seeing that one means of achieving precisely this end is to admit openly that all men are brothers, all deriving from the same One, all striving for the same goal; in fact that one path to union with the One is through supporting *both* the inner and the outer man in his fellows. One of the most fascinating things about Plotinus is that in this sphere of activity his practice has outrun his theory. In practice he has recognized that concern for others does not entail the withdrawal of the mind from higher things and its submergence in the lower. The Plotinian soul is a subtle instrument; it can contemplate the higher and care for the lower at the same time. Yet Plotinus has not recognized the full significance of his own theory. Here is one example of the accepted fact that he stands with one foot in the ancient world, with the other outside it.

13

THE ORIGINALITY OF PLOTINUS

'It is necessary to take the notable opinions of the ancients and consider whether any of them agree with ours.' (*Enneads* 3.7.7.15)

It will not have escaped the reader's attention that, in discussing various ideas of Plotinus, it has apparently been necessary to refer frequently to those of earlier thinkers, especially Plato. He may therefore have begun to wonder at times either whether Plotinus can stand on his own feet, or why, if he cannot, he is worth serious attention. If he then looks at the *apparatus fontium* of Henry and Schwyzer's edition of the *Enneads*, he may find his worst fears confirmed when he sees the lists of quotations from Plato, Aristotle, or von Arnim's *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*. Then continuing his increasingly embarrassed search he will turn to the largest recent book on Plotinus and observe its title *Les Sources de Plotin*.[1] Here he will find admirable articles dealing with the indebtedness of Plotinus to Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Numenius, Ammonius, Alexander of Aphrodisias and many others. And a summary of the results of this same work will confront him in page after page of Henry's introduction to the third edition of MacKenna's translation of the *Enneads*.[2] At this stage he will begin to feel that, despite the cautions of Harder,[3] Plotinus is being dissolved into his sources, that is, suffering the fate of the philosophic Cicero. And the more percipient he is and the more he becomes involved in his source-hunting, the more he will find that the names of dim and almost forgotten figures seem to dominate the surviving text. What will be left for Plotinus when we have 'recovered' the philosophies of Posidonius and Ammonius Saccas? The enquirer may begin to feel that just as the archaeologist often

seems a man for whom Praxiteles' chisel is more exciting than his Hermes, so Plotinus' modern critics are more concerned with his 'raw materials', his background, than with his own philosophical positions. And these philosophical positions may begin to appear wholly unoriginal in the process.

It is not my intention to suggest that the eminent scholars I have mentioned, many of whom have so notably contributed to the greatly increased interest in Plotinus that has come about in recent years, wished to do anything more by their investigations into sources than further the understanding of Plotinus himself. Nevertheless, there still appears to be some need to attempt a further estimate of the true position of Plotinus in regard to his sources and in particular to Plato, to whose inspiration he is so greatly indebted. The following remark of Henry's will form a suitable beginning: 'Plotinus would have been surprised at being thought of as the founder of a new school, Neoplatonism. He considered himself a Platonist pure and simple, without prefix or qualification—in other words, as an interpreter and follower of Plato. Plato, in his view, possessed the truth, the whole truth.' We can see from this remark that our own enquiry will have to attempt the answers to at least three questions: Does Plotinus regard himself solely as an interpreter of Plato? Does Plato, in Plotinus' view, possess the whole truth? If Plato and Plotinus differ, is Plotinus aware of the differences and how does he account for them?

In the course of our investigation we shall consider not only the writings of Plato, but those of Aristotle, the Stoics and the other 'sources' as well. Here our task will be easier, for the habit has not arisen of referring to Plotinus as a neo-Aristotelian[4] or a neo-Stoic. Nevertheless the attitude Plotinus adopts towards these thinkers may be helpful in our assessment of the fundamental problem of his attitude to Plato and the estimate we make of his originality in general. It will be best therefore if we begin with the passages of Porphyry's *Life* which deal with the attitude of Plotinus to all

previous writers and with his biographer's view of his originality,[5] before looking first at his attitude to the Middle Platonists, Stoics and Aristotelians, and then to Plato himself.

