

ENNEADS

(SELECTION)

Plotinus

Plotinus (c.204-270) was born in Egypt (unclear whether he was a Hellenized Egyptian or a Greek), developed an interest in philosophy at the age of 28 and began studies in Alexandria, eventually apprenticing himself for eleven years under the philosopher Ammonius Saccus, who also taught the Christian theologian Origen (c.185-c.254). Here Plotinus studied Plato, supplementing him with bits from the Pre-Socratics, Aristotle, and the Stoics. This amalgam came to be called “Neoplatonism” in the 19th century, although until then Plotinus and his followers were simply called Platonists.

At the age of thirty-nine, Plotinus left Alexandria to journey to the East to learn the philosophy of India and Persia. He traveled with a Roman army, but a mutiny (the murder of the Roman emperor Gordianus III, who was leading the forces), caused Plotinus to flee back to Rome, where he fell into the good graces of the new emperor, Gallienus. Plotinus immediately set up a school (245/244) that continued beyond his death.

The manuscripts that we have from Plotinus were written between the ages of 48 and 65 (when he died), and were in general disorder. His disciple Porphyry (who studied under him from 263 to 268, and who headed the school after Plotinus’ death) edited these writings into six groups of nine treatises each. These “groups of nine” — Enneads, in Greek — are the writings that we now possess.

The following selection was translated by Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page.

THE FIRST ENNEAD THIRD TREATISE

On Dialectic [the upward way]

1. What art is there, what method, what discipline to bring us there where we must go? [...]

For all there are two stages of the path, as they are making upwards or have already gained the upper sphere. The first degree is the conversion from the lower life; the second — held by those that have already made their way to the sphere of the Intelligibles, have set as it were a footprint there but must still advance within the realm — lasts until they reach the extreme hold of the place, the Term attained when the topmost peak of the intellectual realm is won. [...]

SIXTH TREATISE On Beauty

1. Beauty addresses itself chiefly to sight; but there is a beauty for the hearing too, as in certain combinations of words and in all kinds of music, for melodies and cadences are beautiful; and minds that lift themselves above the realm of sense to a higher order are aware of beauty in the conduct of life, in actions, in character, in the pursuits of the intellect; and there is the beauty of the virtues. What loftier beauty there may be, yet, our argument will bring to light.

What, then, is it that gives comeliness to material forms and draws the ear to the sweetness perceived in sounds, and what is the secret of the beauty there is in all that derives from soul? Is there some one principle from which all take their grace, or is there a beauty peculiar to the embodied and another for the bodiless? Finally, one or many, what would such a principle be?

Consider that some things, material shapes for instance, are gracious not by anything inherent but by something communicated, while others are lovely of themselves, as, for example, virtue. The same bodies appear sometimes beautiful, sometimes not; so that there is a good deal between being body and being beautiful. What, then, is this something that shows itself in certain material forms? This is the natural beginning of our enquiry.

What is it that attracts the eyes of those to whom a beautiful object is presented, and calls them, lures them, towards it, and fills them with joy at the sight? If we can find this, then perhaps we can use it as a standpoint for the wider survey.

Almost everyone declares that the symmetry of parts towards each other and towards a whole, along with a good color — this is what constitutes the beauty recognized by the eye; that in visible things, as indeed in all else, universally, the beautiful is essentially the symmetrical and measured.

But consider what this means. Only a compound would be beautiful, and never anything devoid of parts; the several parts will have beauty, not in themselves, but only as work-

ing together to give a comely total. Yet beauty in an aggregate demands beauty in details; it cannot be constructed out of ugliness; its law must run throughout.

All the loveliness of color and even the light of the sun, being devoid of parts and so not beautiful by symmetry, must be ruled out of the realm of beauty. And how comes gold to be a beautiful thing? And lightning by night, and the stars, why are these so fair?

In sounds also the simple must be proscribed, though often in a whole noble composition each several tone is delicious in itself.

Again since the one face, constant in symmetry, appears sometimes fair and sometimes not, can we doubt that beauty is something more than symmetry, that symmetry itself owes its beauty to a remoter principle?

