

Plotinus

born AD 205, , Lyco, or Lycopolis, Egypt?
died 270,

Campania ancient philosopher, the centre of an influential circle of intellectuals and men of letters in 3rd-century Rome, who is regarded by modern scholars as the founder of the Neoplatonic school of philosophy.

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Origins and education.

The only important source for the life of **Plotinus** is the biography that his disciple and editor **Porphyry** wrote as a preface to his edition of the writings of his master, the **Enneads**. Other ancient sources add almost no reliable information to what **Porphyry** relates. This must be mentioned because, though Porphyry's "**Life of Plotinus**" is the best source available for the life of any ancient philosopher, it has some important deficiencies that must necessarily be reflected in any modern account of the life of **Plotinus** that does not use a great deal of creative imagination to fill in the gaps. The "**Life of Plotinus**" is the work of an honest, accurate, hero-worshipping, and serious-minded friend and admirer. Apart from a few fascinating scraps of information about the earlier parts of the life of **Plotinus**, **Porphyry** concentrates on the last six years, when he was with his master in Rome. Thus, a fairly complete picture is available only of the last six years of a man who died at the age of 65. It is the elderly **Plotinus**, as it is the elderly Socrates, who alone is known. **Plotinus'** own writings contain no autobiographical information, and they can give no unintentional glimpses of his mind or character when he was young; they were all written in the last 15 years of his life. Nothing is known about his intellectual and spiritual development.

Plotinus was born in AD 205. **Porphyry** states that he never spoke about his parents, his race, or his country. Eunapius, a late 4th-century writer, and later authors wrote that his birthplace was Lyco, or Lycopolis, in Egypt, either the modern Asyut in Upper Egypt or a small town in the Nile Delta. Though this may be true, there is no real evidence in the "**Life of Plotinus**" or in his own writings to suggest that **Plotinus** had any special knowledge of or affinity with Egypt; the fact that he later studied philosophy in the great cosmopolitan city of **Alexandria** is not necessarily evidence that he was an Egyptian.

His name is Latin in form, but, in the 3rd century AD, this gives no clue to his ethnic origins. All that can be said with reasonable certainty is that Greek was his normal language and that he had a Greek education. For all his originality, he remains Hellenic in his way of thinking and in his intellectual and religious loyalties.

In his 28th year—he seems to have been rather a late developer—**Plotinus** felt an impulse to study philosophy and thus went to **Alexandria**. He attended the lectures of the most eminent professors in **Alexandria** at the time, which reduced him to a state of complete depression. In the end, a friend who understood what he wanted took him to hear the self-taught philosopher **Ammonius "Saccas."** When he had heard **Ammonius** speak, **Plotinus** said, "**This is the man I was looking for,**" and stayed with him for 11 years.

Ammonius is the most mysterious figure in the history of ancient philosophy. He was, it seems, a lapsed Christian (yet even this is not quite certain), and the one or two extant remarks about his thought suggest a fairly commonplace sort of **traditional Platonism**. A man who could attract such devotion from **Plotinus** and who **may also have been the philosophical master of the great Christian theologian Origen, must have had something more to offer his pupils, but what it was is not known.** That **Plotinus** stayed with him for 11 years is in no way surprising.

[NOTE: ESOTERICALLY IN THE SECOND CENTURY A.D ROMAN EMPIRE **AMMONIUS "SACCAS"** WAS A MASTER OF THE SPIRITUALITY SYSTEM THE ATEN PATH OF THE NOW DESTROYED BUT OPERATING "UNDEGROUND" ANCIENT EGYPT/KEMIT MYSTERY SCHOOL OF ON (ANNU).]

One did not enter an ancient philosophical school to take courses and obtain a degree, but rather to join in what might well be a lifelong cooperative following of the way to truth, goodness, and the ultimate liberation of the spirit.

Expedition to the East

At the end of his time with **Ammonius [Saccas]**, **Plotinus** joined the expedition of the **Roman emperor Gordian III** against Persia (242–243), with the intention of trying to learn something at first hand about the philosophies of the Persians and Indians. The expedition came to a disastrous end in Mesopotamia, however, when **Gordian** was murdered by the soldiers and **Philip the Arabian** was proclaimed emperor. Plotinus escaped with difficulty and made his way back to Antioch. From there he went to **Rome**, where he settled at the age of 40.

That a Greek philosopher, especially at this period, should be interested in Oriental thought is not extraordinary. Plotinus' own thought shows some striking similarities to Indian religious philosophy, but he never actually made contact with Eastern sages because of the failure of the expedition. Though direct or indirect contact with Indians educated in their own religious-philosophical traditions may not have been impossible in 3rd-century **Alexandria**, **the resemblances of the philosophy of Plotinus to Indian thought were more likely a natural development of the Greek tradition that he inherited.**

That Plotinus was able to join the expedition of the **senatorial emperor Gordian**, that he went to **Rome (an unusual place for a philosopher to settle)**, and that **Porphyry** found him, 19 years later, at the centre of a circle of friends and disciples—many of whom were members of the **senatorial aristocracy**—has been interpreted (probably erroneously) as meaning that he or his family had strong personal connections with Roman senators.

