PLOTINUS:  **The Platonist**

_plato_ (427 – 347 B.C.E.)

Plotinus (c. 204 – 270 C.E.)

by

DAVID J. YOUNT, PH.D.

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Bibliography
Preface

When I first read Plotinus, I could not help but feel that there were many significant similarities between what Plotinus was claiming about the nature of reality, knowledge, and ethics on the one hand, and what Plato mentions in his dialogues on these philosophical studies, on the other.¹ I do not believe that I was merely being misled by Plotinus himself, who frequently asserts that he is simply following Plato in what he says; one can show through the use of Plato’s and Plotinus’ texts that Plotinus holds very similar (and in many cases identical) views to those held by Plato. After having read Plato and Plotinus, then, I was convinced that there would be an entire tome written that detailed the resemblance between the two philosophers. However, as I searched the major universities’ library holdings, I was amazed that there was no work on their shelves whose main thesis argued that these two philosophers held essentially the same philosophical view. Even more remarkable to me was the fact that not only was there no such book, but that scholars (mainly in journal articles and in books on the interpretation of Plato’s Parmenides, for instance), seemed to go out of their way to differentiate Plato’s view from that of Plotinus, as we will see in the following chapters. Indeed, I have attended conferences, at which papers were delivered by scholars who apparently felt that it is enough simply to mention a “mystical” reading of a Platonic passage in order to refute that rendering as being a reputable interpretation of the passage in question.

Having said this, I should mention that many years after I had decided to write this book, I came upon an exception. John N. Findlay, in his Plato and Platonism, after explaining some of Plotinus’ views, claims:

There is nothing in all these Plotinian treatments which does not have abundant connections with the Platonic writings, and this is particularly so in the eschatological treatments of the life of the Soul after bodily death, its migration from one bodily form to another, and its final liberation. (Findlay 1978: 216)²

While I was pleased to see that I was not the only person to see this strong connection between the two philosophers, I discovered that Findlay himself does not present his readers with anything resembling all of these “abundant connections” in his works, which thus leaves the present project worthy of pursuit. Moreover, I would (and will) argue that there are many more and important connections besides ones related to the soul and its eschatology.

Nonetheless, I am left wondering what generally motivates scholars to deny the similarity between Plato and Plotinus’ views. I have even talked to a notable Platonic commentator (whose name I will not mention) who had made up his mind that there is no meaningful connection between the two philosophers, but after I asked for some justification of that opinion, he admitted that he had not read much of Plotinus’ work!

¹ Apparently my initial reaction was similar to Anton (2006: 1): “Does [the term “Neoplatonism”] suggest that we are dealing with a special type of Platonism? I asked the question because I once, like many other colleagues, thought that Plotinus was a true Platonist.” Unlike Anton, however, my initial reaction has not changed.

² I hasten to point out that I disagree with Findlay’s assessment here: “… it is in Hegelianism that Platonism finds its highest fulfillment …” (1970: 263; see also 1975a: 679-680). Also, Findlay is a “hylozoist and an animist,” and believes that “all these beings have their own life and consciousness” (1970: 265).
I have several hypotheses as to why no major work has been written about their similarity: First, perhaps the similarity is too obvious. That a point about Plato is obvious does not seem to have kept many Platonic scholars from writing about such a line of reasoning, however. For instance, Platonic scholars frequently write about the compatibility of and similarities between Plato and Aristotle’s thought, as well as the similarities between Platonic dialogues, and the Pythagorean and other pre-Socratic elements in Plato’s thought, etc.; so the blatancy of the Platonic-Plotinian compatibility by itself does not seem to account for the lack of subject material on this matter.

Second, perhaps scholars ignore this connection because the writings of Plotinus have famously been used by St. Augustine as a commentary of Plato and an unwitting source of Christian doctrine, and so have influenced the theology of the Church. In other words, perhaps the historic connection between Plotinus and Christian theology implies to these commentators that Plotinus’ thought is similar to Christianity, and they would rather avoid having Plato’s thought seen as being similar to such a philosopher or to such a religion. There are two reasons to discount this reasoning, if anyone has this concern. First, anyone who actually takes the time to read Plotinus’ Enneads will come to understand that the views as expressed are not essentially Christian in nature (except what was used and adapted by St. Augustine for his own purposes). Second, since Plotinus lived from 204-270 C.E., and since his student, friend, and editor Porphyry wrote Against the Christians of which only fragments remain, we can see that these philosophers were aware of Christianity and did not endorse its theology. Not only did neither philosopher endorse Christianity, but also both philosophers took the time to write against Christianity in some form or other.