Porphyry tells us that, at his philosophical seminars, Plotinus' procedure was to have various treatises read aloud, and he mentions a number of Middle Platonists and Peripatetics whose works were examined. He adds, however, that Plotinus did not follow any of these authorities closely but had a personal and original approach in his speculations and brought the insight (νοῦν) of Ammonius to each problem. The first thing we notice is that the list of authors read does not include Plato and Aristotle; indeed the writers mentioned are all of the Christian era. In the *Enneads* themselves, however, none of these authorities are mentioned by name. Indeed the latest philosophical writer referred to by name is Epicurus (2.9.15.8), who flourished about 300 B.C.[6] We can only assume from this that knowledge of the basic Platonic and Aristotelian texts was assumed for students at this stage.

What does Porphyry mean by his remark that Plotinus brought the intuition of Ammonius to bear on each particular problem? Some help in understanding this is probably to be found in an extraordinarily difficult text (daggered by Harder as untranslateable) which speaks of Plotinus as ἐκπαθῶς φράζων καὶ τὸ συμπαθείας ἢ παραδόσεως. This probably means that out of a natural flair for his subject-matter Plotinus was able to expound philosophy from two sources: the traditional writings of the great thinkers of the past, and his own sense of kinship with the spirit of reality. Hence we can see how it is that Porphyry can go on to say that in Plotinus' writings we can find hidden Stoic and Peripatetic doctrines, including, indeed, the essence of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Plotinus' natural philosophic bent would be employed in handling these works not in the spirit of a commentator, but in that of an original thinker. This application of natural talent to the school texts would presumably be included in what Porphyry calls Ammonius' method. How it works in

practice when Plotinus comes to deal with Aristotle and the Stoics we shall see in a moment. At this stage, however, we may observe that one of Plotinus' main bones of contention with the critic Longinus seems to have been on this issue. Armstrong states the position very well as follows:[7] 'Porphyry tells us (*Life*, ch. 14) that "when the treatise *On Principles* and the *Philarchaios* of Longinus were read to Plotinus, he said 'Longinus is a scholar, but certainly not a philosopher'".[8] From this remark I would hazardously conjecture that Longinus professed himself to be offering the authentic interpretation of Plato based on a close and accurate study of the text of the *Dialogues*, of a kind which Plotinus considered inappropriate to a philosopher—certainly nobody who knew the *Enneads* would insult Plotinus himself by calling his interpretation of Plato "scholarly".' As Armstrong shows, citing chapter eighteen of Porphyry's *Life*, Longinus disputed Plotinus' interpretation of the relationship between the Divine Mind and the Forms on the grounds—as Armstrong surely rightly suggests—that it was not a literal, and possibly that it was not a traditional, interpretation of Plato. We should recall that on a related topic to this, namely the interpretation of *Timaeus* 39E, Plotinus breaks with the Numenian interpretation and substitutes a new one of his own within the *Enneads* themselves.[9] Furthermore although there are very few passages in the *Enneads* where Plotinus tells us that he is going against the received school-tradition, there is one of some significance. At the opening of 4.8.1 he remarks that his opinion that the whole soul does not descend is unorthodox (παρὰ δόξαν τῶν ἄλλων), and this verdict is endorsed by Proclus, who rejects the novel theory (νεώτερος λόγος).[10] It is significant that precisely here, where Plotinus openly breaks with the tradition, very few of the later Neoplatonists followed him.[11] Proclus is more representative of the general outlook, and, surprisingly at first sight but truly, he is the man whose thought can still be recognized by a modern scholar as 'in some ways closer to the real thought of Plato'.[12]

There is a further point to be noticed. Plotinus did not write commentaries on Platonic texts, nor anything approaching an introduction to Plato such as we have surviving from the hand of Albinus. This fact is not so significant for Plotinus, a third-century figure, as it would have been had he lived two hundred years later. Nevertheless it should be added to the earlier evidence we have adduced to show that in Plotinus' view, although we must *try* to explain, as he says in 6.4.16 of the descent of the soul, that our doctrines accord or at least do not conflict with those of the ancients, yet scholars and philosophers are not identical.

Such then is what we may perhaps rashly call the method of Ammonius. The philosopher is to handle his predecessors in a philosophical rather than a scholarly manner. We should now attempt to see how such a method works in practice, and then, after examining all the evidence, determine the general question of the attitude of Plotinus to his sources and the extent of his dependence on them. We may begin therefore with what seems to be the easiest part of the problem to handle, namely Stoicism.

