Plotinus: Charms and Countercharms

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A Very Personal Beginning

For the last few years, thanks to the Leverhulme Trust, I've been largely absent from my department, working on the late antique philosopher Plotinus. To speak personally – it's been a difficult few years, since my youngest daughter has been afflicted with anorexia during this period, and my own bowel cancer was discovered, serendipitously, and removed, at the end of 2005. Since then I've had ample occasion to consider the importance – and the difficulty – of the practice of detachment, and also to worry about the moral some have drawn from Plotinian and similar philosophies, namely that the things of this world really do not matter much, and that we should withdraw ourselves from them. Maybe it is true, as Plotinus says, that 'some troubles are profitable to the sufferers themselves, poverty and sickness for example'.[1] But this is not an altogether helpful message for those afflicted by the bundle of disorders that lead to anorexia. It's difficult not to suspect, for example, that Simone Weil would have lived longer but for her Neo-Platonism. It has also been made obvious to me that we are (or at any rate, I am) much less in control of our own mental and emotional states even than I had thought before. None of this, of course, should have been any surprise: I have frequently pointed out – to myself and others – the importance of distinguishing between one's self and the states one finds oneself in, and the extreme difficulty of controlling the thoughts we say are ours (but which, by that very fact, reveal themselves as very far from *ours*). Any delusion that my knowledge of these facts is of itself enough to render me immune to them has been – at least for the moment – thoroughly debunked – though the facts themselves are such that this disillusionment, so to call it, is probably both temporary and almost entirely insincere!

But to return to Plotinus. My study of Plotinus's Ethics and Psychology began from the recognition that Plotinus is seeking not

[1] *Enneads* III.2.5, 15: I use Hilary Armstrong's translation throughout (*Plotinus: The Enneads* Loeb Classical Library, Heinemann: London 1966–88).

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merely to advise but to offer techniques of self-improvement through the use of imagination and – in a sense which I shall try to explicate – invocation. It is also important to be ready to recognize that Plotinian Ethics may seem harsh or irrelevant to moralists who have come to take it for granted that the object of moral action must be to 'improve' things, and that it is the outcome, in terms of human or maybe sentient 'happiness' that is the proper criterion of good judgement. Plotinus, like other ancient moralists, is less concerned about pains and pleasures, and less inclined to judge actions by their outcomes. His is an ethic that could reasonably be described as 'otherworldly', but may still have implications for action and political organization in this world. Though, as I have just hinted, there are elements in his philosophy that might appeal to depressives, his own character, so it seems, was more sanguine than melancholic. It is quite likely that *Porphyry*, his disciple, friend and eventual editor, was depressive: he records that Plotinus spotted his condition, and ordered him away from Rome to Sicily to recover.

Sorting out what the aim of ethical action should be, why all *action* is held to be, in some sense, second-best, and how he suggests we should learn to be properly virtuous, has been my principal task. My conclusion, so far, is that a Plotinian framework, and Plotinian accounts of the good, can serve both individual and global ends – in particular it is worth recalling that Neo-Platonic reasonings lie near the root of Islamic as well as Western tradition, and is also, at least, very similar to elements of Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Neglect of this background has sometimes meant that debates between proponents of the separate traditions have been unnecessarily antagonistic (which is not to say that there are no serious disagreements between them). More than most moral philosophers Plotinus actually provided some workable suggestions for how we might achieve virtue (rather than simply telling us to try harder, or perhaps to lower our expectations), and some clearer conception of what virtue is. By changing the 'metaphors we live by', in a phrase made famous by Lakoff & Johnson,[2] we can begin to change the way we live. Plotinus's goal was both to clarify our thinking and to facilitate our virtuous living.

So what is it that he urges us to do? The point is not simply to believe a set of metaphysical doctrines that, however well reasoned, will inevitably seem obscure, contestable or at least supremely odd. Nor can it be to live exactly as he lived. Plotinus's world, the social

[2] George Lakoff & Mark Johnson *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago 1980).