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Life in Rome.

Whatever may have been the circumstances of **Plotinus** when he first came to **Rome**, by the time **Porphyry** made his acquaintance in AD 263 he was living in dignified and comfortable conditions, though maintaining a considerable degree of personal austerity. His reputation in society was excellent and earned by practical activity as well as by teaching. He acted as an **arbitrator in disputes**, without ever being known to make an enemy, and many of his aristocratic friends, when they were approaching death, appointed him guardian of their children. “His house,” Porphyry says, “was full of young lads and maidens,” and he most conscientiously fulfilled his obligations under Roman law as their guardian, taking care of their education and their property.

Like other great contemplatives, he had plenty of time for other people and could attend to their worries (sometimes quite trivial) without losing his inward concentration. He heard a boy's lessons, found who had stolen a lady friend's necklace, or noticed that **Porphyry** was in a state of depression and contemplating suicide and so sent him away for a change of scenery and companionship. “Present at once to himself and others” and “gentle and at the disposal of all who had any sort of acquaintance with him” are ways in which **Porphyry** described him. He was, it seems, a man who gave the impression of being in touch with the eternal without losing awareness of the earthly needs of his many friends.

His circle of friends was cosmopolitan, including men from the eastern half of the empire as well as Roman senators, their wives, and widows. Among those who venerated **Plotinus**, according to **Porphyry**, were the **emperor Gallienus** (reigned 253–268) and his wife Salonina, and this led **Plotinus** on one occasion to **attempt practical activity on a larger scale.** He asked the **emperor** to restore a ruined city in Campania and endow it with the surrounding land; the restored city was to be called **Platonopolis**, and its citizens were to live according to the laws and customs of **Plato's ideal states.** Plotinus promised that he would go and live there himself with his friends. That a philosopher who shows in his writings such a total lack of interest in the political side of **Plato's** thought and who preached withdrawal from public life should have made such a proposal is interesting. He may well have thought it his duty as a **Platonic philosopher** to attempt the foundation of a **Platonic city**, if opportunity offered—however personally disinclined he might have been to such activity.

The **emperor** refused his request, and in the political circumstances of the time there was no chance of its being granted. **Gallienus** and the Senate were not on good terms. He had excluded members of the senatorial order from all military commands, and they took their revenge by successfully blackening his memory after his death. However much he might have respected Plotinus personally, the **emperor** would inevitably have regarded **Platonopolis** as a most undesirable senatorial strongpoint and a centre of intrigue against his authority.

Plotinus' teachings and writings.

The main activity of Plotinus, to which he devoted most of his time and energy, was his **teaching** and, after his first 10 years in Rome, his **writing**. There was nothing academic or highly organized about his “**school**,” though his method of teaching was rather scholastic. He would have passages read from commentaries on Plato or Aristotle by earlier philosophers and then expound his own views. The meetings, however, were friendly and informal, and Plotinus encouraged unlimited discussion. Difficulties, once raised, had to be discussed until they were solved. **The school** was a loose circle of friends and admirers with **no corporate organization**.

It was for these friends that he wrote the treatises that **Porphyry** collected and arranged as the **Enneads**. Some, it seems from their complexity, were destined for an inner circle of his closest friends and **philosophical collaborators**, such as **Porphyry**, **Amelius Gentilianus** from **Tuscany (the senior member of the school)**, and **Eustochius**, who was **Plotinus'** physician and who may have produced another edition of his works, now lost.

Some stories in the “**Life**,” and some passages in **the Enneads**, give an idea of **Plotinus'** attitude to the religions and superstitions of his intensely religious and superstitious age, an attitude that seems to have been unusually detached. **Like all men of his time, he believed in magic and in the possibility of foretelling the future by the stars, though he attacked the more bizarre and immoral beliefs of the astrologers. His interest in the occult was philosophical rather than practical, and there is no definite evidence that he practiced magic.**

A person called **Olympius** is reported to have once tried to use **magic** against **Plotinus**, but he supposedly found that the malignant forces he had evoked were bouncing back from **Plotinus** to himself. **Plotinus** was once taken to the **Temple of Isis** for a conjuration of his guardian spirit; a god, **Porphyry** stated, appeared instead of an ordinary guardian angel but could not be questioned because of a mishandling of the conjuring process which broke the spell. What Plotinus himself thought of the proceedings is not known, but apparently he was not deeply interested. His attitude toward the traditional pagan cults was one of respectful indifference.