Turn to what is attractive in methods of life or in the expression of thought; are we to call in symmetry here? What symmetry is to be found in noble conduct, or excellent laws, in any form of mental pursuit? What symmetry can there be in points of abstract thought? The symmetry of being accordant with each other? But there may be accordance or entire identity where there is nothing but ugliness: the proposition that honesty is merely a generous artlessness chimes in the most perfect harmony with the proposition that morality means weakness of will; the accordance is complete.

Then again, all the virtues are a beauty of the soul, a beauty authentic beyond any of these others; but how does symmetry enter here? The soul, it is true, is not a simple unity, but still its virtue cannot have the symmetry of size or of number: what standard of measurement could preside over the compromise or the coalescence of the soul's faculties or purposes?

Finally, how by this theory would there be any beauty of the intellect, alone by itself?

2. Let us, then, go back to the source, and indicate at once the principle that bestows beauty on material things.

Undoubtedly this principle exists; it is something that is perceived at the first glance, something which the soul names as from an ancient knowledge and, recognising, welcomes it, enters into unison with it.

But let the soul fall in with the ugly and at once it shrinks within itself, denies the thing, turns away from it, not accordant, resenting it.

Our interpretation is that the soul — by the very truth of its nature, by its affiliation to the noblest existents in the hierarchy of being — when it sees anything of that kin, or

any trace of that kinship, thrills with an immediate delight, takes its own to itself, and thus stirs anew to the sense of its nature and of all its affinity.

But, is there any such likeness between the loveliness of this world and the splendors in the supreme? Such a likeness in the particulars would make the two orders alike: but what is there in common between beauty here and beauty there?

We hold that all the loveliness of this world comes by communion with a form, for all shapelessness whose kind admits of pattern and form, as long as it remains outside of reason and idea, is ugly by that very isolation from the divine thought. And this is absolutely ugly: an ugly thing is something that has not been entirely mastered by pattern, that is by reason, the matter not yielding at all points and in all respects to form.

But where the form has entered, it has grouped and coordinated what from a diversity of parts was to become a unity; it has rallied confusion into co-operation; it has made the sum one harmonious coherence; for the idea is a unity and what it molds must come to unity as far as multiplicity may.

And on what has thus been compacted to unity, beauty enthrones itself, giving itself to the parts as to the sum. When it lights on some natural unity, a thing of like parts, then it gives itself to that whole. Thus, for an illustration, there is the beauty, conferred by craftsmanship, of a house with all its parts, and there is the beauty which some natural quality may give to a single stone.

This, then, is how the material thing becomes beautiful: by communicating in the thought that flows from the divine.

3. And the soul includes a faculty peculiarly addressed to beauty — one incomparably sure in the appreciation of its own, never in doubt whenever any lovely thing presents itself for judgment.

Or perhaps the soul itself acts immediately, affirming the beautiful where it finds something accordant with the ideal form within itself, using this idea as a canon of accuracy in its decision.

But what accordance is there between the material and that which antedates all matter? On what principle does the architect, when he finds the house standing before him in correspondence with his inner ideal of a house, pronounce it beautiful? Is it not that the house before him, the stones apart, is the inner idea stamped upon the mass of exterior matter, the indivisible exhibited in diversity?

So with the perceptive faculty, discerning in certain objects the ideal form which has bound and controlled shape-

less matter, opposed in nature to idea, seeing further stamped upon the common shapes some shape excellent above the common, it gathers into unity what still remains fragmentary, catches it up and carries it within, no longer a thing of parts, and presents it to the ideal-principle as something concordant and congenial, a natural friend — the joy here is like that of a good man who discerns in a youth the early signs of a virtue consonant with the achieved perfection within his own soul.

The beauty of color is also the outcome of a unification: it derives from shape, from the conquest of the darkness inherent in matter by the pouring-in of light, the unembodied, which is a rational principle and an ideal form.

Hence it is that fire itself is splendid beyond all material bodies, holding the rank of an ideal principle to the other elements, making ever upwards, the subtlest and sprightliest of all bodies, as very near to the unembodied; itself alone admitting no other, all the others penetrated by it: for they take warmth but this is never cold; it has color primally; they receive the form of color from it; hence the splendor of its light, the splendor that belongs to the idea. And all that has resisted and is but uncertainly held by its light remains outside of beauty, as not having absorbed the plenitude of the form of color.

