
Philosophy in Late Antiquity by Andrew Smith

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Neoplatonism, the most influential philosophical movement of the Roman Empire, combined metaphysical speculation on the esoteric meanings of Plato's dialogues with a contemplative vision of reality. At once erudite and eclectic, as it drew on the six centuries of philosophical development between Plato's Academy and its emergence in Alexandria in the third century AD, Neoplatonism above all used philosophical structures to expound and expand the dimensions of inner experience. In his book, *Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, Andrew Smith traces major developments in the growth of Neoplatonic philosophy from the third to fifth centuries, and then concludes with a look at Christian thinkers who especially aligned themselves with this philosophical movement.

Smith's book is addressed to students with relatively little exposure to the primary texts that he surveys, the abstruse and very prolific writings of Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Augustine, and Pseudo-Dionysius. In choosing to focus on Neoplatonism, Smith perhaps succeeds in limiting what would otherwise be a sprawling and unwieldy topic: surely no introductory book could cover all of philosophy in the Roman Empire, including Scepticism, the Aristotelian Commentator Tradition, Stoicism, and Jewish Middle Platonism.

Smith devotes the first part of the book to an explication of Plotinus' *Enneads*. His consideration of Plotinus is by far the most thorough discussion in the book, and this seems only right. It was the brilliantly original work of Plotinus (AD 204-270) as recorded in the *Enneads*, edited and published by Plotinus' disciple Porphyry, that inspired and provided the foundations for the work of later Neoplatonists such as Iamblichus (active AD 245) and Proclus (AD 412-485). Nevertheless, what we find in the first three chapters of the book is

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more than a prosaic or workmanlike summary of Plotinus' doctrines. Indeed, there is more than a little originality and even daring in Smith's explication of how and why Plotinus practiced philosophy.

In the introduction, Smith frames his exposition of Plotinus' philosophy with several anecdotes from Porphyry's *Vita Plotini*, which he published alongside his edition of the *Enneads*. At the age of 28, Plotinus joined Emperor Gordian III's campaign against the Persians and after the failure of that expedition, moved to Rome where he began to teach philosophy. Plotinus engaged whoever wished to attend the lectures (evidently chaos reigned in the classroom, with answers to objections dragging on for days). Senators, doctors, politicians, indeed, the Emperor himself were welcome. But the life of philosophy set one apart, as in the case of Plotinus' student Rogatianus, a senator who renounced his office and became 'an example for those who engage in the life of philosophy' [Porphyry, *Vita* 7.45–46].

In chapters 1–6, Smith explores the Plotinian universe, organizing his entire account of the three major hypostases, soul (chapter 2), the One (chapter 3) and Intellect (chapter 4), around Plotinus' varying and subtle notions of self and self-transformation. For Smith, Plotinus is above all a mystic; and so the theme of Plotinus' fluid notion of self ends in a somewhat surprising affirmation, that in the end the One is in some sense the truest form of self [72–73, quoting and commenting loosely on *Ennead* 6.9.11]. Along the way, Smith points out that the individual as such is characterized by various faculties that involve intellect, discursive reason, perception, and even consciousness in a number of different configurations. While the soul can be viewed primarily as a center of rational activity and agency, as evidenced for example in Plotinus' account of perception as employing activity and judgment rather than impressions, Smith also emphasizes the passages in which Plotinus places intellect or non-discursive awareness at the center of even the individual's core identity.

In chapter 2, Smith moves to a more universal perspective, focusing now on reality as such, the first principle of which is the One. Plotinus is able to configure the One *vis à vis* the rest of reality in multiple ways, as final and efficient cause of all things, as prior to existence, and as the ineffable, utterly transcendent source of all things that is simultaneously nothing at all. Again, Plotinus' explication of the One depends a great deal on the context within which it is being

considered. In some sense, unity is fundamental or prerequisite to existence itself; in another sense, the One has the greatest causal power, so that all things must be its effects. Another approach to the One involves some central Neoplatonist mechanisms, such as, for example, the concept of emanation or self-effusion by which higher realities emit or release traces of themselves that in turn actualize themselves as distinct realities. Thus, Intellect first arises as an inchoate echo of what is not yet distinctively consciousness or knowledge in the One, and then turns back toward (or reverts) to the One as if the latter were its final cause, but in so doing becomes itself a separate hypostasis. Finally, however, the One is in itself unknowable and all of these approaches must be seen as constructions of discursive thought, always subject to revision.

