to attain to a purely spiritual existence led to a strong dualistic and ascetic conception of the relation of the soul to the body. And he expressed this in one of those phrases which, without being technical, reveal the emotional in-

tensity which lay beneath his philosophical analysis. "Death is better than existence in the body." For, to him, spirit was the only and final reality. That which thinks is not matter, and that which thinks is conscious of itself and of its thinking. The unity of this consciousness is the primary fact in all real knowledge of self. It is preserved and continued unchanged through all experience. The consciousness also exists previous to all experience, and is neither a result nor a product of it. It is upon this consciousness and the data it contains that our real knowledge to a great degree depends. Self-consciousness became thus the distinctive and infallible sign of spirit. Whatever was conscious of itself was spirit. His conception, therefore, of consciousness became his great contribution to psychology.

Upon this he based his spiritualistic view of the universe in opposition to the Stoic pantheism and the older metaphysics.⁵ It is true the term does not occur until much later, and was brought into the general current of European thought through the Arabian philosophers of the Middle Ages; but it was, unconsciously, perhaps, the basis and assumption of the intellectual processes of Plotinus.

In order, however, to realize not only the power, but the originality of Plotinus it will be necessary to show his relations with the past speculation. He believed himself to be in the line of Platonic thought, and did not intend to move in a new path; nor did he suppose he was, in any way, doing so. Rather, he was only a continuator of the great tradition.

Three great epochs in the history of Greek speculation previous to Plotinus have been distinguished by the historians. In the first, that from Thales of Miletus to Socrates, the identity of thought and being are naively assumed. Being is understood as sensuous, material reality. Thought is supposed, without any proof, to be able to know reality as such. The distinction between phenomena and noumena was neither asserted nor recognized.

⁵ *Geschichte der Psychologie*, B. II. S. 331. Siebeck.

In the second period, Plato is the founder of the dominant school. To him, being means thought, or, rather, ideas and conceptions; and the identity of thought and being means and affirms nothing more than that the conception as such is true being. Thought and being are one and the same, but not in the sense that being is of a sensuous nature, and is immediately comprehended by thought, as was the idea of the earlier school. It is only in the very highest philosophical sense that Being is, according to its nature, nothing else than thought. This view, too, is undeveloped in consequence of the fact that in this way of regarding knowledge the concept and Being or Reality are identified. The subjective and the objective are confused or blended.

The third epoch is represented by the school of Aristotle. He brings down the objective, metaphysical, conceptions from the height of the Platonic ideal world, and plants them immediately in the sensuous material world as forming and shaping principles. In all these attempts the starting point was the physical universe; and a basis was sought there to gain a foundation for an unified conception of the universe.

Socrates, according to Nietzsche, was the center and turning point in the world's history, viewed from the speculative standpoint. He turned men's thoughts from the outer to the inner, from the objective to the subjective, from Nature to Man, from Matter to Spirit, from Physics to Ethics, though he did not by any means apprehend the full meaning and distinction of the latter. Yet it was in this new field, with all its implications and significance, that the mind of man was hereafter to be engaged, though the full import of the problem was not realized by his successors.

The long debate through the successive schools of Greek thought culminated in a general scepticism, and, as it appeared, an intellectual bankruptcy. Yet, while this process was going on, new interests were awakening, and new efforts were put forth leading in other directions from the old philosophical efforts. The sense of the Divine was increased, and a longing for intercourse and communion with it appeared as the ultimate solution of the

deepest problems of life. The story is a long and interesting one, but belongs to the general history of philosophy rather than to the particular development of the philosophy of Plotinus, though it was organically related to it. In this evolution philosophy and religion were blended; and the ultimate aim was not merely knowledge, as had been the moving impulse of the purely Greek speculation, but a complex in which the new motive of redemption and communion were integral, if not decisive motives. And it was at Alexandria that these new forces came most clearly to light. Philo the Jew, with his transcendental piety, contributed largely to the new movement and the Neo-Pythagoreanism which developed side by side with it, and made a spiritual syncretism which combined with the undying influence of Platonism to produce a new spiritual atmosphere and a new spiritual aim.