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and imaginative world of third-century Rome, is certainly not ours.[3] He could reasonably suppose that each of us, upon our first entry to the natural universe, was and is incarnate as a star,[4] and that such trials and tribulations as we suffer here and now are often, though not always, just retribution for the crimes we have committed in past lives. 'There is no accident in a man's becoming a slave, nor is he taken prisoner in war by chance, nor is outrage done on his body without due cause, but he was once the doer of that which he now suffers; and a man who made away with his mother will be made away with by a son when he has become a woman, and one who has raped a woman will be a woman in order to be raped'.[5] His contemporaries had another example of such karmic retribution, to which I shall return shortly:

> God's other name is 'father' because he is capable of making all things. Making is characteristic of a father. Prudent people therefore regard the making of children as a duty in life to be taken most seriously and greatly revered, and should any human being pass away childless they see it as the worst misfortune and irreverence. After death, such a person suffers retribution from demons. This is his punishment: the soul of the childless one is sentenced to a body that has neither a man's nature nor a woman's.[6]

There are still people, even philosophers, prepared to believe in karmic reincarnation (though they had better not say so in public if they wish to be football managers), but I know none who seriously think that their own higher selves are still embodied in the stars of heaven, which we now must conceive as very distant and indifferent suns, not as the innumerable eyes of night. Some theorists imagine that any moral feeling at all widespread in our species must have been selected by neo-Darwinian nature, without regard to any 'objective rightness'. Others believe them merely feelings designed to serve the changing interests of more influential classes. At best such feelings are occasional aids in the business of getting on with things and people, getting on with business. We know, or at least we think we know, that there need never be a single goal, a good that serves all natures and desires. And unlike most Hellenic thinkers we think

[3] This paragraph also features in another paper of mine, 'Plotinus on Becoming Love', in Michael McGhee & Michael Chase *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (forthcoming).

[4] *Enneads* IV.4 [28].5.

[5] *Enneads* III.2 [47].13, 11ff.

[6] *Corpus Hermeticum II:* Brian P. Copenhaver *Hermetica* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1992), 12.

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pity is a virtue, and for grown men to love boys a vice (notwithstanding the obvious contradiction between the thought that these are moral truisms, and that there are no moral truisms).

Much of our instinctive or unthinking disagreement can be traced to a reaction against Plato, who puts the following words in Socrates' mouth on his last day:

> The body is a source of countless distractions by reason of the mere requirement of food, and is liable also to diseases which overtake and impede us in the pursuit of truth: it fills us full of loves, and lusts, and fears, and fancies of all kinds, and endless foolery, and in very truth, as men say, takes away from us the power of thinking at all. Whence come wars, and fightings, and factions? Whence but from the body and the lusts of the body? All wars are occasioned by the love of money, and money has to be acquired for the sake of the body and in slavish ministration to it; and by reason of all these impediments we have no time to give to philosophy; and, last and worst of all, even if the body allows us leisure and we betake ourselves to some speculation, it is always breaking in upon us, causing turmoil and confusion in our inquiries, and so amazing us that we are prevented from seeing the truth. It has been proved to us by experience that if we would have pure knowledge of anything we must be quit of the body – the soul by herself must behold things by themselves: and then we shall attain that which we desire, and of which we say that we are lovers – wisdom; not while we live, but, as the argument shows, only after death; for if while in company with the body the soul cannot have pure knowledge, one of two things follows – either knowledge is not to be attained at all, or, if at all, after death. For then, and not till then, the soul will be parted from the body and exist by herself alone. In this present life, we think that we make the nearest approach to knowledge when we have the least possible intercourse or communion with the body, and do not suffer the contagion of the bodily nature, but keep ourselves pure until the hour when God himself is pleased to release us. And thus getting rid of the foolishness of the body we may expect to be pure and hold converse with the pure, and to know of ourselves all that exists in perfection unalloyed, which, I take it, is no other than the truth. For the impure are not permitted to lay hold of the pure.[7]

[7] Plato *Phaedo* 67b (tr. Benjamin Jowett).

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We are very easily persuaded that this distrust of bodies is pathological, or at any rate mistaken. What has Plotinus, or the Platonic tradition, to do with us and our necessities?

One answer might simply be that we might, after all, be wrong. When modernists deny even the *possibility* of metempsychosis, or of non-rational intelligence, or of the thought that we are indeed asleep and dreaming, they unduly restrict our options – and incidentally create great difficulties for their own, unreflective theories. If it is truly impossible, for example, that I have been a woman, it is also absurd to ask me to imagine what I would feel if I were,[8] and so absurd to demand of me the sort of moral imagination that is the root of justice. If it were really *impossible* to conceive that I'm asleep, it would also be impossible to conceive that there is a real world independent of my feelings and experience. If the only intelligence were strictly rational (that is, founded only in self-evident truth and purely logical inference), none of us would ever know a thing, or care. And if we really trusted *bodies* or our bodily sensations we would hardly realize that anyone else existed, or much mattered. It is possible to feel a sympathetic twinge when we notice someone else in pain, but it would be quite wrong to suggest that our *knowledge* of their pain rests on any bodily affection. The discovery that other creatures really do exist, and feel, is, in effect, a revelation, an intellectual intuition. Our better selves, at least, aim at reality:

> Certainly the good which one chooses must be something which is not the feeling one has when one attains it; that is why the one who takes this for good remains empty, because he only has the feeling which one might get from the good. This is the reason why one would not find acceptable the feeling produced by something one has not got; for instance, one would not delight in a boy because he was present when he was not present; nor do I think that those who find the good in bodily satisfaction would feel pleasure as if they were eating when they were not eating or as if they were enjoying sex when they were not with the one they wanted to be with, or in general when they were not active.[9]

So Platonists might be right after all – and Platonism is indeed a more popular option among working scientists than modern philosophers have realized. But even if we're right, there is always something to be

[8] This is not to say that I *cannot* imagine the impossible, but that I could not infer any definite practical conclusion from what I know to be impossible.

[9] *Enneads* VI.7 [38].26, 20ff.

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learned from other ways of thinking. To modify a remark of Chesterton's, it is the main purpose of historical philosophy to show that humanity can be great and even glorious under conditions, and with beliefs, quite different from our own.[10] But my concern is rather with phenomenology than physics. What is it like, for example, to be a Platonist in love, and what is recommended for our own lives here-now? What is it to become love, to be possessed, to be 'drunk with nectar', to be – and see – Aphrodite? What is it to bring the god in us back to the god in the all? And how do we do it?

Mysticism, Morality and Magic

It is a common error – at least among philosophers – to contrast Mysticism and Morality, and thence to conclude that either Plotinus can have little to say about everyday moral concerns, or else that what he does say is too robust and uncompassionate to convince us now. It is true that, on the one hand, Plotinus seems to suggest that we should detach ourselves from all earthly concerns, turning to more and more abstract goals, and regarding events here-now as no more than children's games.[11] On the other hand, he is confident that we should care for whatever is kin to the Father (and therefore should care for every living soul[12]), and supposes that Minos' communion with Zeus issued in laws for the proper conduct of society.[13] My argument is that 'the flight of the alone to the Alone', to use the most familiar translation of Plotinus's slogan[14] is misinterpreted. Seeking solitude is the very essence of the fall: 'as if they were tired of being together, they each go to their own',[15] and the inward turn that Plotinus recommends is actually a turn towards community. 'When we look outside that on which we depend we do not know that we are one, like faces which are many on the outside but have one head inside. But if someone is able to turn around, either by himself or having the good luck to have his hair pulled by Athena herself, he will see God and himself and the all

[10] G.K. Chesterton *Fancies versus Fads* (Methuen: London 1923), 176.
[11] *Enneads* I.4 [46].8; III.2 [47].8.
[12] *Enneads* II.9 [33].16.
[13] *Enneads* VI.9 [9].7.
[14] *Enneads* VI.9 [9].11. This is McKenna's translation in his great version of *The Enneads*, but *monos*, in this context, actually means 'pure' or 'uninfected', not 'solitary'.
[15] *Enneads* IV.8 [6].4, 11f.

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. . . He will stop marking himself off from all being and will come to all the All without going out anywhere'.[16] Similarly those passages that now seem to us robust and uncompassionate are a recipe for a more genuine love: seeing the beauty of each living soul, but without concupiscence and without projecting our own desires, sets each soul free to help the World Soul make the world. 'The flight of the alone to the alone' is actually a movement of the pure, the naked, to the pure.[17] It is not its *solitude* but its detachment, from everything that gets in our way, that matters. This is not easy. 'When the feeling of pleasure or pain is most intense, every soul of man imagines the objects of this intense feeling to be then plainest and truest, though they are not so'.[18] Remembering otherwise takes effort.

So what is 'the Alone', or the One? And what is it to 'go' there? Strictly, 'it' isn't anything at all, nor is going there 'a journey for the feet'![19] But a way of making Plotinus's meaning a little clearer to us is to accept the gloss he offers: 'the productive power of all things'.[20] Plotinus shows how intellect is carried out of itself, how we depend on myths and theurgic meditations and the passion of love, to fall in love at last with Love Himself. The One is unique, indeed – but very far from solitary. The One is everywhere – but not because it fills a pre-existent space. Rather every place and every entity exists in love. The One *is* Love.[21] Which is why Plotinus would, I think, have had some sympathy with the remarks about 'the childless' that I quoted, though he would also have included within the class of 'children', offspring, any new creation, pupils, works of art or accurate philosophies (notwithstanding his occasional suggestion that external production is a sign, in a way, of weakness).