Amelius, his closest friend and coworker in philosophy, was a pious man, addicted to attendance at sacrifices. **Plotinus** refused to join him in his devotions but seems to have thought none the worse of him. Despite his rather aggressive piety, **Amelius** remained **Plotinus'** friend and collaborator.

Some members of his circle of friends were **Gnostics** (heretical Christian dualists who emphasized **esoteric salvatory knowledge**), and they provoked him not only to write a vigorous attack on their beliefs but to organize a polemic campaign against them through the activities of **Porphyry** and **Amelius**. **Plotinus'** reasons for detesting **Gnosticism** also would have applied, to some extent, to **orthodox Christianity**—though there is no evidence that he knew anything about it or that he had any contact with **the church in Rome**.

Gnosticism appeared to him to be a barbarous, melodramatic, irrational, immoral, un-Greek, and insanely arrogant superstition. **Plotinus' own religion, which he practiced and taught with calm intensity, was the quest for mystical union with the Good through the exercise of pure intelligence.**

Last years.

In his last years **Plotinus**, whose health had never been very good, suffered from a painful and repulsive sickness that **Porphyry** describes so imprecisely that one modern scholar has identified it as **tuberculosis** and another as a form of **leprosy**. This made his friends, as he noticed, avoid his company, and he retired to a country estate belonging to one of them in Campania and within a year died there (270). The circle of friends had already broken up.

Plotinus himself had sent **Porphyry** away to Sicily to recover from his depression. **Amelius** was in Syria. Only his physician **Eustochius** arrived in time to be with **Plotinus** at the end. His last words were either “**Try to bring back the god in you to the divine in the All**” or “**I am trying to bring back the divine in us to the divine in the All.**” In either case, they express very simply the faith that he shared with all religious philosophers of late antiquity.

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Platonism

Neoplatonism: its nature and history

Plotinus and his philosophy

As far as is known, the originator of this distinctive kind of **Platonism** was **Plotinus (AD 205–270)**. He had been the pupil at Alexandria of a self-taught philosopher called **Ammonius [Saccus]**, who also taught the **Christian Origen** and the latter's pagan namesake, and whose influence on his pupils seems to have been deep and lasting. But **Ammonius [Saccus]** wrote nothing; there are few reports of his views, and these are unreliable so that nothing is actually known about his thought. A number of distinguished scholars have made attempts to reconstruct it, but their speculations go far beyond the evidence.

Plotinus must thus be regarded as the first **Neoplatonist**, and his collected works, the **Enneads (Greek enneas, “set of nine”**—six sets of nine treatises each, arranged by his **disciple Porphyry**), are the **first and greatest collection of Neoplatonic writings**.

Plotinus, like most ancient philosophers from **Socrates** on, was a religious and moral teacher as well as a professional philosopher engaged in the critical interpretation of a **long and complicated school tradition**.

He was an acute critic and arguer, with an **exceptional degree of intellectual honesty** for his, or any, period; **philosophy** for him was **not only a matter of abstract speculation** but also a **way of life** in which, through an exacting intellectual and moral self-discipline and purification, **those who are capable of the ascent can return to the source from which they came**.

His written works explain how from **the eternal creative act**—at once spontaneous and necessary—of that transcendent source, **the One, or Good**, proceeds the world of living reality, constituted by repeated double movements of outgoing and return in contemplation; and this account, showing the way for the human self—which can experience and be active on every level of being—to return to **the One**, is at the same time an exhortation to follow that way.

Plotinus always insisted that **the One, or Good**, is beyond the reach of thought or language; what he said about **this supreme principle** was intended only to point the mind along the way to it, not to describe or define it. But though no adequate concept or definition of **the [One, or] Good** is possible, it was, nonetheless, for **Plotinus a positive reality of superabundant excellence**.

Plotinus often spoke of it in **extremely negative language**, but his object in doing so was to stress the inadequacy of all of man's ways of thinking and speaking to express this **supreme reality** or to clarify the implications of the claim that **the [One, or] Good** is **absolutely one and undetermined, the source of all defined and limited realities**.

The original creative or expressive act of **the One [or, Good]** is **the first great derived reality, nous (which can be only rather inadequately translated as “Intellect” or “Spirit”)**; from this again comes **Soul**, which forms, orders, and maintains in being **the material universe**.

It must be remembered that, to **Plotinus**, the **whole process of generation is timeless**; **Nous** and **Soul** are eternal, while **time** is the **life of Soul** as active in the physical world, and there **never was a time when the material universe did not exist**.

The “**levels of being**,” then, though distinct, are not separate but are **all intimately present everywhere and in everyone**. To **ascend from Soul through Intellect to the One [or, Good]** is **not to travel in space** but to awake to a **new kind of awareness**. Intellect for Plotinus is at one and the same time **thinker, thought, and object of thought**; it is a **mind that is perfectly one with its object**. As **object**, it is the **world of Forms, or Ideas**, the totality of real being in the Platonic sense. These **Forms**, being one with Intellect and therefore with each other, are not merely objects but **are living, thinking subjects, each not only itself but, in its contemplation, the whole**. They are **the archetypes** and causes of the necessarily imperfect realities on lower levels, souls and the patterns or structures that make **bodies** what they are.