Starting from the subjective basis, Plotinus fixes his eye upon the human soul; and from its nature and constitution, as he studied it, makes a new beginning; and through it and its necessities and character attempts to find a solution for the new spiritual needs which were now awake and insistent. The human soul in contrast with the body is by its very nature immortal and indivisible. It is a spiritual entity, an essence, separable from, and independent of, the body. It is without color, figure, weight, is unchangeable and incorrupt: the principle of life and movement in matter. Hence, by its very nature, it is divine and immortal.⁶ Having, therefore, a divine origin, the spirit of man does not become an individual being, and is not conscious of its individuality, until it is separated and detached from its principle. By virtue of its essential character it tends to re-enter the Spirit, that is, the universal Intelligence. According as the consciousness of individualism is weakened by the effort to lose itself and return to its origin, so the consciousness of its essence becomes more clear and profound, and, in the same degree, the consciousness of the spirit as a Self is more and more emphasized.

⁶ Vacherot, Vol. I., p. 540.

The theory appears over subtle and paradoxical, and seems to involve a pantheistic absorption as the inevitable result of the process. But as a practical conclusion it accentuates and sharpens to the highest degree the consciousness of a spiritual personality.⁷ The speculative inheritance which he received from the past left the problem of matter still unsolved, and it was one which in the interest of a unified theory he could not escape or avoid. The spiritual and ideal quality of his thought led him to attempt to overcome the dualism which lay in the Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy, but strive as he would, he was never able to accomplish it. For matter was still in opposition to spirit and lay on the outer fringe of life, a dark cloud, breaking up the unity and serenity of his speculative system.⁸ In order to overcome this opposition he denies the actual existence of matter, and deprives it of any qualities or characteristics. He asserts that it is not Being. This declaration seems to be the absolute negation of every reality in matter, but the facts of life were hard to deal with. Instead, therefore, of landing in a pure monistic idealism, he in reality ended in an ascetic dualism. This dualism, also, involved or implied a pessimistic view of life. For life, as conditioned by matter, could only be regarded as a distinct fall and degradation. Death, then, in reality is a release and elevation. As a matter of fact, this was the view generally held then by his Christian contemporaries.⁹ It is true that matter is here viewed from the ethical standpoint and not from the physical or metaphysical, but this does not change the problem, it only approaches it from another angle.

The merely negative quality of it, moreover, becomes positive, inasmuch as matter is the positive source of evil, and, therefore, in itself evil. Redemption, in fact, means an escape from matter.¹⁰ His ethical point of view carries him here beyond the conclusions of Plato, and gives a

⁷ Vacherot, Vol. I, p. 591.

⁸ *Geschichte der Metaphysik*, B. I. S. 107. E. Von Hartmann.

⁹ *Philosophie des Plotin*. S. 153. Kirschner.

¹⁰ *Philosoph. des Griechen, dritte Theil, zweite Abtheilung*, S. 547. Zeller.

more sombre and despairing outlook upon life. Theoretically, it may be true that for Plotinus matter is no more than the last degree of Being, and the ideal limit of its development. There is much which seems to justify this view and also that he was the first and most eminent Monist which the history of antique thought presents to us.¹¹ Logical consistency would seem to involve this conclusion, but the fundamental aim and intellectual implications lead in the other direction. For while he was seeking for light, as all Greek thinkers sought it, he was using his intellect for the purpose of life rather than light. And with the insoluble problems involved in his own philosophical assumptions, he was plunged into inconsistencies and contradictions which had their ground in his own nature. With all the Greek love of beauty and splendor of the world, he hated the asceticism of the gnostics and the Christians most bitterly. Yet this love seems to be in conflict with his own moral and spiritual asceticism, and he saw no way to reconcile the various elements in life and in his own nature.

