

Special Extra Material to Transform Consciousness

Preliminary practices

In our discussion with Dr Stróżyński we concentrated on two main groups of practices, a meditative practice of strongly disassociating the identity of the self from the body and its affects, and powerful imaginative practices. But we have considerable evidence for a set of preliminary practices recommended by Plotinus (and, *ceteris paribus*, by many late antique religious movements), which prepare the way for these more advanced practices.

At VI.7[38]36.7 ff. we find an outline of a course of practices which begins below the level of *nous* and prepares the seeker for attaining to the noetic. This is for when we are still *thinking about* the noetic; in the later practices the seeker has *become* the contemplation:

Thus, comparisons, negations, and knowledge teach us about the things which come from this [sc. nous], but purifications are what make the journey toward it, as do certain ‘steps upon the way’, and excellences, beautiful orderings [of the self], and ‘approaches’ to the noetic, becoming established *there*, and feasting upon the things *there*.

But whoever indeed should become both visionary and vision simultaneously, himself of himself and of other things, having become being and *Nous* and the ‘Universal Animal’, no longer looks at it from the outside.

The ‘comparisons, negations, and knowledge’ fairly clearly refer to the basic training in logical thought and discourse essential for philosophic practice: in short, to dialectics (compare I.3[20], *On Dialectic*).

What are the ‘purifications’? Porphyry tells us of a regime of moderate asceticism followed by Plotinus (cf. I.4[14].21-2); it may be that these practices (taking little sleep, vegetarian diet, and eating little, *Plot.* 2,8, 9) are what are meant by the ‘purifications’. This may also refer to the cultivation of the virtues (cf. I.2[19], *On Virtues*), which are often described as preliminary purifications leading to the initiation of *noësis* in the Platonist tradition’s appropriation of the model of the Eleusinian mysteries.

What are the ‘steps upon the way’? Well, this is a citation of Pl. *Symp.* 211c3: we are talking about the movement from the love of particulars, up through progressively refined levels of *erôs*, to love of the Beautiful-in-Itself.

The establishment in the noetic is the real deal. At this stage we are probably in ‘you need to ask the *nous* himself what it means’ (see V.3[49]5.25-6) territory.

Another illuminating passage is V.3[49]9 (MacKenna's translation):

In order, then, to know what the Divine Mind is, we must observe soul and especially its most God-like phase.

One certain way to this knowledge is to separate first, the man from the body- yourself, that is, from your body- next to put aside that soul which moulded the body, and, very earnestly, the system of sense with desires and impulses and every such futility, all setting definitely towards the mortal: what is left is the phase of the soul which we have declared to be an image of the Divine Intellect, retaining some light from that sun, while it pours downward upon the sphere of magnitudes [that is, of Matter] the light playing about itself which is generated from its own nature.

Of course we do not pretend that the sun's light [as the analogy might imply] remains a self-gathered and sun-centred thing: it is at once out-rushing and indwelling; it strikes outward continuously, lap after lap, until it reaches us upon our earth: we must take it that all the light, including that which plays about the sun's orb, has travelled; otherwise we would have a void expanse, that of the space- which is material- next to the sun's orb. The Soul, on the contrary- a light springing from the Divine Mind and shining about it- is in closest touch with that source; it is not in transit but remains centred there, and, in likeness to that principle, it has no place: the light of the sun is actually in the air, but the soul is clean of all such contact so that its immunity is patent to itself and to any other of the same order.

And by its own characteristic act, though not without reasoning process, it knows the nature of the Intellectual-Principle which, on its side, knows itself without need of reasoning, for it is ever self-present whereas we become so by directing our soul towards it; our life is broken and there are many lives, but that principle needs no changings of life or of things; the lives it brings to being are for others not for itself: it cannot need the inferior; nor does it for itself produce the less when it possesses or is the all, nor the images when it possesses or is the prototype.

Anyone not of the strength to lay hold of the first soul, that possessing pure intellection, must grasp that which has to do with our ordinary thinking and thence ascend: if even this prove too hard, let him turn to account the sensitive phase which carries the ideal forms of the less fine degree, that phase which, too, with its powers, is immaterial and lies just within the realm of Ideal-principles.

One may even, if it seem necessary, begin as low as the reproductive soul and its very production and thence make the ascent, mounting from those ultimate ideal principles to the ultimates in the higher sense, that is to the primals.

Separation from the body

I.6[1]8.5 and 25-27. These passages responds to the question posed by Plotinus, 'How shall we find the way, what method shall we devise?' He tells us (Armstrong's translation):

Let him who can, follow and come within, and leave outside the sight of his eyes ...

Let all these things go, and do not look. Shut your eyes, and change to and wake to another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use.

VI.9[9]7.17-23, MacKenna's translation:

In sum, *we must withdraw from all the extern [sic], pointed wholly inwards; no leaning to the outer; the total of things ignored, first in their relation to us and later in the very idea; the self put out of mind in the contemplation of the Supreme; all the commerce so closely There that, if report were possible, one might become to others the reporter of the communion.*

V.1[10]12.4-21, MacKenna's translation:

I am not speaking of the material order – all that is separable – but of what lies beyond the sense realm in the same way as the Primals are beyond all the heavens; I mean the corresponding aspect of man, what Plato [R. IX 589a7-b1] calls the Interior Man.

