

# PLOTINUS

(204/5-270 C.E.)

Plotinus was born in Egypt (either a Hellenized Egyptian or a Greek), developed an interest in philosophy at the age of 28, and began studies in Alexandria, eventually apprenticing himself under the philosopher Ammonius Saccus for eleven years (who also taught the Christian theologian Origen [c.185-c.254]). Plotinus studied Plato supplemented 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 39, Plotinus left Alexandria to study philosophy in India and Persia. He traveled with a Roman army, but a mutiny involving the murder of the Roman emperor Gordianus III – who was leading the forces – caused Plotinus to flee. He made his way to Rome and the good graces of the new emperor, Gallienus, who had a strong interest in the sciences (but was a terrible ruler). Plotinus founded a school in Rome (c. 245), but then died twenty-five years later from leprosy.

Plotinus’s literary remains were composed 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. These “groups of nine” — *Enneads*, in Greek — are the writings we now possess.

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## Influences on Plotinus

- (1) Plato
- (2) Aristotle
- (3) Stoicism

## The One

- (1) *Being & Unity*. The degree of a thing’s being is directly proportional to the degree of its unity.
- (2) *Perfect Unity*. Perfect (absolute) unity is not attained by objects of sense-experience. Nor is it attained in Nous (because of the diversity of forms), nor in the soul (for similar reasons).
- (3) *Negative Theology*. We cannot say what God is; only what God is not.
- (4) Plotinus’ God (One) is neither Plato’s (Divine Craftsman) nor Aristotle’s (Unmoved Mover).

## Intellect (*nous*)

- (1) The Doctrine of Emanation leads to a Hierarchy of Being.
- (2) Intellect as Emanation of The One.
- (3) Intellect is Unity containing a Duality.
- (4) Intellect is Unity containing a Plurality.
- (5) Intuitive knowledge.

[Intellect’s] knowing is not by search [reasoning] but by possession [intuition], its blessedness inherent, not acquired; for all belongs to it eternally and it holds the authentic eternity imitated by time.... Its entire content is simultaneously present in that identity: this is pure being in eternal actuality; nowhere is there any future, for every then is a now... [*Enneads*, V.1.4]

- (6) Individual essences (Forms).
- (7) Intellect as Organism.

## Soul

- (1) Soul as Emanation of Intellect.
- (2) Discursive knowledge.

Sprung ... from Intellect, Soul is intellectual, but with an intellection operation by the method of reasoning .... Soul deals with thing after thing — now Socrates; now a horse: always some one entity from among beings — but Intellect is all and therefore its entire content is simultaneously present in that identity. [V.1.4]

- (3) *Time* = the movements of the thinking Soul.
- (4) Soul emanates the Sensible World.
- (5) Soul = many souls.

## Matter & Evil

- (1) *Matter* = utter disunity (lack of form or being).
- (2) *Evil* = the resistance of matter to its complete determination by souls.
- (3) Problem with Plotinus’ conception of matter.

## Ascent of the Soul

The individual soul’s desire to return to a pure contemplation of, and eventual mystical union with, the One.

## Schools of Neoplatonism

- Porphyry (232-305).
- Iamblichus (late 3rd-early 4th).
- Aedesius of Cappadocia (died c. 355 C.E.).
- Emperor Julian (reign: 361-363).
- Plutarch of Athens (c.350-433).
- Proclus (c.410-485).
- Pseudo-Dionysius (c.500).
- Boethius (480-524).
- The Alexandrian School of Neoplatonism.