There are many aspects of Stoicism which Plotinus openly opposes. Perhaps the most ardent advocate of a stoicizing Plotinus, Professor Theiler,[13] lists a number of them: the materialist view of the soul (4.7.2) and of God (2.4.1); their theory of categories (6.1.25ff.); their concept of Time (3.7.7.25; 3.7.13.59); their doctrine of the interpenetration of bodies (2.7). As Henry has remarked,[14] Plotinus is not at all averse from using arguments drawn from the Peripatetic armoury to deal with these objectionable sides of Stoicism where necessary. It is curious that no Stoic philosopher is mentioned by name in the *Enneads*, and Henry thinks that Plotinus' arguments against them may often be drawn from Aristotelian textbooks, such as those of Alexander of Aphrodisias, who, as we have seen, was read in Plotinus' school. It should be added, of course, that since the time of Antiochus of Ascalon (first century B.C.) at least, Stoic doctrines had been

blended with those of other schools. The Stoicism that Plotinus feels obliged to attack is perhaps more a state of mind than the theories of any particular philosopher, even if that philosopher is a Posidonius.

Yet what of the Stoic-sounding ideas that we find in Plotinus: the sympathy of the universe and its interconnection; the *Logos* and *spermatikoi logoi* in the material world; the theories we discussed while dealing with Plotinus' theodicy and doctrines of Providence? All these things are certainly to be found in Plotinus, but they are radically altered from their original form. We have seen much of this transformation in the earlier chapters of this book. We observed how the Plotinian *logos* is no pantheistic God, as the Stoics made it, but the power of transcendent principles working in the visible world. *Spermatikoi logoi* in Plotinus depend on the Platonic Ideal World, thus having little but the name in common with their Stoic counterparts, and as for Providence, it is sufficient to state that while for the Stoics it depends on pantheism, for Plotinus it rests on the foundation of emanation from the transcendent One. Plotinus has indeed taken over the Stoic doctrine of 'sympathy', but with the pantheism removed, and we should remember that he was thus able to see it as an elaboration of the Platonic doctrine of the World Soul. In short, there are Stoic doctrines embedded in the *Enneads*, as Porphyry says, but Plotinus is always their master. They are used when they are useful, but when they oppose his own insights they are relentlessly discarded or rewritten. As a minor, but illuminating, example of this procedure of rewriting, we may briefly consider Plotinus and the Stoics on the question of suicide.

The Stoics held that since the only good thing is virtue and the only bad thing is vice, while all else remains morally indifferent, the philosopher who finds life unbearable can commit suicide after a reasoned consideration of the particular circumstances. It seems from Diogenes Laertius' *Lives* that both Zeno and Cleanthes committed suicide.[15] The grounds

for their actions, however, were trivial, and indeed, on their own account, 'indifferent'. Such action was allowed to the Stoic on behalf of his country, to avoid being forced to commit a crime, and to avoid poverty or chronic illness. And the opponents of the Stoics did not hesitate to point out the 'indifferent' nature of some of these grounds. The Stoic defence would seem to have been that life itself is a matter of indifference and so long as the decision to suicide is taken calmly and rationally (εὔλογος ἐξαγωγή) and does not involve the subjection of the reason to the passions, it is to be allowed to the wise man.

Plotinus' approach to the position is most illuminating. Porphyry tells us in chapter eleven of the *Life* that he himself once contemplated suicide but was dissuaded by Plotinus. Plotinus suggested that his decision had been taken not in accordance with pure reason, but in a fit of depression. Hence it must be unreasonable. Now we might suppose that this argumentation is strictly Stoic—and indeed a Stoic should, on his own premisses, have accepted it—but Plotinus demonstrates in the *Enneads* themselves that although the soul has always the right to determine whether to remain in the body or to leave it, it should always in fact choose to stay. Flight to the beyond, we read in 1.8.6, does not mean leaving this life, but rather living in accordance with the precepts of holiness and justice.

Inge is wrong to imply that a passage of 1.4.16 means that Plotinus thought that suicide was ever in practice justifiable.[16] Plotinus simply says in this passage that the soul is not prevented from abandoning the body[17] and always has the authority to decide whether to abandon it or not. But this is the kind of decision readers of Plotinus should understand very well. The soul can choose for or against suicide, but the good soul will always in practice choose against. It merely remains to see why it will choose against.