This is to touch on a suggestion of Hilary Armstrong: 'Many people are looking for an unorganized and unorganizable Good as the only true object of worship, the source of value and the goal of desire, whose light shines everywhere in this ever-changing world as we contemplate it with our ever-changing

[16] *Enneads* VI.5 [23].7, 9f.

[17] I have examined the metaphor of nakedness at greater length in 'Going Naked into the Shrine: Herbert, Plotinus and the Constructive Metaphor': D. Hedley & S. Hutton, eds., *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity* (Springer: Dordrecht 2008).

[18] *Phaedo* 83c

[19] *Ennead* I.6 [1].8, 23.

[20] *Ennead* III.8 [30]. 10. See Eric D. Perl 'The Power of All Things': *ACPQ* **71** 1997, 301–13.

[21] *Enneads* VI.8 [39].15.

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minds'.[22] That Good promises a future which is always other than our present, an infinite realm of possibility that will be forever filled to overflowing with the forms of beauty, 'boiling with life'.[23]

Plotinian philosophy is not a merely abstract nor a merely individualistic or intellectual affair. When Plotinus planned to found 'Platonopolis' it is easy to suppose that what he had in mind was, in effect, a University: an assembly – with supporting staff – of scholars dedicated to unravelling the truth, by various 'reasonable' means. But perhaps we should take more seriously the thought that he had Plato's *Laws* in mind: a genuine city, all of whose citizens would share in the liturgical year. He would have agreed with Plato:

> Man's life is a business which does not deserve to be taken too seriously; yet we cannot help being in earnest with it, and there's the pity. Still, as we are here in this world, no doubt, for us the becoming thing is to show this earnestness in a suitable way... I mean we should keep our seriousness for serious things, and not waste it on trifles... while God is the real goal of all beneficent serious endeavour, man... has been constructed as a toy for God, and this is, in fact, the finest thing about him. All of us, men and women alike, must fall in with our role and spend life in making our play as perfect as possible... What, then, is our right course? We should pass our lives in the playing of games – certain games, that is, sacrifice, song, and dance... [Mankind should] live out their lives as what they really are – puppets in the main, though with some touch of reality about them, too.[24]

He himself, according to Porphyry, celebrated the birthdays of Plato and Socrates 'with sacrifice and philosophical discussion'. He finds nothing odd in appealing to oracles about honouring the dead – or as themselves the heroic dead.[25] And the mysteries are constantly invoked as meaning what Plotinus himself has come to see, with Plato's help, as true.[26] Even the star-gods, though they do not determine what we shall do, may serve as examples, and we may request their aid.[27] 'In the *Laws*', according to Catherine Pickstock's

[22] Armstrong 'The Escape of the One' *Studia Patristica* **13** 1975, 77–89 (reprinted in *Plotinian and Christian Studies* (Variorum: London 1979), ch. XXIII), 88.
[23] see *Ennead* VI.7 [38].15.
[24] Plato, *The Laws*, 803–4, tr. A.E. Taylor.
[25] *Ennead* IV.7 [2].15.
[26] *Ennead* I.6 [1].6; VI.9 [9].11.
[27] *Ennead* IV.4 [28].30.

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reading, 'it is the divine gift of the liturgical cycle with all the concomitant sustenance which the deities bring to these festivals, which distinguishes human beings from the wild animals which have no such gifts of order, rhythm or harmony'.[28] I am not so sure that Plotinus, any more than Porphyry, makes so radical a distinction between the 'human' and the 'non-human' – one might as well, as Plato said, divide the world into 'cranes' and 'non-cranes'.[29] But the main point, that such liturgies embody and reinforce the themes which souls should rehearse at all times, seems a fair one. That, after all, is what the Egyptian priests – perhaps – intended: by using paintings and statues to convey their messages they allowed the gods an entry into the human soul.[30] The imaginative exercises that Plotinus himself devises are *theurgic* in intent.[31] Progress is not made exclusively by intellectual, argumentative means – indeed such arguments depend upon the real existence of an intellectual grasp of 'immutable justice and beauty',[32] for which we can have no *argument* if we cannot already see it. Even when we do have arguments for a conclusion we may need to reinforce them if we are to stay convinced: as Pico della Mirandola argued: 'the magic of Zamolxis is the medicine of the soul, because it brings temperance to the soul as medicine brings health to the body'.[33] We need something to counteract the effect of natural enchantments, the charms of my title.