Inge (1929a: 21) quotes Augustine [from Contra Academicos III, xviii], as saying: “The utterance of Plato, the most pure and bright in all philosophy, scattering the clouds of error, has shone forth most of all in Plotinus, the Platonic philosopher who has been deemed so like his master that one might think them contemporaries, if the length of time between them did not compel us to say that in Plotinus Plato lived again.” K. S. Guthrie (1896: 56) argues that the proof of Augustine’s debt to Plotinus “may be found in the fact that Augustine of Hippo took the whole conception of monotheism in its cosmic relations as it stood in [Plotinus’] works into his De Civitate Dei, without any material alterations.” Inge (1929a: 12) claims: “There is nothing startling in the considered opinion of Rudolf Eucken, that Plotinus has influenced Christian theology more than any other thinker (since St. Paul, he should have no doubt added).” Conversely, from Pond (1856: 139-140), we find a denial that Platonism originated the Trinity doctrine and a lament that later Platonists thought of Jesus as an emanation: “Platonism did not originate, as has been pretended, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, but it gradually changed and corrupted this doctrine. Its tendency was to lower the personal dignity, and lessen the authority of the Son of God. The Platonizing teachers, instead of regarding him as one and equal with the Father, conceived of him as an emanation – an inferior and derived being.” And finally, Rist (1964: 31) states that the influence of Christianity on Plotinus is basically non-existent: “Plotinus lived in the third century A.D., but for all the influence Christianity had on his thought, he might as well have lived before Christ.”

Turnbull (1948: 249) lists Augustine’s debt to Plotinus as follows (with which I agree): “To understand St. Augustine one must be familiar with the language and ideas of Plotinus from whom he borrowed not only scattered thoughts, but the best part of his doctrine on the Soul, on Providence, on the Transcendence of God, on evil as the negation of good, and on freedom; and his theory of time and eternity.”

Plotinus, according to Porphyry’s The Life of Plotinus (hereafter “Life”), wrote against “Christians and … sectarians who had abandoned the old philosophy … men … alleging that Plato had not penetrated to the depths of intelligible reality. Plotinus hence often attacked their position in his lectures … ” (Life, in A. H. Armstrong’s translation for the Loeb Classical Library (1966a: Ch. 16); hereafter, the translation of Life and chapter references cited are from the Loeb edition). Also, Plotinus is said to have observed Socrates and Plato’s birthdays, but not to have observed any Christian or Egyptian holy days (Life, Ch. 2). Porphyry wrote Against the Christians, only fragments of which remain (see Hoffman 1994). Regarding the ruination of large parts of Against the Christians, A.
Third, perhaps scholars deny their similarity because Plotinus is said and generally regarded as a mystic, whereas a majority of scholars seem to deny that Plato is a mystic. For instance, I agree with the entry for “Platonism” in The New Encyclopædia Britannica in its assessment that, until the 1960s, English-speaking philosophers and scholars in general, “maintained a hostile attitude toward [Neo-Platonism] which they wrongly regarded not only as ‘decadent’ but also as ‘mystical,’ and thus outside the true tradition of Greek philosophy.” I will show in what follows that Plotinus definitely states and Plato pretty obviously claims that it is possible for certain persons to have an experience that gives one knowledge of what exists, what we can know, and how we should live. (I address this “anti-mystical” point further in § 1.8 of Chapter 1.)

Largely ignoring and/or downplaying the importance of Plotinus’ thought and his interpretation of Plato not only do a great disservice in general to budding Platonic scholars but also erect a barrier to understanding Aristotle and Plato’s thought. Whether or not Plotinus is wrong in what he holds, at the very least, he offers another interpretation of Plato that merits investigation, just as Platonic scholars look to Aristotle, and other ancient, modern, and contemporary commentators, in an attempt to better understand Plato’s view. At the most, Plotinus is the best interpreter of Plato, and fills in the details left out of Plato’s dialogues, for whatever reason. At the least, his work is worth assessing and dealing with in order to know more about the history of Platonism. As I hope to show, Plotinus’ work is an excellent (if not the best) interpretation of Plato’s philosophy, and is valuable for its own sake, as well as for the sake of understanding some of his predecessors.

Why is Plotinus the Platonist? That is, why is Plotinus the best example of a follower of Plato’s thought? If we think of a continuum with 0% Platonist at one end, where someone believes none of the claims in Chapters 1 – 4 of this book, and with 100% Platonist at the other, where someone assents to all of these claims, Plotinus is the best example of Platonism of which I am aware, for three reasons.

First, as we will see, Plotinus questions almost nothing about what Plato says regarding metaphysical, epistemological, or ethical matters and demonstrates his agreement with over 170 such claims. In contrast, almost every Platonic scholar or follower that I am aware of either (1) questions Plato’s views in some fundamental aspect, to some extent or other, or (2) fundamentally ignores what Plato is saying. Examples of the former group (particularly including contemporary scholars, but even Aristotle fits in this category) include those who ridicule or find implausible Plato’s views such as that reincarnation occurs, that learning is recollection of the Forms, that stars have souls, or his arguments for the immortality of the soul, his conception of the ideal state, or for the Forms. Contemporary philosophers generally seem...
to refer to themselves as Platonists if they merely believe that Forms exist, but there are obviously many additional metaphysical claims that Plato makes (such as that the soul is immortal, there is a World-Soul or All-Soul, a Demiurge that created the visible universe, reincarnation, and guardian spirits); hence, though one’s being committed to the Forms may minimally qualify someone as a Platonist, presumably someone who is dedicated to more of what Plato says is a Platonist to a greater degree than someone who is not so committed. Not only did Plotinus never question any of these views just mentioned, he in fact argues strongly in favor of them. Examples of the latter group of scholars include St. Augustine (who rejected Neoplatonism in his City of God10) and Marsilio Ficino. According to Tigerstedt, in Ficino’s “Exhortation to Those that Listen to or Read Plotinus,” Ficino “solemnly advises them that they should consider themselves as listening to Plato himself. For, through the mouth of Plotinus, Plato speaks to us—a second Plato, as elevated as the first, and sometimes even deeper.”11 I thoroughly agree with Ficino’s comment here, and indeed hope to demonstrate its truth in the rest of this book. However, Ficino also adds that, in his opinion, Platonism is second in correctness or divinity only to Christianity.12