The answer to this is given in *Ennead* 1.9 and in a fragment of Plotinus' teachings not recorded in the *Enneads* but preserved

by the Aristotelian commentator Elias.[18] Since the time of the *Phaedo*, it had been accepted among the Platonists that suicide was to be rejected, and in that respect Plotinus' own rejection in these pages is not surprising. What is interesting in our present context is rather how he demonstrates the truth of the Platonic position against the Stoics on Stoic ground, namely by showing that suicide is unreasonable. His arguments are that just as the sun performs a providential function in the world in general, so the soul must be regarded as the providential lord of the body and the body must therefore not be wholly neglected while the soul is still able to look after it. Furthermore, it would be a curious thing if man, who after all is not responsible for the joining together of soul and body, should take it upon himself to separate them instead of waiting for the force that has bound them together to come and loose them. This is of course a version of Socrates' own argument in the *Phaedo* (62 c).

These are the arguments of the passage from Elias. In the *Ennead* itself Plotinus musters others. His principal theme here is that if the soul detaches itself from the body by suicide, this cannot take place without the soul itself's becoming a prey to the passions of, for example, grief or anger. Thus, against the Stoics, at no time could a fully reasoned decision for suicide be taken. And this is reinforced in a typically Plotinian and paradoxical fashion. If the time of one's death is allotted by fate, it could not be a happy act to attempt suicide before this, unless, says Plotinus, it is necessary to do so. Of course the whole point of the tract thus far has been to demonstrate that it never is necessary, and therefore that it would never be happy, for as Plotinus now says, if one's rank in the next world is to be determined by the state in which one leaves this, suicide is out of the question so long as there is any chance of progress towards the good life. It seems unlikely that Plotinus thought that anyone was good beyond all possibility of improvement, and hence withdrawal is to be rejected. As Plotinus puts it elsewhere (4.4.44.23), 'It seems reasonable

(εὔλογον) not to withdraw from life because of the difficulties of acclimatizing oneself to living'.

Here then we have an excellent example of the independent approach of Plotinus to Stoicism. He has learned from Socrates that suicide is an abandonment of one's post; he recognizes from the Stoics, however, that it is right that the soul should have the right to decide in favour of life or death. From these two positions he formulates his own original stand. Certainly the soul should decide, but the soul of the good will always decide for life. And as with this doctrine, so with much else of Stoicism. Where the Stoics have an inkling of the truth, they are followed, with or without reinterpretation; where they err they are unhesitatingly corrected or rejected.

We may now briefly look at the so-called Middle Platonists and Neopythagoreans. As we have seen, the writings of many of these men were read in Plotinus' seminars, but none of them is mentioned by name in the *Enneads* and no modern scholars would pretend that Plotinus regarded them as more than starting-points for discussion. They had none of the authority of the 'ancient' thinkers. Sometimes what they say is useful;[19] sometimes it is to be corrected, as we have observed in the case of Numenius' interpretations of the *Timaeus*; sometimes it is to be rejected flatly, as are the extreme forms of dualism taught by Numenius and Plutarch. All these pre-Plotinian writers themselves are professors of Ancient Philosophy, the philosophy of Plato or Aristotle or 'Pythagoras'. Their aim is an exposition of the true attitudes of the master or masters. It is not surprising therefore that, however much Plotinus learned from them, our opinion of his claims to originality will not be affected by our understanding of this indebtedness, but by our grasp of his attitude towards the masters themselves to whom all these later prophets claimed to show the way.

As for the pre-Socratics, to whom Plotinus sometimes refers, they need be reviewed only very briefly here. The way their opinions are introduced in turn (Heraclitus, Empedocles, Pythagoras and his school in 4.8.1; Anaxagoras, Heraclitus,

Empedocles in 5.1.9) seems to suggest that Plotinus is going to a handbook rather than bothering with the original texts. He quotes the odd tag or generality to which he tends to attribute whatever meaning he sees fit. But he regards even the best of them, Parmenides, as vague on serious matters when compared with the Parmenides of Plato's dialogue (5.1.9). The pre-Socratics then are at best props, and sometimes mere names traditionally listed (after the fashion of Aristotle) when a new doctrine comes up for discussion.