> But how is the good man affected by magic and drugs? He is incapable of being affected in his soul by enchantment, and his rational part would not be affected, nor would he change his mind; but he would be affected in whatever part of the irrational in the All there is in him, or rather this part would be affected; but he will feel no passionate loves provoked by drugs, if falling in love happens when one soul assents to the affection of the other [that is, to the life of the living body]. But just as the irrational part of him is affected by incantations

[28] Catherine Pickstock, After Writing: *on the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Blackwell: Oxford 1998) 40, commenting on Plato *Laws* 653dff; 42 further cites *Laws* 803d, 644dff on *paideia*.

[29] Plato *Statesman* 263d.

[30] *Ennead* V.8 [31].6; IV.3 [27].11; see *Asclepius* 37: Copenhaver op.cit., 90.

[31] See Gregory Shaw 'Eros and Arithmos: Pythagorean Theurgy in Iamblichus and Plotinus' *Ancient Philosophy* **19** 1999, 121–43.

[32] *Ennead* V.1 [10].11.

[33] *On the Dignity of Man*, after Plato *Charmides* 156dff.

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> so he himself by counter-chants and counter-incantations will dissolve the powers on the other side.[34]

Those counter-chants and counter-incantations are mostly *arguments*.[35] As Armstrong has written, 'philosophical discussion and reflection are not simply means for solving intellectual problems (though they are and must be that). They are also charms, counter-charms, for the deliverance of the soul'.[36] But not all Plotinus's charms are simply argumentative: some require us instead to use our imagination.

Understanding the uses of the star-gods, for example, depends on changing our point of view. Armstrong may speak for many: 'It would be difficult for us, imaginatively as well as intellectually, to recognize and venerate the goddess Selene in the dreary, dusty receptacle for excessively expensive junk with which we have all become so boringly familiar of late years'.[37] But on the contrary, we have cause to be grateful, in a way, to just that goddess. Looking only at the material, we may suppose that the Moon, Selene, is indeed no more than rubble. But consider instead what it is to look back from the Moon. Consider the images of Earth seen from the Moon which have decorated websites and student bedrooms for the last thirty or more years. That vision of our little segment of the wider world, the blue and silver bubble against a darkened sky, has helped to remind us – at the deepest imaginative level – that we do indeed inhabit a single, beautiful world, and that our political and social divisions must fade before that insight. Looking in turn towards the Moon herself what we should see is the love that binds, the universal sympathy that makes causality possible. What Plotinus called magic we now recognize as universal law – but our words make no clearer than Plotinus's what explains that law, that magic. Those who can think of the Moon – or the Earth itself – as no more than rubble may indeed feel themselves to be in that imagined hell which Armstrong evoked in his – somewhat exaggerated – account of third-century sensibility: 'It was a period in which the sense of individual isolation in a vast and terrifying universe was

[34] *Ennead* IV.4 [28].43: Armstrong op.cit., vol. 4, pp. 269ff.

[35] *Ennead* IV. 4 [28].43, 19ff: Armstrong op.cit., vol. 4, p. 271.

[36] Armstrong 'Plotinus': *Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, ed. A.H. Armstrong (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1967), 195–271: 260, after Plotinus *Ennead* V.3 [49].17.

[37] Armstrong 'The Apprehension of Divinity in the Self and Cosmos in Plotinus' in R. Baines, ed., *The Significance of Neoplatonism* (Studies in Neoplatonism vol. 1 Old Dominion University: Norfolk VA 1976), 187–98.

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perhaps more intensely felt than even immediately after the breakdown of the city-state into the Hellenistic world. For in the Roman Empire, under Babylonian influence, the view of the ruling power of the universe as a cruel, inaccessible Fate, embodied in the stars, worship of which was useless, had come to its full development. The individual exposed to the crushing power of this Fate, and the citizen also of an earthly state which seemed almost as vast, cruel and indifferent as the universe, felt to the full the agony of his isolation and limitation'.[38]

One factor in Plotinus's occasional gesture towards an 'astrological' religion which I have not yet managed to disentangle is the difference between planets and fixed stars. The background assumption of his day, expressed by both his immediate predecessors and his successors, was that individual souls, in their descent from the heaven of the fixed stars, picked up planetary aspects of which they must be purged in their ascent. Some commentators are convinced that Plotinus must have been too sensible to believe this, and they may be right. But Plotinus's chief *reason* for not believing it was that he did not wish to insult the planetary angels by suggesting that their influence was entirely bad. They may need to be purged, but rather in the sense of being cleaned than being evacuated.