Second, there is only one man in the history of the world (other than Plato himself), as far as we know, who actually was so convinced of the truth of Plato’s work, that he made a great effort to procure some land and attempt to create on this earth “Platonopolis,” Plato’s ideal state, and rule it according to Plato’s laws. That man is Plotinus.13 Plotinus is in effect a living counterexample to Bernard Knox’s claim that, “Plato is a great artist and philosopher, but there is surely no one reading this who would abandon even the most corrupt and inefficient democracy to live in his republic” (1993: 98).

Third, there are only two men in the history of philosophy who more or less personally attest to having had a vision and knowledge of the Platonic Good or the One (see Chapter 1): namely, Plotinus and Porphyry; this disqualifies the other Neo-Platonists (Iamblichus, Syrianus, and Proclus) and later groups of Platonists (Cambridge, etc., including Thomas Taylor). We can show that Porphyry is not the best example of a Platonist (even though he claims to have had the aforementioned experience) because we do not have writings, as we do with Plotinus, which confirm his agreement with as much Platonic doctrine.

It should be apparent at this point that there is some evidence for my claim made in the title of this book: If anyone deserves to be called a Platonist, and not necessarily a “new Platonist,” “recent Platonist,” or “Neo-Platonist,” it is Plotinus.14 It is my aim to show, with the

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12 See Tigerstedt (1974: 19): “Ficino composed a vast Corpus of writings which in his eyes were only a little less holy and revealed than the Scriptures.” See also the entry for Ficino in Britannica (1991, v. 4, p. 761): “He saw Plato’s thought as one of the most noble expressions of the spirit, exceeded only by the truth of Christianity.” This high opinion of Christianity’s correctness is where Ficino and I disagree, though I will not argue that point here.
13 In *Life*, Porphyry relates that Plotinus wanted to use the former city of Campania to found Platonopolis, “and he undertook to move there with his companions. The philosopher would have easily gained his wish if some of the courtiers, moved by jealousy, spite, or some such mean motive, had not prevented it” (Ch. 12). We will return to this point in Ch. 4, § 4.5.1.3.
14 This assertion should not be taken as claiming that no else can rightly be referred to as a Platonist, but only to suggest that Plotinus only saw himself filling in details of Plato’s thought as opposed to fitting Platonic views into his own. There are, of course, many different followers of Plato in some form or other, including but not limited to Aristotle, the Skeptics, Middle Platonists, other Neo-Platonists (e.g., Porphyry, Iamblichus, Syrianus, and Proclus), early Christian Platonists (e.g., Augustine, Ficino), Renaissance Platonists, Cambridge Platonists (e.g., Cudworth, More, Smith, and others), and Thomas Taylor.
aid of the texts, the overwhelming extent to which these two thinkers share similar, compatible views. It is not my aim to show here the differences between Plotinus’ thought and other Neo-Platonists (such as Iamblichus and Proclus), though such a project would certainly be a worthy one.

It would be a great source of satisfaction to me if this book were to encourage many more philosophers to engage their minds by trying to understand Plotinus’ writings.\(^\text{15}\) The (obvious) problem is that most philosophy students are not introduced to Plotinus, so they are not familiar with his work from the start, and as a result they do not study his work in graduate school. This sequence of “non-events” produces very few professors who have seriously studied his work, and so the cycle perpetuates itself. It will take a great shift in thinking to persuade scholars to focus more on Plotinus, but I think such a shift would pay many dividends.

It is in the interest of presenting as much evidence as possible in favor of the position that these philosophers hold essentially the same view, to spur interest in Plotinus’ reading of Plato, and to increase awareness of Plotinus generally, that I write this book.

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Dave Yount
Mesa Community College

\(^\text{15}\) After I wrote this sentence, I found A. H. Armstrong’s (1947: 222) similar wish: “If I have managed to persuade anybody that Plato and Aristotle, Plotinus and Augustine are something more than musty historical curiosities who can be left to the attention of specialists with nothing better to do, then I shall have done something well worth doing. After all, we may reject the conclusions of the ancients if we like, but their thought is of sufficiently high quality and has an affected that of later ages sufficiently deeply to make it very unwise for us to ignore them completely in making our own decisions about what we believe to be true.”