We can now turn to Plotinus' second major source: Aristotle. The writings of Aristotle are, as Porphyry says, deeply embedded in the *Enneads*. We can find him in matters of small importance and in some of Plotinus' major philosophical theories. Henry has demonstrated beautifully[20] how Plotinus is able to go back from the near-contemporary Peripatetic Alexander, whose works, as Porphyry notices,[21] were read in Plotinus' school, to Aristotle himself. In this case, it is a matter of something quite small; elsewhere, however, we find Plotinus using theories of potentiality and actuality, or of the relation between the knowing mind and the object of its thought. But let us look a little further. In Aristotle there is no question but that activity (ἐνέργεια) is superior to potentiality (δύναμις).[22] In Plotinus, the word δύναμις is given a comparable but markedly different significance when applied to the One, as we saw in an earlier chapter.[23] That strange version of parts of the *Enneads* which has come down to us in Arabic under the name *The Theology of Aristotle* contains at the beginning of book eight the following sentence:[24] 'We say that actuality is superior to potentiality in this world, whereas in the upper world potentiality is superior to actuality.' The origin of this doctrine is obscure; perhaps there is some influence of the strange primacy of genus to species which is sometimes to be found in Aristotle.[25] The actual phrase of the *Theology* is not paralleled by a precise Plotinian text, but that need not mean it does not represent a Plotinian position. The One, at any rate, has the power to create all things, and

in that sense is potentially all things, a sense, of course, which involves neither the pantheism of the Stoa nor the Aristotelian primacy of the finite actual (τὸ ἓν πάντα καὶ οὐδὲ ἕν· ἀρχὴ γὰρ πάντων οὐ πάντα, ἀλλ' ἐκείνως πάντα, 5.2.1.1). Plotinus is quite capable of using the Aristotelian concept of potentiality and actuality in an Aristotelian way. But he is always quite capable of moving the sense of δύναμις from 'potentiality' to 'power', thus giving what Hadot has called 'une intuition fondamentalement anti-aristotélicienne'.[26]

Then again there is the question of Aristotle's God. In breaking with that Plotinus was opposing not only Aristotle but the Middle Platonists as well, for the view that God must be understood as an Aristotelian self-thinking mind had become a commonplace by the second century A.D.[27] Indeed it seems from a very strange passage of *Ennead* 6.9 that, if one said that there is a God, the sophisticated world would almost inevitably think of this Aristotelian self-thinking mind.[28] But although Plotinus makes ample use of the Aristotelian doctrine of the thinking mind being identical with its objects at the level of the second hypostasis,[29] he attacks Aristotle vigorously for suggesting that such a God, involving such a logical duality, could be the first principle of a monistic universe.[30] In other words, Aristotle's theory can be used where Plotinus sees fit to use it—which may not always be where Aristotle supposed it should be used. It is rather amusing to see the very attitudes Aristotle himself adopted towards his predecessors, particularly the pre-Socratic 'natural' philosophers, being adopted by Plotinus towards Aristotle himself.

We need spend no further time on the Aristotelian doctrines Plotinus rejects outright, such as the categories (6.1.1–24), the soul-form as an act of the body (4.7.8[5]), or the fifth element (2.1.2). More significant is the fact that he is not particularly interested in Aristotle's version of Platonism—and this will serve as a bridge by which we can now at last pass on to consider Plotinus' attitude to Plato himself, for here is the ultimate scale by which his originality must be measured.