A passage in the *Corpus Hermeticum* is at least suggestive: to escape the twelve zodiacal torments (ignorance, grief, incontinence, lust and so on), we are to invoke 'the powers of god'. These are, initially, seven in number: knowledge of god, knowledge of joy, continence, perseverance, justice, liberality and truth. Life, light and the good arrive thereafter, to make up the decad.[39] Those seven powers look very much as if they are to be conceived as planetary, though this connection is not made explicit even in the *Hermetica*, let alone Plotinus. What the powers have become in us may not be wholly virtuous, but they are not therefore to be despised.

In the words of a later, Neo-Platonically inspired witness: before Adam fell 'what is now gall in him sparkled like crystal, and bore the taste of good works, and what is now melancholy in man shone in him like the dawn and contained in itself the wisdom and perfection of good works; but when Adam broke the law, the sparkle of innocence was dulled in him, and his eyes, which had formerly

[38] Armstrong 'Plotinus and India' *Classical Quarterly* **30** 1936, 22–8: 28.
[39] Treatise XIII, 8–9: Copenhaver op.cit., 51.

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beheld heaven, were blinded, and his gall was changed to bitterness, and his melancholy to blackness'.[40]

I'm moved to suggest, very cautiously, that this idea can be joined up with Plotinus's advice to polish our internal statues! Those statues, I suggest, are to be conceived as typical Roman statues of personalized virtues, or of the planetary gods we have internalized 'on the way down'.

The Romans, and their many imitators, chose to depict Virtues on their public monuments as clothed female figures: the four statues ornamenting the Library of Celsus in Ephesus, for example, are of *arete, ennoia, episteme*, and *sophia* (though what the sculptor intended by these titles may remain obscure). Roman coins carry similar figures to represent equity, good faith, modesty and the like. Whether those who admired the statues or glanced at the coins ever sought to invoke these personified virtues, constructing moving images of them in the way advised by sundry modern esotericists, I do not know. It is also not altogether easy to understand what any of these virtues actually amount to: *sophrosune*, for example, is translated, by Armstrong, variously, as 'self-control', 'chastity' and 'integrity'. Possibly, 'self-possession' would be the fittest version. Nor are public, 'civic', virtues all that Plotinus praised: such virtues, indeed, can barely qualify as human, and their exemplars can expect to be born again as ants or bees, in happy service of society.[41] 'Real' virtues are not dependent on a fallen world to give them sense. *Sophrosune*, as seen by those who gaze on the divine beauty, is 'not the kind which men have here below, when they do have it (for this is some sort of imitation of that other)'.[42] The detail of Plotinian ethical theory is another story, but we can get some way towards an understanding of his pedagogic practice, by enlisting the aid of more explicit guides. Consider, for example, John Makransky's summary of Tibetan Buddhist practice:

[40] R. Klibansky, E. Panofsky, & F. Saxl *Satum and Melancholy* (Nelson: Edinburgh 1964), 80, citing Hildegard of Bingen: Kaiser ed., *Hildegardis Causae et Curae*, Leipzig 1903, 43. See ps.Denis *Celestial Hierarchy* \$14: 'the Celestials' fury of anger represents an intellectual power of resistance of which [our sort of] anger is the last and faintest echo' (taken from http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/CelestialHierarchy2.html, accessed 27th May 2008).

[41] See *Ennead* VI.3 [44].16,28ff; *Ennead* VI.8 [39].5.

[42] *Ennead* V.8 [31].10, 14ff.

