

## Plotinus on Beauty

*This short paper is an attempt to help us explore Plotinus' understanding of the central place that beauty plays in his metaphysics, cosmology and psychology. He saw himself as deeply rooted in the Platonic tradition and although he is considered by modern commentators as the founder of "neoplatonism" it is clear that he would have been shocked to hear anyone suggest that he was anything other than a thoughtful expounder of the wisdom tradition of Plato those that were Plato's for-runners and successors.*

Plotinus, as all good Platonists, sees beauty as an absolutely intrinsic part of the divine reality: it is a reality that originates silent and unseen in an ineffable One, and then unfolds in ordered stages – a procession itself driven by the power of beauty contemplated. Moreover this procession is simultaneously mirrored by a return back to the One and, importantly, this too is entirely the result of contemplation.

Plotinus writes about this dynamic effect of beauty in numerous places in his *Enneads*, but two of his treatises especially concentrate on beauty – I, vi (known under Porphyry's title *The Beautiful*) and V, viii, (*On the Intelligible Beauty*). The first of these starts with an elementary examination of beauty as displayed in the mundane world:

We still, therefore, repeat the question, what is the beauty of bodies? It is something, which, at first view, presents itself to sense; and which the soul familiarly apprehends, and eagerly embraces, as if it were allied to itself: But when it meets with the deformed, it hastily starts from the view, and retires abhorrent from its discordant nature. For since the soul in its proper state, ranks according to the most excellent essence in the order of things, when it perceives any object related to itself, or the mere vestige of a relation, it congratulates itself on the pleasing event, and astonished with the striking resemblance, enters deep into its essence, and, by rousing its dormant powers, at length perfectly recollects its kindred and allies. (I, vi, 2)

Here Plotinus, drawing on both the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, is already laying down the basic Platonic position, that there is an unbreakable connection between beauty in its primary intellectual and eternal state and beauty in its manifested temporal image. Further, that this connection is a key to the embodied soul's recovery of her knowledge of her true nature.

But the soul, by her innate power, than which nothing more powerful, in judging its proper concerns, when the rest of the soul<sup>1</sup> judges along with it, acknowledges the beauty of forms. And, perhaps, its knowledge in this case arises from its accommodating its internal ray of beauty to form, and trusting to this in its

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor translates the section (*e alla synepikrine psych*) "when another soul concurs" but I have followed Armstrong here. Presumably what Plotinus is saying is that when the part of the soul which inspects material forms is joined by its inner or higher powers or "self" the outer aligns with the inner.

judgment; in the same manner as a rule is employed, in the decision of what is straight. (I, vi, 3)

The truth that lies in real being is found by the soul to be *within herself*, for the soul is an image of the being that is intellect. As Eric Perl points out in his introduction to Ennead V, i, Porphyry's title for this treatise, *On the Three Hypostases*, tends to over-separate intellect and soul as it suggests:

“that we are dealing with three different realities, additional to one another, as if the One were a first thing, which generates intellect as a second thing, which in turn generates soul as a third thing. But Plotinus is at pains in the treatise to show that this is not the case. Rather, the relation of soul to intellect, and of intellect to the One, is in each case that of “image” (eikon or eidolon) and “expression” (logos), and the generation in question is nothing but the derivation of an image from its original.”

The true closeness of the hypostases (and, indeed, with that which is the outermost moments of the motion of soul, nature and body) underlies the oft-stated view of ancient Platonists ‘All things are in all, but in a manner appropriate to the essence of each’” (Numenius, fr. 41 Des Places) and which is given a more refined expression in Porphyry's *Sentences* – “All things are in all, but in a mode proper to the essence of each: in the intellect, intellectually; in the soul, discursively; in plants, seminally, in bodies, imagistically; and in the Beyond, non-intellectually and supra-essentially (*Sent.* 10) Thus for something as wide-ranging as the soul, the ability to move upward and downward while retaining her self-identity is shown in her ability to encompass truth at differing levels of reality, but perhaps more dramatically is her experience of beauty. In the upward motion this provides the ‘*suddenly*’ (Ἐξαίφνης) moment of Diotima's initiation of Socrates in the *Symposium*; and in downward motion the secret of true art: “... the soul, which, as something divine, and a portion of the the beautiful itself, renders whatever it supervenes and subdues, beautiful, as far as its natural capacity will admit.” (Ennead I, vi, 6)

The end of Plotinus' treatise *On the Beautiful* is itself an example of such art:

If you become thus purified, residing in yourself, and having nothing any longer to impede this unity of mind, and no farther mixture to be found within, but perceiving your whole self to be a true light, and light alone; a light which, though immense, is not measured by any magnitude, nor limited by any circumscribing figure, but is every where immeasurable, as being greater than every measure, and more excellent than every quantity: if, perceiving yourself thus improved, and trusting solely to yourself, as no longer requiring a guide, fix now steadfastly your mental view, for with the intellectual eye alone, can such immense beauty be perceived. But, if your eye is yet infected with any sordid concern, and not thoroughly refined, while it is on the stretch to behold this most shining spectacle, it will be immediately darkened and incapable of intuition, though some one should declare the spectacle present, which it might be otherwise able to discern. For, it is here necessary, that the perceiver and the thing perceived, should be similar to each other, before true vision can exist. Thus the sensitive eye, can never be able to survey the orb of the sun, unless strongly endued with solar fire,