Now prime among the doctrines of the Plato of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is the theory of the derivation of the Forms from the One and the Dyad. Plotinus is well aware that the Forms were traditionally so derived,[31] but he only alludes to the doctrine specifically on three occasions: at 5.1.5.14, 5.1.6.1 (this is very vague; Plotinus speaks of the difficulty of seeing how plurality or a dyad or number arises) and 5.4.2.7. A glance at the last-named passage will put the matter in perspective. 'From the Indefinite Dyad and the One', says Plotinus, 'arise the Forms and the Numbers, that is, the Intellect.' Now although attempts to understand how Plato supposed the Numbers and Forms to arise from the One and the Dyad have not been very successful,[32] it is at least clear that what arises is not the Intellect, as Plotinus says it is. We can interpret Plotinus' unwillingness to enquire further into what Aristotle means in several ways, but it seems certain that one reason is that he has his own opinion about the relation of the One and the Dyad—and that opinion is not to be found in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Whether Plotinus simply supposed that Aristotle had misinterpreted the doctrine is a problem beyond our powers to solve, but we know that when he read the account of Plato's philosophy in the *Metaphysics* he did not find there the equation of the Dyad with Aristotle's *own* concept of Intelligible Matter;[33] nor did he find his own dynamic notion that the Dyad, after its birth from the One, has some kind of proclivity to return (ἔφεσις, 5.3.11.12). Thus once again we find Plotinus taking over a doctrine in a rather nominal way, while leaving himself free to refashion it as he sees fit.

But the Plato of Aristotle is not the same as the Plato of the dialogues. We must now face the heart of the problem and see whether the attitude of Plotinus towards his 'sources' which is emerging needs to be modified here. We must first of all see what Plotinus himself has to say formally about his debts to Plato. A passage from 5.1.8 would appear to be the best starting-point. Plotinus defends his account of the three levels

of reality by claiming that Plato knew of them. His own views, he says, are not novel or contemporary; they are in the form of an explanation of earlier theories;[34] their antiquity can be proved by reference to the writings of Plato himself. Furthermore, and this is perhaps the most significant phrase of the passage, they were uttered long ago, but not explicitly (πάλαι μὲν εἰρῆσθαι μὴ ἀναπεπταμένως).[35] This should be retained firmly in the memory, for Plotinus is certainly not the man to be accused of not making things explicit. His tendency rather is to state his own principles *ad nauseam* till, as he hopes, they are inculcated in the reader by some kind of osmosis.

What then does this passage tell us? It tells us that it is important to realize that the fundamental principles of philosophy can be found—though not necessarily clearly—in the writings of Plato. It is the task of the philosopher to clarify these principles. But this will not always be easy, for as we read elsewhere in the *Enneads* (4.4.22.12; 4.8.1.27), Plato does not always speak so consistently that we can easily determine what he wishes to say. Nevertheless, if like the Gnostics we break entirely new ground, we shall find ourselves 'outside the truth' (2.9.6.12). From these formal utterances, therefore, we should suppose that the author of the *Enneads* would have been delighted with the remark of Augustine that one would have supposed that in Plotinus Plato lived again.[36]

Yet how does this theory apply to Plotinus' treatment of Platonic texts? Theiler has applied the singularly appropriate phrase *Plato dimidiatus* to the Plato we find in the *Enneads*,[37] and it is well known that despite the continual appeal to the views of the master, and the use of φησί as almost an equivalent of the Pythagorean αὐτὸς ἔφα (the Master said), there is very little reference in the *Enneads* to the early dialogues, little in general of Platonic origin on ethics or politics, little from the *Laws*. Even a dialogue like the *Theaetetus*, which occurs frequently in Henry and Schwyzer's *testimonia*, is represented almost exclusively by the passage about likeness to God in 176AB. It is the highly confident

metaphysical dialogues of Plato's middle period, *Republic*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, which together with the *Timaeus* and a strangely interpreted *Parmenides* are the most frequently quoted in the *Enneads*. To these we should add the *Second Letter*, which Plotinus believed to be by Plato. There are also snippets from other works, particularly the *Sophist* and *Philebus*, but the above are the most significant. And we should remember that even within these 'central books' of Platonism, Plotinus again and again refers to the same passages: *Republic* 509, *Symposium* 210ff., *Phaedrus* 247, *Sophist* 248–9, *Timaeus* 39E and so on. It would be rash to suggest that he used an anthology; it is more likely that he did not go through the whole Platonic *corpus* thoroughly. Nevertheless there is no doubt that his attitude to the Platonic text was what we might call 'anthological'. He finds the positions of Platonism so well summed up in a few passages that he resorts to these again and again. We should remember that he had no idea whatsoever of any developmental theory to account for the differences of Plato's thoughts, nor does he appreciate the reason why Plato chose to write in dialogue form. He makes therefore little allowance for *ad hominem* argumentation. Contradictions in Plato are either problems to be resolved, as we have seen, or, as I have tried to show elsewhere in the case of his theories of *Eros*,[38] they are repeated in modified form in the *Enneads* themselves.