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> Sitting in correct posture on a comfortable seat, one takes refuge (*skyabs 'gro*) in Guru, Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha, receives their blessing envisioned as light and nectar, and generates the thought of enlightenment for the sake of all beings (*sems bskyed*). That thought is the highest possible motivation for action (*karma*) of any kind. It directs all the ritual activity which follows toward the highest soteriological ends. One then recollects the field of karmic merit (*tshogs zhing gsal gdab pa*). A vast array of lineage gurus, tantric deities, buddhas, bodhisattvas, *pratyekabuddhas*, *śravakas*, *ḍākas*, *ḍākinīs*, and protector deities is visualized and their presence invoked by ritual procedures. Each element of the visualization has levels of signification based on Tibetan systematizations of Sūtra and Tantra, the whole array being viewed as a manifestation of enlightened mind, the gnosis of bliss and void, the inseparability of *bla ma* (*guru*) and *yi dam* (*iṣṭadevatā*). Offering one's practices to that 'field' is said to generate enormous karmic merit, to purify, and to bless, the three fundamentals of spiritual progress. In fact, from a Tibetan perspective, no meditator is ever actually alone. A practitioner in 'solitary' retreat not only visualizes the field of deities, but feels their presence, repeatedly entreating them for inspiration and blessing.[43]

The historical question, whether Plotinus and his friends actually did something like this, is probably unanswerable, and is less important, for my purposes, than the psychological, whether such practices have the desired effect, or the philosophical, what they tell us about the way things are – or at least the way we are. The particular terms and images employed by Tibetan Buddhists, of course, are unlikely to be familiar to most inheritors of the European tradition, and there is no need to explore them here – except to note that 'light' and 'nectar' at least are metaphors we hold in common.

[43] Makransky 'Offering (*mChod pa*) in Tibetan Ritual Literature' in José Ignacio Cabezón & Roger R. Jackson, eds., *Tibetan Literature Studies in Genre: Essays in Honor of Geshe Lhundup Sopa* (Snow Lion: Ithaca, New York 1995), 312–330: 318f (housed at http://www.thdl.org/collections/literature/genres/book/show.php). See Stephan Beyer *The Cult of Tara: Magic and Ritual in Tibet* (University of California Press: Berkeley, CA 1973).

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Many Selves, One Self

The first thing to note is that the 'vast array' of apparently alien presences is nothing strange.

> 'Know yourself' is said to those who because of their selves' multiplicity have the business of counting themselves up and learning that they do not know all of the number and kind of things they are, or do not know any one of them, not what their ruling principle is or by what they are themselves.[44]

The point about visualising this array is not to summon them from somewhere else, but to identify the work they already do in us, and maybe to give them their appropriate ranks. 'The Unity of Self' is something, in a way, to be achieved, or eventually uncovered, not merely, placidly, assumed. Finding a new way of seeing is also to find a new way of being.

> Not only must the practitioner visualize the deity as vividly as possible, but he must also, in any ritual of evocation (that is, whenever he generates himself as the deity), exchange for his own ordinary ego the ego of the deity, which is the subjective correlate of the exchange of ordinary appearances for the special appearance of the deity and his retinue of mandalas.[45]

Just as Tibetan Buddhists find a vocabulary for their multiplicity in 'lineage gurus, tantric deities, buddhas, bodhisattvas, *pratyekabuddhas*, *śravakas*, *ḍākas*, *ḍākinīs*, and protector deities', so Plotinians found them in Hellenic myth, the myths of Plato, and contemporary culture. Armstrong suggested that Plotinus did not take myths seriously because he used them inconsistently, or strained their sense. But that same fact is actually evidence of the use he made of them. The images, the stories, are changed in action, to embody his particular meanings. And the second thing to note is that for Plotinus as well as for Buddhists all these images and opinions only float past consciousness: they are not of our essence,[46] and must in the end be discarded (which they can't be, if we don't know what they are).

There at least two ways of developing all this. The first, which I have been sketching, is to take the Plotinian or the third-century astrological story as a convenient fiction, which doesn't depend for

[44] *Ennead* VI.7 [38].41,22–27.
[45] Beyer op.cit., 76–7.
[46] *Ennead* III.6 [26].15.

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its efficacy on any actual astronomical accuracy. The second is to draw corresponding morals from our present, and putatively far more accurate astronomy. We aren't actually down at the bottom of the sidereal universe, but orbiting a minor star some way out in a galactic spiral of an undistinguished galaxy. That story has been used by many moderns to drive home the supposed utter insignificance of human life – though rather few of those who urge that moral seem really to find their own lives insignificant! It is of course easy, and probably even advisable, to make fun of those who pretend to be affected by those thoughts. But maybe we can still learn from them. The universe, assuredly, is very big and very old. But of course its age and size are only large, precisely, in *human* terms. Just insofar as we manage to conceive the world beyond we see that its largeness may as well be smallness, and our very *knowledge* of its being shows that we, or our intellects, are larger still.