and participating largely of the vivid ray. Every one, therefore, must become divine, and of godlike beauty, before he can gaze upon a god, and the beautiful itself. Thus proceeding in the right way of beauty, he will first ascend into the region of intellect, contemplating every fair species, the beauty of which he will perceive to be no other than ideas themselves; for all things are beautiful by the supervening irradiations of these, because they are the offspring and essence of intellect. But that which is superior to these, is no other than the fountain of good, every where widely diffusing around the streams of beauty, and hence, in discourse, called the beautiful itself; because, beauty is its immediate offspring. But, if you accurately distinguish the intelligible objects, you will call the beautiful the receptacle of ideas; but the good itself, which is superior, the fountain and principle of the beautiful; or, you may place the first beautiful and the good in the same principle, independent of the beauty which there subsists.

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It is worth recalling how Plato in his *Timaeus* has the whole of the cosmos arising from the Demiurgic contemplation of the beautiful paradigm (“that which is the most beautiful and every way perfect of intelligible objects”) and Plotinus understands that contemplation, whatever the nature of the contemplator, is creative. In his treatise III, 8<sup>2</sup> he affirms that the secret of Nature is just this contemplation of beauty, where, he suggests, that should one question Nature about her producing power she would reply:

it is not fit you should interrogate me, but it becomes you to understand in silence, even as I am silent, and not accustomed to speak: but what is it you should understand? this, in the first place, that whatever is produced is my spectacle, produced while I am silent, a spectacle naturally produced; and that I, who spring from a certain contemplation of this kind, possess a nature desirous of beholding: hence that which retains in me the office of a speculative power, produces a spectacle or theorem, in the same manner as the geometrician, from speculating on his science, describes a variety of figures, yet the lines of bodies emanate from hence, not by my engraving them in matter, but drop, as it were, from the energy of my contemplation: indeed an affection is constantly preserved in me for my mother, and the sources of my being, for they derive their origin from contemplation, and my generation is also deduced from speculation, since while my parents, destitute of action and being reasons greater and more exalted than myself, speculate themselves, I am produced. (sect 4)

This universal power of contemplation of the beauty that is of being is later in the same treatise is described so:

Hence then it truly appears that all things derive their being from contemplation, and are contemplations, as well the things which truly exist as the things produced from them, *viz.* spectacles formed from the speculations of true beings, and every where presenting themselves either to the energies of sense, of knowledge, or of opinion. Actions too are directed to knowledge as their end, and desire affects knowledge. Generations likewise, originating from speculation into form, and

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<sup>2</sup> Porphyry's title is *On Nature, Contemplation and the One*.

there ending, cease to fabricate any other contemplative specimen, and every where particular imitations of efficient causes, produce spectacles and species. Generated substances likewise, imitations as it were of beings, declare that efficient causes behold as their end, neither productions nor actions, but the effect itself, for this only purpose, that it may be a spectacle to beholders. (sect. 7)

Just as Diotima urges Socrates to rise through the ladder of love upwards towards the final embrace of Beauty herself, so Plotinus traces the source of beauty through ever-rising steps:

The reason therefore of the beauty contained in nature is the exemplar of the beauty appearing in body: but the exemplar of natural beauty, is a more beautiful reason contained in soul, from which the beauty of nature flows. But this shines brighter in a worthy soul, already advanced in beauty, than in nature herself: since it adorns such a soul, and affords a light, derived from one much greater; and which is no other than the first beauty. Thus abiding in the soul, it leads it to consider, what that superior reason of beauty may be, which is no longer generated nor placed in another, but abides perpetually in itself. Hence it is not reason, but the author of that reason which is first: since indeed the first reason is a certain beauty subsisting in soul as in matter. But its author is intellect, which is always the same, and not sometimes intellect; because intelligence does not happen extrinsical to this true and original intellect. (V. viii, 3)

And, beyond intellect is the Good, or the absolute source of Beauty:

Here, however, dismissing every discipline, and arriving at the utmost extent of erudition, he becomes established in beauty, as far as to which it is possible to energise intellectually. But being lifted from this, as from a wave of intellect, and elevated, as it were, by its swell, he will suddenly perceive [*The Good*]. He will, however, be ignorant of the manner in which he sees it; but the vision filling the eyes with light, will prevent him from seeing anything else, since the light itself will be the object of his vision. For then one thing will not be in him that which is seen, and another the light of the visible object, nor will it be intellect, and that which intellect perceives; but it will be a splendour generating these things afterwards and abiding in itself. This, however, will be light alone, generating intellect without being extinguished in the production of it. But this light remains, and intellect is produced from the very existence of it. For if it was not a thing of this kind, intellect would not have a subsistence. (VI. Vii, 35)

Proclus further unfolds this mysterious end in his *Theology of Plato* (II, 11) for we should quietly contemplate, he says, the great kingdoms of the cosmos, and the even greater realms of intellect and being,

But, prior to these, let us celebrate him, as unfolding into light the whole intelligible and intellectual genus of gods, together with all the supermundane and mundane divinities - as the god of all gods, the unity of all unities, and beyond the first adyta, - as more ineffable than all silence, and more unknown than all essence, - as holy among the holies, and concealed in the intelligible gods."