Thus our soul, too, is a divine thing, belonging to another order than sense; such is all that holds the rank of soul, but (above the life principle) there is the Soul perfected as containing Intellectual-Principle with its double phase, reasoning and giving the power to reason. The reasoning phase of the soul, needing no bodily organ for its thinking but maintaining, in purity, its distinctive Act that its thought may be uncontaminated – this we cannot err in placing, separate and not mingled into body, within the first Intellectual. *We may not seek any point of space in which to seat it; it must be set outside of all space; its distinct quality, its separateness, its immateriality, demand that it be a thing alone, untouched by all of the bodily order.*

Imaginal experiments

Here are some examples of Plotinian 'imagination-experiments' to try, once you have silenced the clamour of the body.

One of the things I find fascinating in these pieces is the way in which Plotinus flips the script at the end of the exercise; I have thrown in some italics to emphasise how he does this.

Let us know how you get on!

An exercise for conceiving of how incorporeals can exist in the corporeal world:
VI.4[22]7.22 ff (Armstrong's translation):

And suppose you made a small luminous bulk (ὄγκος) a kind of centre, and put a larger transparent spherical body round it, so that the light of what was inside shone in the whole of what was round it, and no ray of light from anywhere else came to the outside bulk, shall we not affirm that what is inside has not itself been affected but has reached the whole of the outer bulk while remaining as it is, and that the light seen in the small bulk has taken possession of that outside? Now, since the light does not come from the small bodily bulk – for it is not in that it is body that it has the light, but in that it is luminous body, by another power which is not bodily – suppose that someone took away the bulk of the body but kept the power of the light, would you still say that the light was somewhere, or would it be equally present over the whole outer sphere? *You will no longer rest in your thought in the place where it was before, and you will not any more say where it comes from or where it is going, but you will be puzzled and put in amazement when, fixing your gaze now here and now there in the spherical body, you yourself see the light.*

A (related?) exercise, in which we see how soul lights up the world: VI.I[10]2.11 ff.
(MacKenna's translation):

How life was purveyed to the universe of things and to the separate beings in it may be thus conceived:

That great soul must stand pictured before another soul, one not mean, a soul that has become worthy to look, emancipate from the lure, from all that binds its fellows in bewitchment, holding itself in quietude. Let not merely the enveloping body be at peace, body's turmoil stilled, but all that lies around, earth at peace, and sea at peace, and air and the very heavens. Into that heaven, all at rest, let the great soul be conceived to roll inward at every point, penetrating, permeating, from all sides pouring in its light. As the rays of the sun throwing their brilliance upon a lowering cloud make it gleam all gold, so the soul entering the material expanse of the heavens has given life, has given immortality: what was abject it has lifted up; and the heavenly system, moved now in endless motion by the soul that leads it in wisdom, has become a living and a blessed thing; the soul domiciled within, it takes worth where, before the soul, it was stark body – clay and water – or, rather, the blankness of Matter, the absence of Being, and, as an author says, 'the execration of the Gods'.

Conceiving of infinity: VI.6[34]3.27 ff. (MacKenna's translation):

How, then, are we to form any conception of its being?

We must fasten on the bare notion and take what that gives us – opposites that still are not opposed: we think of large and small and the

unlimited becomes either, of stationary and moving, and it will be either of these. But primarily it can be neither in any defined degree, or at once it is under limit. Limitless in this unlimited and undefined way, it is able to appear as either of a pair of opposites: draw near, taking care to throw no net of limit over it, and you have something that slips away; you come upon no unity for so it would be defined; approach the thing as a unit, and you find it manifold; call it a manifold, and again you falsify, for when the single thing is not a unity neither is the total a manifold. In one manifestation it takes the appearance of movement, in another of rest, as the mind envisages it.

The sphere: V.8[31]9 (MacKenna's translation):

Let us, then, make a mental picture of our universe: each member shall remain what it is, distinctly apart; yet all is to form, as far as possible, a complete unity so that whatever comes into view shall show as if it were the surface of the orb over all, bringing immediately with it the vision, on the one plane, of the sun and of all the stars with earth and sea and all living things as if exhibited upon a transparent globe.

Bring this vision actually before your sight, so that there shall be in your mind the gleaming representation of a sphere, a picture holding holding all the things of the universe moving or in repose or (as in reality) some at rest, some in motion. Keep this sphere before you, and from it imagine another, a sphere stripped of magnitude and of spatial differences; cast out your inborn sense of Matter, taking care not merely to attenuate it: *call on God, maker of the sphere whose image you now hold, and pray Him to enter. And may He come bringing His own Universe with all the Gods that dwell in it – He who is the one God and all the gods, where each is all, blending into a unity, distinct in powers but all one god in virtue of that one divine power of many facets.*

Another sphere, for conceiving the unity underlying multiplicity VI.5[23]9.1-5 (MacKenna's translation):

The elements in their totality, as they stand produced, may be thought of as one spheric figure; this cannot be the piecemeal product of many makers each working from some one point on some one portion. There must be one cause; and this must operate as an entire, not by part executing part; otherwise we are brought back to a plurality of makers. The making must be referred to a partless unity, or, more precisely, the making principle must be a partless unity not permeating the sphere but holding it as one dependent thing. In this way the sphere is enveloped by one identical life in which it is inset; its entire content looks to the one life: thus all the souls are one, a one, however, which yet is infinite.

Another kind of sphere, made up of the totality of all noetic souls VI.7[38]15.25
ad fin:

This is why, if somebody likens him [sc. the *nous*] to a variegated, living sphere, and makes him a thing all of faces, shining with living faces, or imagines every pure soul converging on this same place, lacking nothing, but having everything belonging to them, and the universal *nous* seated upon their summits, so that the region is illuminated by a noeric light ... One imagining him in this way is like someone else looking at something from outside. *We must become that ourselves, and make ourselves into the contemplation.*