John Dillon, commenting on a particular image:

> Here we are being called upon to use our imagination creatively, to attain to a purely intellectual conception. It is worthwhile, perhaps, to try to perform the exercise as Plotinus prescribes. I have attempted it repeatedly, and the sticking point is always the instruction, once one has conjured up the universe (as a luminous, diaphanous globe, with all its parts distinct and functioning), then to think away the spatiality ("*aphelon ton onkon labe*") – and not just by shrinking it! It is in fact an excellent spiritual exercise. Calling upon God here is no empty formality. If it is done effectively, it has a quasi-theurgic result: "He may come, bringing his own cosmos, with all the gods that dwell in it – He who is the one God, and all the gods, where each is all, blending into a unity, distinct in powers, but all one god, in virtue of that divine power of many facets." In other words, if you perform the exercise correctly, you will achieve a mystical vision of the whole noetic cosmos. And Plotinus knew what he was talking about.[47]

And again:

> If one likens it to a living richly varied sphere, or imagines it as a thing all faces, shining with living faces, or as all the pure souls running together into the same place, with no deficiencies but

[47] John Dillon 'Plotinus and the Transcendental Imagination' (J.P. Mackey, ed., *Religious Imagination*, Edinburgh University Press 1986) 55–64, reprinted in Dillon *The Golden Chain* (Variorum Press: Aldershot 1990), commenting on Plotinus *Ennead* V.8 [31].9.

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> having all that is their own, and universal Intellect seated on their summits so that the region is illuminated by intellectual light – if one imagined it like this one would be seeing it somehow as one sees another from outside; but one must become that, and make oneself the contemplation. But we should not remain always in that manifold beauty, but go on still darting upwards, leaving even this behind.[48]

The cosmos as Plotinus conceived it has, of course, some likeness to the unified, fixed cosmos of Stoic and modern scientific myth. What is different is that the whole cosmos is, as I said before, *alive*, and infinite in energy and diversity. One step on the way to its discovery may indeed be the recognition of our merely *personal* insignificance, but this is only to open the way to realizing something more. The *dead* world of modern myth is the outward replica of depression. Plotinus asks us to wake up to the obvious truth that the cosmos *boils* with life, and the less obvious revelation that the order we can see out there reflects a greater, intellectual order by which we can ourselves be moved.

Anorexia, founded as it so often is, in a sense of personal unworthiness, a conviction that we clutter things up by existing, that our perceptions are like dirty fingerprints upon a world that is better without us, is a perversion of a genuine insight, a perversion that prevents that insight's true development. Not *minding* about the body is not at all the same as passionately despising it. Accepting its dissolution is not the same as using violence against it. 'There is disgust or grief or anger: one must not act like this.'[49]

[48] *Ennead* VI.7 [38].15, 25–16, 3. Armstrong, *Enneads* op.cit., vol. VII, 136 suggests that the image of many faces might have been inspired by the sight of 'some small Indian image'. It seems just as likely that the inspiration was Ezekiel's vision of the four living creatures, each with four faces and four wings, and each with a wheel full of eyes, before the throne of God: *Ezekiel* 1.4–28. *Merkabah* symbolism has a long Rabbinic history. Gershom G. Scholem remarks: 'The throne-world is to the Jewish mystic what the pleroma, the "fullness", the bright sphere of divinity with its potencies, aeons, archons and dominions is to the Hellenistic and early Christian mystics of the period who appear in the history of religion under the names of Gnostics and Hermetics', (*Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Shocken Books: New York 1974; 1st published 1941), 44). Plotinus doesn't mention these various inmates of the pleroma, but they may well be there in his imagination.

[49] *Ennead* I.9 [16].

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And to conclude with Socrates: 'A man of sense ought not to assert that the description which I have given of the soul and her mansions is exactly true. But I do say that, inasmuch as the soul is shown to be immortal, he may venture to think, not improperly or unworthily, that something of the kind is true. The venture is a glorious one, and he ought to comfort himself with words of power like these, which is the reason why I lengthen out the tale.'[50] We need both *arguments* and 'words of power', enchantments, to subvert the sorcery of nature, the constant conviction on the one hand that what we individually *feel* is real, and that there is nothing worth considering beyond it, and on the other, that we are really insignificant. On the contrary, we need to remember that it is Soul that gives life to all.[51] Polishing those internal statues, invoking immortal presences, perhaps we come a little closer to the life the ancients praised.

[50] *Phaedo* 114d, tr. Benjamin Jowett.
[51] *Ennead* V.1 [10].2.

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