In the great truth of Christianity, the Incarnation, the two worlds, the divine and the human, matter and spirit, were united in humanity. The Naturalism of the ancient world had lost sight of, or never recognized, the spiritual; and in the reaction Neo-Platonism lost sight of the material or tried to explain it away.¹² This explanation may not be acceptable to all students, but the fact is that Plotinus was never able to justify the existence of matter, and strove to remove it out of the field of thought as a primary element. While he sought to be an optimist, and intellectually, perhaps, gave that impression, his optimism was only in reference to the formal and logical constitution of Being. The world was not only simply reason or spirit, it was at the same time matter, and its reasonable constitution stands out against a dark background of an illogical foundation, which, in spite of all his efforts, he can neither understand nor explain.¹³ For his system

¹¹ *L'infinite Divine*, p. 220. H. Guyot.

¹² Vacherot, II Vol., p. 187.

¹³ *Plotin*, S. 197. Drews.

of emanations by which he sought to account for the existence of matter has only a theoretical consistence, and has no metaphysical or psychological foundation. It was an argument derived possibly from oriental sources, and gives a pantheistic character to his philosophical system.

If he could not avert his glance from the world, as no man can, the two foci of his thought, however, were Man and God: the two great spiritual realities into whose nature he sought to look with an interest and an awe which have never been surpassed by any inquiries into the character of Being. It is in his conception of God, or the One, and the relations which exist between the spirit of man and the Infinite Being, which forms the chief interest he has for the student of speculative philosophy. For it was from this source that one of the great currents sprang which has remained a prevailing power in human thought ever since: because it was the expression of a new spiritual condition which had never previously been so intellectually felt. The new attitude, the new development, the new relation, or the new function, was organically connected with the new interpretations or definitions, not only of the human spirit, but of the Divine. For, to Plotinus, the only absolute reality was spirit. The difficulties he had with matter arose from his absolute idealism and his unwillingness to give any but a negative character to it. So strongly did he feel the intrusive and disturbing effect of matter, not only as an element of thought but of life, that he insisted that the independence of the soul, its own self-conscious self-possession, is the richest and fullest victory which can be achieved here upon earth. "He that possesses himself is happy even in the bull of Phalaris," has the true antique ring, and shows how deeply the profound egotism of the Stoic reveals a fundamental instinct of the age. In his language about Being, the One or God, it seems clear that he had read Philo, though his line of thought is rather Hellenic than Jewish or Alexandrian Christian.¹⁴ He read him, too, sympathetically, but he gives a clearer and fuller

¹⁴ *Neo-Platonism*, p. 26. T. Whittaker.

expression to the underlying thought of his great predecessor. For he was filled with a passion for the Infinite far transcending that of Philo, and, perhaps, that of any other writer of antiquity. He was, in fact—and this is his immortal interest and glory—the first and the greatest of the mystic philosophers. For him God is the Ineffable and the Unknowable. He is, nevertheless, the King of Kings, the Father of the gods: He is the Cause of all causes: the Supreme Cause: the First Act: the Absolute: the Principle and Essence of Absolute Existence: the Root of Reason. It is true there was much in Greek speculation which was preparatory for this, but Plotinus made it his own; he deepened and systematized it, showing that he was something more than a mere eclectic. In his endeavor to free the Absolute from any limitations which are suggested by words, he denies every positive affirmation, and strives to reach pure Being, which is free from all the suggestions and modifications which human speech carries with it. That he most ardently believed in the Divine Reality can be easily gathered from all that he says of it, and especially from the spiritual aims which reveal themselves in his whole life. "Life without God is only an image of life," he says; and one who feels so may be in intellectual bondage to a system, but his soul is seeking a center where it may rest. But his dialectics led him, as it leads every man who rests uncompromisingly upon the mere logic of a system, into a dilemma from which he could not extricate himself. Since this Absolute One, for whom the soul searches, is free from all qualities or distinctions, and is not to be described by any of the terms which apply to finite existence, there is only one method which can be used to attain a foundation for belief or certainty, and that is, negation. We reach this exclusive Unity by a process of abstraction. When we take away all differences, distinctions, and attributes, in fact, everything which constitutes or characterizes existence as we know it, that which is left represents the ultimate basis of all being: it is self-existent and self-defined and has no relations which can be expressed or assumed. In this solitary independence it has no sym-

pathy or connection with anything below it or outside of it; and the world of matter and of life is cut off from any basis in its being.