And harmonies unheard in sound create the harmonies we hear, and wake the soul to the consciousness of beauty, showing it the one essence in another kind, for the measures of our sensible music are not arbitrary but are determined by the principle whose labor is to dominate matter and bring pattern into being.

So much, then, for the beauties of the realm of sense, images and shadow-pictures, fugitives that have entered into matter — to adorn, and to ravish when they are seen.

4. But there are earlier and loftier beauties than these. In the sense-bound life we are no longer granted to know them, but the soul, taking no help from the organs, sees and proclaims them. To the vision of these we must mount, leaving sense to its own low place.

As it is not for those to speak of the graceful forms of the material world who have never seen them or known their grace — men born blind, let us suppose — in the same way those must be silent upon the beauty of noble conduct and of learning and all that order who have never cared for such things, nor may those tell of the splendor of virtue who have never known the face of justice and of moral wisdom, beautiful beyond the beauty of evening and of dawn.

Such vision is for those only who see with the soul's sight — and they will rejoice at the vision, awe will fall upon them, and a trouble deeper than all the rest could ever stir, for now they are moving in the realm of truth.

This is the spirit that beauty must ever induce, wonderment and a delicious trouble, longing and love and a trembling that is all delight. All this may be felt for the unseen, just as for the sees. The souls feel it — every soul in some degree — but those the more deeply that are the more truly apt to this higher love, just as all take delight in the beauty of the body but not all are not stung as sharply, and only those who feel the keener wound are known as lovers.

5. These lovers, then, lovers of the beauty outside of sense, must be made to declare themselves.

What do you feel in the presence of the grace you discern in actions, in manners, in sound morality, in all the works and fruits of virtue, in the beauty of souls? When you see that you yourselves are beautiful within, what do you feel? What is this Dionysiac exultation that thrills through your being, this straining upwards of all your soul, this longing to break away from the body and live sunken within the veritable self?

These are no other than the emotions of souls under the spell of love.

But what is it that awakens all this passion? No shape, no color, no grandeur of mass; all is for a soul, something whose beauty rests upon no color, for the moral wisdom the soul enshrines and all the other hueless splendor of the virtues. It is that you find in yourself, or admire in another, a loftiness of spirit, righteousness of life, disciplined purity, courage of the majestic face, gravity, modesty that goes fearless and tranquil and passionless, and, shining down upon all, the light of god-like intellect.

All these noble qualities are to be revered and loved, no doubt, but what entitles them to be called beautiful?

They exist, they manifest themselves to us, anyone who sees them must admit that they have a reality of being; and is not real being itself really beautiful?

But we have not yet shown by what property in them they have wrought the soul to loveliness. What is this grace, this splendor as of light, resting upon all the virtues?

Let us take the contrary, the ugliness of the soul, and set that against its beauty — to understand at once what this ugliness is and how it comes to appear in the soul will certainly open our way before us.

Let us then suppose an ugly soul, dissolute, unrighteous, teeming with all the lusts, torn by internal discord, beset by

the fears of its cowardice and the envies of its pettiness, thinking, in the little thought it has, only of the perishable and the base, perverse in all its ways, the friend of unclean pleasures, living the life of abandonment to bodily sensation and delighting in its deformity.

What must we think but that all this shame is something that has gathered about the soul, some foreign bane outraging it, soiling it, so that, encumbered with all manner of turpitude, it has no longer a clean activity or a clean sensation, but commands only a life smoldering dully under the crust of evil; that, sunk in manifold death, it no longer sees what a soul should see, may no longer rest in its own being, dragged ever as it is towards the outer, the lower, the dark?

An unclean thing, I dare to say — flickering hither and thither at the call of objects of sense, deeply infected with the taint of body, occupied always in matter, and absorbing matter into itself — in its commerce with the ignoble it has trafficked away for an alien nature its own essential idea.

If a man has been immersed in filth or daubed with mud his native comeliness disappears and all that is seen is the foul stuff besmearing him; his ugly condition is due to alien matter that has encrusted him, and if he is to win back his grace it must be his business to scour and purify himself and make himself what he was.