Nevertheless, as has been observed already, Plotinus did not regard himself as a scholar, but as a philosopher who brought his own approach to bear on problems; and he did not write commentaries. It is curious too how in other ways he stands aloof from what is usually called Neoplatonism. It may be noticed what a comparatively minor figure he is in Merlan's *From Platonism to Neoplatonism*, where the current of ideas seems to run from Speusippus and the Old Academy through Posidonius to Iamblichus. Somehow Plotinus stands aside, markedly distinct from the orthodox 'Platonic' tradition.

As Henry has pointed out,[39] there are three main planks of

Plotinus' philosophy which have without doubt come from what he thought Plato to have said clearly: the distinction between sensibles and intelligibles; the immateriality and immortality of the soul; the transcendence of the One or Good. These are certainly in Plotinus' view the foundations of true philosophy, and to deviate from them would be absurd. Nevertheless once within this framework we should notice how Plotinus proceeds. First of all he adds doctrines which Plato never held and which Plotinus never twists his 'source' into supporting. An example of such a doctrine is the view that in the case of living things there are not only generic and specific Forms but Forms of individuals.[40] Then there are cases where Plotinus, for some reason which we cannot be sure we understand, actually changes what Plato says. A striking example of this has been pointed out by Armstrong,[41] who observes that whereas in the *Phaedrus* (252D7) Plato describes the process of doing good to one's beloved as 'working on a statue' (ἄγαλμα τεκταίνεται), Plotinus in 1.6.9.13 exhorts the searcher for the Good to go on working at *his own* statue (τεκταίνων τὸ σὸν ἄγαλμα). Then there are the more obvious changes of doctrine, for example in the attitude to symmetry. For Plato, symmetry, as we read repeatedly, and especially in the *Republic* and *Phaedo*, is of the very essence of Goodness and Beauty; for Plotinus, on the other hand, the essence of Beauty is Life. Why is there more beauty on a living than a dead face? Why are portraits which are more alive considered more beautiful than those which are more symmetrical? Because it is wrong to suppose that symmetry is the bringer of beauty. The truth is that beauty is the cause of symmetry (6.7.22.25).[42] Then too there is Plotinus' attitude to the arts. It is true that at one place in the *Republic* (484CD) Plato tells us that the painter is able to look up to the Ideal World as a pattern of reality, but the normal view of that dialogue, elaborated in great detail in book ten, is that all artists are simply copying particulars, that is, producing copies of mere copies of the real. Before

Plotinus there had been a revulsion against this attitude,[43] and Plotinus himself will not accept it. Using the traditional example of Phidias—a fact which makes us suppose that here he is not thinking of the isolated passage at *Republic* 484, but rather preferring his own version of the later tradition to the revered Plato himself—Plotinus insists that the sculptor did not make his statue of Zeus from looking at sensible models, but rather that he went back to the Form behind the material objects and imagined what Zeus would be like if he were to make himself visible (5.8.1.34–40).[44]

Ennead 5.5.12 provides interest of a rather different kind. In Plato's *Statesman* we read that the good man of state is like a weaver who combines the different classes of the community. His task, however, is made especially difficult by the fact that there is some kind of opposition between various of the virtues: courage, for example, and moderation (306A–308B). But this insight that although both courage and moderation are 'parts of virtue' they can be in opposition to one another is nowhere paralleled in Plato by the recognition that there might be any divergence in the claims on man of Goodness and Beauty. Indeed the search for Beauty in the *Symposium* and the journey to the Good in the *Republic* are always rightly supposed to be different ways of looking at the same philosophic procedure. And in Plotinus too this is often the case, for example in *Ennead* 1.6, which perhaps best fulfils Porphyry's description of Plotinus as living in accordance with the methods prescribed by the *Symposium*.[45] Yet in 5.5.12 Plotinus is able to see that at times the love of Beauty and the love of the Good may not be compatible. The Good is superior to Beauty and its effects are different; it is gentle and friendly, where Beauty brings violence and astonishment. Love of Beauty may even prevent the aspirant to philosophy from attaining the Good. There is no need to go further here in the exegesis of this difficult chapter. Suffice it to say that Plotinus' respect for Plato does not prevent him from saying some very un-Platonic things if he feels they are necessary.

