

## Plotinus – The ascent to Beauty

Plotinus, one of the great sages of the Platonic tradition, upheld the Platonic doctrine concerning the divinization of the human soul through the ascent to the Good (or the One). This ascent is underpinned by an ever-deepening contemplation of beauty, which usually starts with those beauties of the material world but ends in a direct contact with the immaterial Beauty which is the mysterious source of all beauties – be they outer or inner ones. Two of his treatises are particularly concerned with the exhortation to his auditors to take the path of beauty: the first is Ennead I, 6, "On Beauty"; the second is Ennead V, 8, "On the Intelligible Beauty."

Our aim is to look at some of the important elements of these treatises over two sessions – the first session will look at "On Beauty", the second at "The Intelligible Beauty." Two particular preliminaries are worth noting: Firstly, Plotinus has a view that the whole of reality can be seen as resting in three natures (or "hypostases") – One, Intellect and Soul: the One is that mysterious and ineffable source in which all things are rooted but in which there is no quality or differentiation through which the mind might grasp its nature; Intellect is the condition of eternal being – all that *is*, without any *becoming*, and hence truly knowable; Soul covers the moving world, beginning from self-motion and a contact with Intellect, it works out its activities not only on itself, but also through nature and the material world. Secondly, in his writings Plotinus tends to call the eternal realm of Intellect "There" – in contradistinction to the temporal world of manifestation which he often calls "Here".

### Session 1 – On Beauty (I, 6), selected readings

"Beauty is mostly in sight, but it is to be found too in things we hear, in combinations of words and also in music, and in all music; for tunes and rhythms are certainly beautiful: and for those who are advancing upwards from sense-perception ways of life and actions and characters and intellectual activities are beautiful, and there is the beauty of virtue. If there is any beauty prior to these, this discussion will reveal it.

Very well then, what is it which makes us imagine that bodies are beautiful and attracts our hearing to sounds because of their beauty? And how are all the things which depend on soul beautiful? Are they all made beautiful by one and the same beauty or is there one beautifulness in bodies and a different one in other things? And what are they, or what is it? Some things, bodies for instance, are not beautiful from the nature of the objects themselves, but by participation, others are beauties themselves, like the nature of virtue. The same bodies appear sometimes beautiful, sometimes not beautiful, so that their being bodies is one thing, their being beautiful another. What is this principle, then, which is present in bodies? We ought to consider this first. What is it that attracts the gaze of those who look at something, and turns and draws them to it and makes them enjoy the sight? If we find this perhaps we can use it as a stepping-stone and get a sight of the rest."

(section 1)

Could it be, asks Plotinus that the view that beauty is simply the proper proportions of parts, and the harmony between things. But does that mean that simple things – things without parts – cannot be beautiful? And does it mean that everything that harmonizes is beautiful: the statements that "morality is stupidity" and "justice is a fine kind of silliness" harmonize – but does that make them beautiful. We need to look for a better answer, and consider our own reactions to beauty and its absence:

So let us go back to the beginning and state what the primary beauty in bodies really is. It is something which we become aware of even at the first glance; the soul speaks of it as if it understood it, recognises and welcomes it and as it were adapts itself to it. But when it encounters the ugly it shrinks back and rejects it and turns away from it and is out of tune and alienated from it. Our explanation of this is that the soul, since it is by nature what it is and is related to the higher kind of reality in the realm of being, when it sees something akin to it or a trace of its kindred reality, is delighted and thrilled and returns to itself and remembers itself and its own possessions. What likeness, then, is there between beautiful things here [in the material world] and There [in the eternal world]? If there is a likeness, let us agree that they are alike. But how are both the things in that world and the things in this beautiful? We maintain that the things in this world are beautiful by participating in form; for every shapeless thing which is naturally capable of receiving shape and form is ugly and outside the divine formative power as long as it has no share in formative power and form. This is absolute ugliness. But a thing is also ugly when it is not completely dominated by shape and formative power, since its matter has not submitted to be completely shaped according to the form. The form, then, approaches and composes that which is to come into being from many parts into a single ordered whole; it brings it into a completed unity and makes it one by agreement of its parts; for since it is one itself, that which is shaped by it must also be one as far as a thing can be which is composed of many parts. So beauty rests upon the material thing when it has been brought into unity, and gives itself to parts and wholes alike.