So, we may justly say, a soul becomes ugly by something foisted upon it, by sinking itself into the alien, by a fall, a descent into body, into matter. The dishonor of the soul is in its ceasing to be clean and apart. Gold is degraded when it is mixed with earthy particles; if these be worked out, the gold is left and is beautiful, isolated from all that is foreign, gold with gold alone. And so the soul: Let it be but cleared of the desires that come by its too intimate converse with the body, emancipated from all the passions, purged of all that embodiment has thrust upon it, withdrawn, a solitary, to itself again — in that moment the ugliness that came only from the alien is stripped away.

6. For, as was taught in ancient times, moral discipline and courage and every virtue, not even excepting wisdom itself, all is purification.

Hence the Mysteries with good reason adumbrate the immersion of the unpurified in filth, even in the nether-world, since the unclean loves filth for its very filthiness, and swine foul of body find their joy in foulness.

What else is *sophrosyne* (practical wisdom), rightly so-called, but to take no part in the pleasures of the body, to break away from them as unclean and unworthy of the clean? So too, courage is but being fearless of the death

which is but the parting of the soul from the body, an event which no one can dread whose delight is to be his unmingled self. And magnanimity is but disregard for the lure of things here. And wisdom is but the act of the intellectual-principle withdrawn from the lower places and leading the soul to the above.

The soul thus cleansed is all idea and reason, wholly free of body, intellectual, entirely of that divine order from which the well-spring of beauty rises and all the race of beauty.

Hence the soul heightened to the intellectual-principle is beautiful to all its power. For intellection and all that proceeds from intellection are the soul's beauty, a graciousness native to it and not foreign, for only with these is it truly soul. And it is just to say that in the soul's becoming a good and beautiful thing is its becoming like to God, for from the divine comes all the beauty and all the good in beings.

We may even say that beauty is the authentic existence and ugliness is the principle contrary to existence, and the ugly is also the primal evil, therefore its contrary is at once good and beautiful, or is good and beauty; and hence the one method will discover to us the beauty-good and the ugliness-evil.

And beauty, this beauty which is also the good, must be posed as the first. Directly deriving from this first is the intellectual-principle, which is pre-eminently the manifestation of beauty; through the intellectual principle, soul is beautiful. The beauty in things of lower order-actions and pursuits, for instance, comes by operation of the shaping soul which is also the author of the beauty found in the world of sense. For the soul, a divine thing, a fragment as it were of the primal beauty, makes beautiful to the fullness of their capacity all things whatsoever that it grasps and molds.

7. Therefore we must ascend again towards the good, the desire of every soul. Anyone who has seen this knows what I mean when I say it is beautiful. Even the desire of it is to be desired as a good. To attain it is for those who take the upward path, who set all their forces towards it, who divest themselves of all that we have put on in our descent. So, to those who approach the holy celebrations of the Mysteries, there are appointed purifications and the laying aside of the garments worn before, and the entry in nakedness — until, passing, on the upward way, all that is other than the God, each in the solitude of himself shall behold that solitary-dwelling existence, the apart, the unmingled, the pure, that from which all things depend, for which all look and live

and act and know, the source of life and of intellection and of being.

And one that shall know this vision — with what passion of love shall he not be seized, with what pang of desire, what longing to be molten into one with this, what wondering delight! If he who has never seen this being must hunger for it as for all his welfare, he who has known must love and reverence it as the very beauty; he will be flooded with awe and gladness, stricken by a salutary terror; he loves with a veritable love, with sharp desire; all loves other than this must he despise, disdaining all that once seemed fair.

This, indeed, is the mood even of those who, having witnessed the manifestation of Gods or Supernals, can never again feel the old delight in the comeliness of material forms. What then are we to think of one who contemplates absolute beauty in its essential integrity, no accumulation of flesh and matter, no dweller on earth or in the heavens — so perfect its purity — far above all such things in that they are non-essential, composite, not primal but descending from this?

Beholding this being — the *Choragos* of all existence, the self-intent that ever gives forth and never takes — resting, rapt, in the vision and possession of so lofty a loveliness, growing to its likeness, what beauty can the soul yet lack? For this, the beauty supreme, the absolute, and the primal, fashions its lovers to beauty and makes them also worthy of love.