Men at their highest are **intellects, or souls perfectly conformed to Intellect**; they become aware of their intellectual nature when, passing not only beyond sense perception but beyond the discursive reasoning characteristic of the **life of Soul**, they immediately grasp eternal realities.

Soul for Plotinus is very much what it was for **Plato**, **the intermediary between the worlds of Intellect and Sense and the representative of the former in the latter**. It is produced by **Intellect**, as Intellect is by **the One, [or, Good]** by a **double movement of outgoing and return in contemplation**, but the relationship between the two is more intimate and the frontier less clearly defined.

For Plotinus, as for **Plato**, the characteristic of the **life of the Soul** is **movement**, which is the **cause of all other movements**. The **life of the Soul** in this **movement** is **time**, and **on it all physical movement depends**. **Soul** both forms and rules the **material universe** from above; and in its **lower, immanent phase**, which Plotinus often calls **nature**, it acts as an indwelling principle of life and growth and produces the lowest forms, those of **bodies**.

Below these lies the **darkness of matter**, the final absence of being, the absolute limit at which the expansion of the universe—from **the One [or, Good]** through diminishing degrees of reality and increasing degrees of multiplicity—comes to an end. Because of its utter negativity, such matter is for Plotinus the **principle of evil**; and although **he does not really believe** it to be an independent principle forming, with **the [One, or] Good**, a dualism, his language about it often has a strongly **dualistic** flavour.

He was not, however, really **dualistic** in his attitude toward the **material universe**. He strongly maintained its goodness and beauty as the **best possible work of Soul**. It is a **living organic whole**, and its wholeness is the best possible (though very imperfect) reflection on **the space–time level** of the living unity in diversity of the **world of Forms in Intellect**. It is held together in every part by **a universal sympathy and harmony**. In this harmony **external evil and suffering** take their place as necessary elements in the great pattern, **the great dance of the universe**.

Evil and suffering can affect men's lower selves but can only exceptionally, in **the thoroughly depraved**, touch their true, higher selves and so cannot interfere with the real well-being of **the philosopher**.

As souls within bodies, men can exist on any level of the soul's experience and activity. (The descent of souls into bodies is for Plotinus—who had some difficulty in reconciling **Plato's** various statements on this point—both a fall and a necessary compliance with universal law.)

Man can ascend through his own **intellect** to the level of **universal Soul**, become that whole that he already is potentially, and, **in Soul**, attain to **Intellect** itself; **or** he can isolate himself on the lower level, shutting himself up in the experiences, desires, and concerns of his lower nature.

Philosophical conversion—the beginning of the ascent to **the One [or, the Good]**—consists precisely in turning away, by a tremendous intellectual and moral effort, from the **life of the body**, dominating and rising above its desires, and **“waking to another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use.”** This, Plotinus insisted, is **possible while one is still in an earthly body** and **without neglecting the duties of one's embodied state**.

But **the body** and **bodily life** weight a **man** down and hamper him in his ascent. **Plotinus'** language when speaking of the body and the senses in this context is **strongly dualistic and otherworldly**.

Platonists in general think much more dualistically about their own bodies than about the material universe as a whole. The **physical world** is seen positively as a noble image of the intelligible; **the individual**, earthly, animal body, **on the contrary**, tends to be regarded negatively as a hindrance to the intellectual and spiritual life. When a **man's philosophical conversion is** complete and he has become **Intellect**, he can rise to that **mystical union** in which the **One [or, the Good]** manifests his continual presence, carried on **the surging current of the impulse of return to the source (in its strongest and final flow)**, the pure love of **Intellect** for **the [One, the] Good** from which it immediately springs. There is no consciousness of duality in that **[mystical] union**; the individual is not aware of himself; but neither is he destroyed or dissolved into **the One [or, Good]**—because even in the **[mytical] union** he is still **Intellect**, though **Intellect** “out of itself,” transcending its normal nature and activity.

This **mystical union** for **Plotinus** was **the focus of much of his effort** and, for those of similar inclination, **the source of the continuing power of his teaching**.

Philosophy for him was religion, the effort to actualize in oneself **the great impulse of return to the [One, or the] Good**, which constitutes reality on all its levels; and **religion for him was philosophy**.

There was no room in his thought and practice for special revelation, grace, and repentance in the Christian sense, and little for external rites or ceremonies.

For him the combination of **moral purification** and **intellectual enlightenment**, which only **Platonic philosophy** as he understood it could give, **was the only way to union** with **the [One, or]Good**.

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