In order to establish some relations or connections, Plotinus is compelled to proceed from the One to the Many by a process of descent. This method seems to suggest oriental sources, or at least it resembles in its logic, if not in its terminology, some of the Gnostic systems which are evidently based upon oriental ideas. Yet, however that may be, after so defining or declaring the nature of the One in such a way as to preclude the existence of the world by any direct action or activity on the part of the Changeless Being, this became a necessary attempt to explain the world and life. It does not harmonize with his theory of the One, and finds no ground in the Absolute Being for such a process. For all the language which he uses to describe this movement from the center outward is based upon experiences or similes which by no means correspond to the empty void and the unknown abyss of Pure Being. For the conception of the One which is reached by pure negation is quite another and different thing from its actual existence. Affirmation, not Negation, is the path of demonstration, and the test, in fact, of reality.

These various stages or waves in the evolution are defined in terms which, looked at from the point of view of modern philosophical speculation, seem quite arbitrary and unjustified. Their real meaning consists in the fact that they reveal to us the difficulties which face the mind in its attempts to give a valid statement of the facts of life and the problems of the soul and God. The abstract language and definitions deprived the One of any element of personality, and again and again we miss the pathetic sincerity which fills the language of Philo, inspired as it was by the vivid realism of the Old Testament. This, which plays such a large part in the thought of Philo, seemed to vanish in the rigid and abstract dialectic of Plotinus; yet the fervor and passion were there, and the yearning for God was even more intense and burst through the cold phraseology of the schools. Instead of

uniting man and God, his very efforts seemed to make the breach wider and more impassable. For the primary aim of Plotinus, the subjective basis of his philosophy, was the desire for a perfect union with God. Yet his theory of emanation, which Zeller says was involved in the Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, weakened, instead of strengthening, the bond which united the soul with God. Also, as Vacherot says, it prevents or denies any immediate contact between them. The force of the French critic's argument is more or less weakened, however, if the system of Plotinus is regarded, as Zeller regards it, as a "Dynamic Pantheism." Guyot regards it on the other hand as "Pure Plotinianism." That is, it absorbed elements from preceding systems; but modified them, and reproduced them in a form which is fundamentally original.

In spite of its limitations and defects, the system of Plotinus represents on the whole progress in speculation, and furnished a basis upon which the future largely worked: that is, in its main and fundamental assumptions. Regarded simply from the results obtained in the way of a new conception of the order and relation of God and the world, Neo-Platonism represents an actual advance over the speculations of the previous Greek schools. The god of Plato creates the universe as the artist produces, that is, by working with previously existing material. The Aristotelian conception was of a god who acts by attraction upon a world which in itself has the principle of existence, and also of life. Stoicism reached the idea of unity by a gross confusion and identification of the world with God; it avoided Dualism only to fall into Naturalism or Materialism. Neo-Platonism, on the other hand, advances the great idea that the world obtained its being, life, movement, and form from God.

The very theory of emanation which seemed to offer an explanation of the cosmic order involved him, by its evolutionary character, in a contradiction which defeated the very aim he had in view. Man stood not closer, but farther from God than ever; and no way was open for union or communion between the two. To avoid the