It is no service to our case to go into matters where Plotinus produces an un-Platonic doctrine by unwittingly *misinterpreting* Plato himself. Mistakes of exegesis are unimportant to a philosopher. The fact that Plotinus should not have found his doctrine that the Forms are 'not outside the Intellect' in the dialogues does not affect the question of his attitude to the Platonic text. For that purpose all that matters is that he thought he could find it in that text. It is more to the point simply to list a few examples of doctrines which are either clearly in opposition to the Platonic text or not discussed by Plato but opposed to what we can surmise of his opinions, or again produced by Plotinus by what looks like a wilful manipulation of that text for philosophical purposes.

It is time therefore to consider the three questions with which we began: Does Plotinus regard himself solely as an interpreter of Plato? Does Plato, in Plotinus' view, possess the whole truth? Where Plotinus differs from Plato, is he ever aware of the difference and how does he account for it? The answer to the first two questions must, on the results of this enquiry, be No. Plotinus does not think that Plato possesses the whole truth, nor does he think of himself as merely an exegete, despite what he says in 3.7.1 or 5.1.8. As he himself puts it in 3.7.7, 'But as things are, our best beginning is to range over the most noteworthy of the ancient opinions and see whether any of them accord with ours'.

And yet there is no doubt that his attitude to Plato is quite different from that to other philosophers. Plato has set him on the path which will lead to truth: that is the sense in which he is a Platonist. Plato has already recognized a number of fundamental principles of metaphysical reality. These must be filled out in detail, but the original schema does not need to be varied, simply because it accords with Plotinus' own. It must be the opinion of anyone who studies the *Enneads* that Plotinus' major motive for philosophizing is to rationalize his own intuitions and experiences. Plotinus is a Platonist because Plato enables him to achieve this with the most success.

Fundamentally, therefore, Plotinus' attitude towards Plato is the same as that towards all other philosophic predecessors, namely that one should accept what is acceptable. Plotinus—perhaps this is the method of Ammonius—finds that Plato, so far as he goes, is highly acceptable.

The third question, namely how far Plotinus is aware of differing from Plato and how he accounts for this difference, is the most difficult to answer. We must not, as we have seen, take into account doctrines which Plotinus thought were in Plato, but which we cannot find there. We must limit ourselves to ideas which Plotinus knows are not clear in Plato or which he seems to recognize are not in Plato at all. Here a subjective element must come into our judgement. Plotinus recognizes inconsistencies in Plato, as we have seen, in 4.8.1. Why he thinks they are there we can only surmise. He does not attribute them to any development of Plato's thought and it seems likely that he thought that a 'higher synthesis' was possible, even if not explicitly made in the dialogues and even if he could not make it himself. We might hazard a guess that he looked on Plato almost as Plato himself looked on the poets, as inspired teachers whose words were not always clear even to themselves.

But the conflict of Goodness and Beauty in *Ennead* 5.5.12, or the matter of 'working on one's own statue' in Plotinus' version of the *Phaedrus*, are the real tests. In the case of the latter we might say that Plotinus was working from memory, that he forgot exactly what Plato had said, that 'it was something about working on statues'. But how curious that a man who is said to have found the whole truth in Plato and who is quite capable of quoting accurately should not bother to look up the text if he thought that accuracy was of tremendous importance. As for Goodness and Beauty, one can only say that if he did not realize that his treatment is un-Platonic, he was a fool—and he certainly was not a fool. The case of *mimesis* is similar. It is asking too much to require us to suppose that the long discussion of this subject in *Republic* X

slipped his memory. One can only conclude that he knew it perfectly well, and chose to improve upon it.

There is no polemic against Plato in the *Enneads*. The honour due to the Master who had seen so much would render that impossible. But tacit correction is possible and necessary at times. As with the others, so with Plato, Plotinus takes what he wants and leaves the rest. As Plato says of Homer,[46] and Aristotle of Plato,[47] so occasionally Plotinus too says implicitly (μὴ ἀναπεπταμένως) of Plato: 'I honour him but I honour truth more.' If this is what a Neoplatonist is, it seems reasonable to suppose that Plato would have regarded him as the best kind of Platonist.