And for this, the sternest and the uttermost combat is set before the souls; all our labor is for this, lest we be left without part in this noblest vision, which to attain is to be blessed in the blissful sight, which to fail of is to fail utterly.

For not he that has failed of the joy that is in color or in visible forms, not he that has failed of power or of honors or of kingdom has failed, but only he that has failed of only this, for whose winning he should renounce kingdoms and command over earth and ocean and sky, if only, spurning the world of sense from beneath his feet, and straining to this, he may see.

8. But what must we do? How lies the path? How come we to this vision of the inaccessible beauty, dwelling as if in consecrated precincts, apart from the common ways where all may see, even the profane?

He who has the strength, let him arise and withdraw into himself, foregoing all that is known by the eyes, turning away for ever from the material beauty that once made his joy. When he perceives those shapes of grace that show in body, let him not pursue; he must know them for copies,

vestiges, shadows, and hasten away towards that they tell of. For if anyone follow what is like a beautiful shape playing over water, is there not a myth telling in symbol of such a dupe, how he sank into the depths of the current and was swept away to nothingness? So too, one who is held by material beauty and will not break free shall be sunk, not in body but in soul, down to the dark depths loathed of the intellective-being, where, blind even in the lower world, he shall have commerce only with shadows, there as here.

“Let us flee then to the beloved Fatherland”: this is the soundest counsel. But what is this flight? How are we to gain the open sea? For Odysseus is surely a parable to us when he commands the flight from the sorceries of Circe or Calypso — not content to linger for all the pleasure offered to his eyes and all the delight of sense filling his days.

The Fatherland to us is there whence we have come, and there is the father.

What then is our course, what the manner of our flight? This is not a journey for the feet — the feet bring us only from land to land — nor need you think of coach or ship to carry you away; all this order of things you must set aside and refuse to see. You must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use.

9. And this inner vision, what is its operation? Newly awakened it is all too feeble to bear the ultimate splendor. Therefore the soul must be trained to the habit of remarking, first, all noble pursuits, then the works of beauty produced not by the labor of the arts but by the virtue of men known for their goodness; lastly, you must search the souls of those who have shaped these beautiful forms.

But how are you to see into a virtuous soul and know its loveliness?

Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: He cuts away here, he smoothes there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also: Cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast, labor to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiseling your statue, until there shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendor of virtue, until you shall see the perfect goodness surely established in the stainless shrine.

When you know that you have become this perfect work, when you are self-gathered in the purity of your being, nothing now remaining that can shatter that inner unity, nothing

from without clinging to the authentic man, when you find yourself wholly true to your essential nature, wholly that only true light that is not measured by space, not narrowed to any circumscribed form nor again diffused as a thing void of term, but ever immeasurable as something greater than all measure and more than all quantity — when you perceive that you have grown to this, you have now become vision: now call up all your confidence, strike forward yet a step, trust yourself, concentrate your gaze, and see.

This alone is the eye that sees the mighty beauty. If the eye that attempts this vision, however, be dimmed by vice, impure, or weak, and unable in its cowardly blanching to see the uttermost brightness, then it sees nothing even though another points to what lies plain to sight before it. To any vision must be brought an eye adapted to what is to be seen, and having some likeness to it. Never did eye see the sun unless it had first become sun-like, and never can the soul have vision of the first beauty unless itself be beautiful.

Therefore, first let each become godlike and each beautiful who cares to see God and beauty. So, mounting, the soul will come first to the intellectual-principle and survey all the beautiful ideas in the supreme, and will avow that this is beauty, that the ideas are beauty. For by their efficacy comes all beauty else, but the offspring and essence of the intellectual-being. What is beyond the intellectual-principle we affirm to be the nature of good radiating beauty before it. So that, treating the intellectual-*Kosmos* as one, the first is the beautiful. If we make a distinction there, the realm of ideas constitutes the beauty of the intellectual sphere, and the good, which lies beyond, is the fountain at once and the principle of beauty, the primal good and the primal beauty have the one dwelling-place and, thus, always, beauty's seat is there.