conclusions of his theory, he added a new element to his system. This was a return to God through the very steps which he had followed in his departure from him. Over against the Descent which explained the origin of man and the universe was an Ascent by which man returned to God. The necessity for this was not logical nor did it consist with his logic. It was rather, perhaps, the result of an independent impulse not related to the intellectual process by which he had gained his conclusions. It sprang out of his deep spiritual craving for the divine. For his moral earnestness swept away his logical consistency, and set him forward on the path which the spiritual movement of the age had already marked out in the evolution or development of Hellenic thought. Stripped of the imagery and naturalism which clothed oriental thought in such glowing language, it had substantial resemblances in its dialectic form to much which we associate with some of the most powerful religious systems of Western Asia. Yet it is his own original method, and reveals the independence and power of his religious instincts over against the philosophical elements which gave body and form to his speculations. But even this long and arduous Ascent ended only in apparent defeat and failure. For God being unknown and unknowable, his existence alone can be affirmed by man, and no conscious experience of his reality is possible for the human spirit. Even after the eager soul has climbed through the various stages of existence it stands at last and alone in the awful solitude gazing blindly into the dark abyss and crater where ultimate Being exists. No ladder of dialectics will avail him here, and flinging away the methods by which he has hitherto risen, he plunges down a new path which seems to open before him.

He here follows the path of Philo, and finds that he is to attain the last aim of philosophy, not by the processes by which he has come hither, but by a vision of the Divine in which all definiteness of thought and vividness of self-consciousness disappears in a mystical ecstasy. For since thought is motion, and the Primal Being is the unchanged and the unchanging, the soul must rise or sink above or

below thought, before it reaches any contact with God. He has here pushed the immobility of God so far that he reverses the Christian order, and says that God is not seeking man, but that man must seek God. The result of the search ends in the absorption of man in God. For what is reached through ecstasy is not a knowledge of the Divine, but an actual union or contact with it: so that all distinctions between the knowing and the known, the seeing and the seen, vanish. The union is so complete that the only element of self-consciousness which remains is that the soul is God.¹⁵ In his intense desire for contact with God he was willing to lose self-consciousness; for, by implication, at least, God cannot be self-conscious, since that implies self-knowledge. Man's personality and identity also disappear in the void of abstract Being. God absorbs man in an ineffable union.

Plotinus was, however, not seeking extinction or absorption, but blessedness, the highest and most perfect happiness, as well as the highest good. How this is possible under the conditions which he implies he does not make clear. If it is true that the mystical union with God can be achieved only through the entire surrender of one's self or ego, through the sacrifice of identity and individuality, it is not at all clear how the "I" can be capable of blessedness, if the ego as such has disappeared. If the true self, the "I," has become one with God, God indeed may be capable of true blessedness, but the individual soul has no part in it, since it has ceased to be individual. So long as the soul is capable of some kind of blessedness, it is because its functions still continue; and it, in consequence, does not truly become God. So soon as it has ceased to function and becomes one with God it is, therefore, no longer capable of blessedness. It is a contradiction to say that I can surrender my consciousness and at the same time be conscious of some kind of blessedness.

On the other hand, it is quite as much of a contradiction to say that God is a blessed Being, although he is raised above all functions, and also above all sensations or

¹⁵ Zeller, S. 611, 612, 613.

thought. The vision of the eternal ideas cannot be united with blessedness in God, since a timeless intellectual contemplation must be absolutely cold and without feeling. For feeling implies an effort, a willing of some kind or other whose satisfaction attracts it. Since the vision of the ideal world must be purely intellectual and logical, there can be no definition or determination of it which is touched with feeling. The assumption, however, of any kind of definition touched with feeling is already excluded from the contemplation of the intellectual world; this is particularly the case with the One, since it is raised not only above the intellectual and logical, but above all activity of any kind whatsoever.¹⁶ In spite, however, of the confusions and contradictions of his intellectual theory, which were due, in large part, to the conditions of philosophical thought in his own day, and also to the assumptions which underlay his whole thinking, the matter of chief moment is the religious interest, which was the main impulse and the very center of his great endeavor. Union and communion with God were the ultimate aim and deep desire of his soul. Out of this spiritual craving emerged a new element in the history of man's spiritual development, that element which is generally called Mysticism. It was new in the sense that it was the first scientific attempt to state the meaning of certain spiritual experiences, and to give them a status in the ordered thought of life. In this sense it was a new consciousness, or, rather, the consciousness of man had expanded and presented to thought two faces or fundamental convictions which were rooted in the spiritual constitution of the soul. The first was the absolute spirituality of God, free from all naturalistic or material conceptions or qualities. The second was the real and actual spirituality of man. The material side of life, the body and its effects or passions, was not regarded as a vehicle or form of expression for the soul at all. The body exerted no modifying influence on the inner constitution of the soul. It was in no way really explained, but practically and actually ignored. Mind