(section 2)

Having seen the connection between the world of eternal ideas (or forms) and the beautiful objects in the material world, Plotinus begins to explore the path we take towards the source of Beauty:

But about the beauties beyond, which it is no more the part of sense to see, but the soul sees them and speaks of them without instruments – we must go up to them and contemplate them and leave sense to stay down below. Just as in the case of the beauties of sense it is impossible for those who have not seen them or grasped their beauty – those born blind, for instance, – to speak about them, in the same way only those can speak about the beauty of ways of life who have accepted the beauty of ways of life and kinds of knowledge and everything else of the sort; and people cannot speak about the splendour of virtue who have never even imagined how fair is the face of justice and temperance; "neither the evening nor the morning star are as fair." But there must be those who see this beauty by that with which the soul

sees things of this sort, and when they see it they must be delighted and overwhelmed and excited much more than by those beauties we spoke of before, since now it is true beauty they are grasping. These experiences must occur whenever there is contact with any sort of beautiful thing, wonder and a shock of delight and longing and passion and a happy excitement. One can have these experiences by contact with invisible beauties, and souls do have them, practically all, but particularly those who are more passionately in love with the invisible, just as with bodies all see them, but all are not stung as sharply, but some, who are called lovers, are most of all.

(section 4)

When we consider what makes a soul beautiful and what makes it ugly, we perhaps understand that the soul is obscured by meanness, injustice, fears, the jealousies of pettiness and the like – all things which in some way are "outside" itself. The self of the soul – its true essence – is intellect, using the word in its Platonic sense, which translates into modern language as "spirit":

So the soul when it is purified becomes form and formative power, altogether bodiless and intellectual and entirely belonging to the divine, whence beauty springs and all that is akin to it. Soul, then, when it is raised to the level of intellect increases in beauty. Intellect and the things of intellect are its beauty, its own beauty and not another's, since only then [when it is perfectly conformed to intellect] is it truly soul. For this reason it is right to say that the soul's becoming something good and beautiful is its being made like to God, because from Him come beauty and all else which falls to the lot of real beings. Or rather, beautifulness is reality . . . so for God the qualities of goodness and beauty are the same, or the realities, the good and beauty. So we must follow the same line of enquiry to discover beauty and goodness, and ugliness and evil. And first we must posit beauty which is also the good; from this immediately comes intellect, which is beauty; and soul is given beauty by intellect. Everything else is beautiful by the shaping of soul, the beauties in actions and in ways of life. And soul makes beautiful the bodies which are spoken of as beautiful; for since it is a divine thing and a kind of part of beauty, it makes everything it grasps and masters beautiful, as far as they are capable of participation.

(Section 6)

The identification of the Beautiful with the Good, brings Plotinus to turn his attention to the power each soul has to unite with the Good – a power which is not brought into activity by adding to the self, but rather by an opposite process:

So we must ascend again to the good, which every soul desires. Anyone who has seen it knows what I mean when I say that it is beautiful. It is desired as good, and the desire for it is directed to good, and the attainment of it is for those who go up to the higher world and are converted and strip off what we put on in our descent; (just as for those who go up to the celebrations of sacred rites there are purifications, and strippings off of the clothes they wore before, and going up naked) until, passing in the ascent all that is alien to the God, one sees with one's

self alone That alone, simple, single and pure, from which all depends and to which all look and are and live and think: for it is cause of life and mind and being. If anyone sees it, what passion will he feel, what longing in his desire to be united with it, what a shock of delight!

(Section 7)

Towards the end of the treatise, Plotinus takes us through the moments of ascent:

But how shall we find the way? What method can we devise? How can one see the "inconceivable beauty" which stays within in the holy sanctuary and does not come out where the profane may see it? Let him who can, follow and come within, and leave outside the sight of his eyes and not turn back to the bodily splendours which he saw before. When he sees the beauty in bodies he must not run after them; we must know that they are images, traces, shadows, and hurry away to that which they image. For if a man runs to the image and wants to seize it as if it was the reality (like a beautiful reflection playing on the water, which some story somewhere, I think, said riddlingly a man wanted to catch and sank down into the stream and disappeared) then this man who clings to beautiful bodies and will not let them go, will, like the man in the story, but in soul, not in body, sink down into the dark depths where intellect has no delight, and stay blind in Hades, consorting with shadows there and here. . . the soul must be trained, first of all to look at beautiful ways of life: then at beautiful works, not those which the arts produce, but the works of men who have a name for goodness: then look at the souls of the people who produce the beautiful works. How then can you see the sort of beauty a good soul has? Go back into yourself and look; and if you do not yet see yourself beautiful, then, just as someone making a statue which has to be beautiful cuts away here and polishes there and makes one part smooth and clears another till he has given his statue a beautiful face, so you too must cut away excess and straighten the crooked and clear the dark and make it bright, and never stop "working on your statue" till the divine glory of virtue shines out on you, till you see "self-mastery enthroned upon its holy seat." If you have become this, and see it, and are at home with yourself in purity, with nothing hindering you from becoming in this way one, with no inward mixture of anything else, but wholly yourself, nothing but true light, not measured by dimensions, or bounded by shape into littleness, or expanded to size by unboundedness, but everywhere unmeasured, because greater than all measure and superior to all quantity; when you see that you have become this, then you have become sight; you can trust yourself then; you have already ascended and need no one to show you; concentrate your gaze and see. This alone is the eye that sees the great beauty. . . For one must come to the sight with a seeing power made akin and like to what is seen. No eye ever saw the sun without becoming sun-like, nor can a soul see beauty without becoming beautiful. You must become first all godlike and all beautiful if you intend to see God and beauty.

(Sections 8 & 9)

## Session 2 – On the Intelligible Beauty (V, 8), selected readings

In this treatise Plotinus picks up from his earlier one, and affirms that the intelligible world of pure being is the intellectual manifestation of that which lies beyond all manifestation. The Platonic understanding of Intellect is that it is beyond the processes of time, a power of eternal contemplation of pure reality: in other words it far transcends what we commonly understand by 'intellect' – a mere faculty of the human self. Intellect is the penultimate height of all existence, and only the Unspoken and Unspeakable lies beyond. He begins:

Since we maintain that the man who has entered into contemplation of the intelligible world and understood the beauty of the true Intellect will be able also to bring into his mind its Father which is beyond Intellect, let us try to see and to say to ourselves, as far as it is possible to say such things, how it is possible for anyone to contemplate the beauty of Intellect and of that higher world.

(Section 1)

After this opening the treatise considers beauty in art: a statue is not beautiful because of its stone substance, but because a sculptor has introduced form to it – in fact there is a stronger form within the artist which is primary, and the form in the stone is a secondary form, and a secondary beauty. Beauty in the things of Nature also have this relation (since, in treatise III, 8, Plotinus shows that Nature is a producer of its creatures by a similar contemplative activity to that of an artist). Pondering a whole range of beautiful things he continues:

Well, then, are the things made and the forming principle in matter beautiful, but the forming principle which is not in matter but in the maker, the first immaterial one, is that not beauty? But if it was the mass which was beautiful in so far as it was mass, it would necessarily follow that the forming principle which was the maker, since it was not mass, was not beautiful; but if the same form, whether it is in something small or something large, moves and influences the soul of one who sees it in the same way by its own power, beauty is not to be attributed to the size of the mass. . . . But certainly Nature which produces such beautiful works is far before them in beauty, but we, because we are not accustomed to see any of the things within and do not know them, pursue the external and do not know that it is that within which moves us: as if someone looking at his image and not knowing where it came from should pursue it. But the beauty also in studies and ways of life and generally in souls makes clear that what is pursued is something else and that beauty does not lie in magnitude: it is truly a greater beauty than that when you see moral sense in someone and delight in it, not looking at his face –which might be ugly – but putting aside all shape and pursuing his inner beauty.

(Section 2)

Plotinus traces the source of all these beauties to the Intellectual realm – that is to say the eternal realm where everything is "just as is it" and not mixed in with things which are "other". Such a realm is divine, and, he says, "all the gods are majestic and beautiful and their beauty is overwhelming: but what is it which makes them like this? It is Intellect,

and it is because Intellect is more intensely active in them, so as to be visible." In the middle of the treatise the writing is marked by Plotinus' own experiences in the Intellectual realm in which the highest Gods have their home:

For it is "the easy life" there, and truth is their mother and nurse and being and food – and they see all things, not those to which coming to be, but those to which real being belongs, and they see themselves in other things; for all things there are transparent, and there is nothing dark or opaque; everything and all things are clear to the inmost part to everything; for light is transparent to light. Each there has everything in itself and sees all things in every other, so that all are everywhere and each and every one is all and the glory is unbounded; for each of them is great, because even the small is great; the sun there is all the stars, and each star is the sun and all the others. A different kind of being stands out in each, but in each all are manifest. Movement, too, is pure: for the mover does not trouble it in its going by being different from it. Rest is not disturbed, for it is not mixed with that which is not at rest. Beauty is just beauty, because it is not in what is not beautiful. Each walks not as if on alien ground, but each one's place is its very self and when it ascends (so to speak) the place it came from runs along with it, and it is not itself one thing and its place another. The thing itself is Intellect and its ground is Intellect; it is as if one were to suppose that in the case of this visible heaven of ours which is luminous that the light which comes from it was born to be the stars. Here, however, one part would not come from another, and each would be only a part; but there each comes only from the whole and is part and whole at once: it has the appearance of a part, but a penetrating look sees the whole in it, supposing that someone had the sort of sight which it is said that Lynceus had, who saw into the inside of the earth, a story which speaks in riddles of the eyes which they have there. They do not grow weary of contemplation there, or so filled with it as to cease contemplating: for there is no emptiness which would result in their being satisfied when they had filled it and reached their end; and things are not different from each other so as to make what belongs to one displeasing to another with different characteristics; and nothing there wears out or wearies. . . This life is wisdom, wisdom not acquired by reasonings, because it was always all present, without any failing which would make it need to be searched for; but it is the first, not derived from any other wisdom; the very being of Intellect is wisdom: it does not exist first and then become wise. For this reason there is no greater wisdom: absolute knowledge has its throne beside Intellect in their common revelation . . .

(Section 4)

What this means is that the kind of contemplative experience of the inhabitants of the Intellectual world (whether these are the Gods, Intellects, or souls which have ascended through purifications) are not discursive, but immediate and whole:

One must not then suppose that the gods or the "exceedingly blessed spectators" in the higher world contemplate propositions, but all the Forms we speak about are beautiful images in that world, of the kind which someone imagined to exist in the soul of the wise man, images not painted but real. This is why the ancients said that the Ideas were realities and substances. The wise men of Egypt, I think, also

understood this, either by scientific or innate knowledge, and when they wished to signify something wisely, did not use the forms of letters which follow the order of words and propositions and imitate sounds and the enunciations of philosophical statements, but by drawing images and inscribing in their temples one particular image of each particular thing, they manifested the non-discursiveness of the intelligible world, that is, that every image is a kind of knowledge and wisdom and is a subject of statements, all together in one, and not discourse or deliberation.

(Sections 5 and 6)

This characteristic of undivided "all-at-once-ness" is fundamental to the world of Intellect where *being* and *knowing* are at one with each other. It is also key to understanding how the rest of reality follows from eternal intellect and the ideas which are there:

. . . you can explain the reason why the earth is in the middle, and round, and why the ecliptic slants as it does; but it is not because you can do this that things are so there; they were not planned like this because it was necessary for them to be like this, but because things There are disposed as they are, the things here are beautifully disposed: as if the conclusion was there before the syllogism which showed the cause, and did not follow from the premises; [the world-order] is not the result of following out a train of logical consequences and purposive thought: it is before consequential and purposive thinking; for all this comes later, reasoning and demonstration and the confidence [produced by them]. For since [the intelligible world-order] is a principle, all these follow immediately and just as they do; and in this sense it is well said that we should not enquire into the reason why of a principle, and of a principle like this, the perfect one, which is the same as the goal; but that which is principle and goal is the whole all together and is without deficiency.

(Section 7)

The second half of the treatise offers the auditor various approaches to the Beautiful – perhaps more appropriate for someone who is well established in the ways of his philosophy, so we'll leave this aside for this session. (Although we do have some copies of the entire treatise available if you wish to explore the whole essay, including the exercises). But Plotinus concludes by encouraging us to see ourselves, at our best, as possessing a similarity to eternal intellect – that is to say, as having a goal of uniting our being and our knowing. He says,

For when we ourselves are beautiful, it is by belonging to ourselves, but we are ugly when we change to another nature: when we know ourselves we are beautiful, but ugly when we are ignorant of ourselves.

(Section 13)