Having described the Intellect's birth from the One, Smith goes on in chapter 3 to explore some of the relationships Intellect enjoys both with its own quasi-objects of knowledge, i.e., Being or the plurality of real beings, as well with its prior and subsequent hypostases. Here we witness Plotinian appropriations of such Aristotelian conceptions as actuality and of intellect's self-contemplation. The second hypostasis, as we have seen, is a subsequent stage of reality that arises when the wisdom inherent within the One turns back on itself, giving rise to Being/Intellect, the intelligible world that consists of intellects each contemplating all the other intellects, rather like a hall of mirrors. This order of reality represents Plotinus' transformation of the Platonic Forms *via* an Aristotelian conception of divine thought eternally contemplating itself, in which both elements of the equation, knower and known, are pure actualities, neither of which has any priority.

Transitory being (*γένεσις* or 'becoming') originates in the third hypostasis, at the level of Soul which is present both on a cosmic level as caretaker of all that is soulless, and as the embodied individual whose destiny is to return to his origin by recovering his lost unity with the One. Chapter 4 explores some of the philosophical innovations involved in Plotinus' doctrine of the soul, including the problem of how soul can be present to body, and the question of how the soul came to be embodied in the first place. Some of these puzzles are inheritances from Plato (i.e., the problem of the relationship between Form and individual); some are articulated as reflexes against contemporary materialist philosophies. Nevertheless, what

remains supremely important for Plotinus is the mission of the soul, to give life to the world and yet to remain detached from it, to care for the universe without becoming lost in it.

Throughout his exposition of the *Enneads*, Smith mentions Plotinus' frequent use of metaphor, e.g., a hand holding a plank is likened to the relationship between soul and body. One important metaphor that Plotinus makes use of to describe the return of the soul to its source is the image of a center surrounded by radiating lines. If the One is the center in the image, then what exactly is implied with respect to the individuality of the soul that makes its return? Is it annihilated, does it lose its own identity? Smith ends chapter 5 by letting Plotinus speak for himself, though perhaps not everyone will agree on the conclusions to be drawn when Plotinus says [6.9.11]: 'if one sees that one's self has become this [i.e. the One]... one reaches the end of one's journey.'

The second section of the book treats the various branches of Neoplatonism that arose after Plotinus in two chapters that survey some of the main tendencies. Chapter 6 discusses the phenomenon of theurgy, the ritual branch of Neoplatonism that arose from its association with polytheist religiosity. Smith focuses on Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo*, a work that survives only in fragmentary form as the preface to Iamblichus' *Mysteries of the Egyptians*. Behind the practice of what looks much like sympathetic magic lay several important doctrines that show Iamblichus innovating on the work of Plotinus. The word 'theurgy' literally means 'activity associated with the gods', and refers to the use of ritual in conjunction with the soul's effort to free itself from bondage to the world of birth and death. Iamblichus insists that knowledge does not deliver the soul from the constraints of embodiment. To complete its cosmic task, the soul must win over the whole chain of being that links our ordinary world with the ultimate principles of reality. The chains of being are the series that each Henad, or divine unity, reproduces all the way down the hierarchy of reality, while the soul itself must gain the assistance of these external powers because it has lost its station in the intelligible world.

Chapter 7 continues the saga of post-Plotinian Neoplatonism, pausing over Proclus' formalization of certain metaphysical ambiguities in Plotinus, and setting the stage for the Christian incorporation of Proclean doctrine, especially through an emphasis on triads; being-

life-intellect and procession-remaining-reversion constitute the most important examples of this prolific idea. The last chapter of the book allows us to glimpse Christian thinkers in light of their immediate predecessors' ways of doing philosophy. For example, Augustine is exercised over the problems of memory and identity, working on topics that seem to be inspired by the *Enneads*: the immateriality of the soul, the life of the mind as a reflection of both time and eternity, the origin of evil, and most of all, the ascent of the mind to the One through mystical contemplation. Another example is Pseudo-Dionysius' emphasis on the *via negativa*, the contemplation of God as pure emptiness, again a reflex of Neoplatonic apophatic theology. This chapter also considers topics such as the pagan-Christian debate over the eternity of the world, and the created or uncreated nature of the soul.

This book contains a wealth of information on its chosen subject and is immensely readable as well as highly erudite. One appreciates the limits that Smith imposes on his subject matter, i.e., his avoidance of emphasis on Neoplatonist scholasticism, and his omission of the Aristotelian Commentator tradition, in the interests of allowing us to glimpse a unique way of doing philosophy that relies on the direct experience of a return to One, and articulates a contemplative vision where ordinary notions of the self, of language, and of reality as a whole are utterly transformed.