¹⁶ *Plotin*, S. 281. Drews.

alone can affect mind and communicate with it, and the Divine Spirit is the true correlate of the human spirit. All else is a matter of indifference, or even something to be avoided and escaped. As a practical result of this position there sprang up a theory of purification by which all the material elements or influences of life should be purged, and contact with the soul removed. Sin was matter, and the way of escape from Sin was not by the Christian law of Divine Forgiveness coming from the life of God, and raising man above the inclinations and desires which darkened the soul, but by an actual and literal renunciation of all earthly interests and a "Flight from the World."

These two factors in the soul loomed high and shone steadily forever after; the Soul and God. And no one ever plunged deeper into the mystery of his own being than Plotinus. In the very intensity of his gaze into that soundless sea, he lost sight of all else but its nature and its end. The sense of the awful solitude of the soul haunted him like a passion which he could neither forget nor escape. No human eye could see, no human heart could feel, the intolerable weight of this isolation. Too deep for tears, too wide for words, he gives us but a glimpse into that spiritual loneliness which ate like a fire in the depths of his soul. In words few, stern and awful, he tells us man's life is but "The flight of the Alone to the Alone."

The importance of the position which Plotinus occupies in the history of human thought consists in the fact that he started from the subjective or psychological point of view which has been the basis of all modern speculative thought. His unifying conception of the soul as purely immaterial and spiritual essence was a contribution which was universally adopted, and which became the fundamental basis of all idealistic thought whether Christian or otherwise. The term he used was not new, but the definition was. The clearness with which he stated it, and the emphasis he gave it were all his own. "Only spirit can commune with spirit; only mind can impart to mind," were fundamental with him. He insisted with

even greater emphasis and awe upon the spirituality of God, and here he was far in advance of much of the popular Christian teaching, as anyone familiar with the literature of the age can easily discover. As a result, the ultimate union of the soul with God was not only a possibility, but an absolute necessity. His influence has been decisive, and the long history of later speculation is marked throughout by the primary standpoint of Plotinus. While his thought was the stimulating and molding force of many succeeding generations, it underwent, as is the case with every original thinker, many and great changes and profound modifications. We may unite in one group the mystics of the Middle Ages, the philosophical mystics among the reformers before the Reformation, with the later mystics who have so much in common with the pagan mystic, such as Spinoza and Hegel. Yet there are profound differences which seem to destroy any real classification. The transcendent God of Plotinus expresses, in his mode of conceiving it, a mystical element which seems to be in a way absent from the Immanent God of Pantheism and of Spinoza.

Systems of philosophy and metaphysics are but the effort to give intellectual and scientific expression to the moods and desires, the new growth and developments, which are stirring so confusedly and obscurely in the souls of the different generations and ages. The endless stream is a witness to the unceasing vitality and the unceasing change in the spiritual interests of mankind. Considered from this point, Plotinus represents not only a new growth, but a new consciousness. Something had come into the life of the soul which was not there before, and with it, or as a result of it, a new thought of man and the meaning of his own being. This new element or capacity once having been discovered or revealed, never died or ever again utterly disappeared from the life of man. Like a mysterious contagion, it spread from age to age and from soul to soul, uniting in one elect band those widely separated by time and tongue. We see it in the great constructive systems of human thought, again in the great moral austerities which stamp the life with grandeur and

with power. Sometimes it is manifest in those spiritual aspirations which flood the soul with beauty and with light. But everywhere and always, in its deepest springs, it is the soul's lonely and quenchless thirst for God.

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