LIFE AND HAPPINESS IN THE “PLATONIC UNDERWORLD”

Michael A. Williams

Enormous progress has been made in recent decades in understanding relationships between evolving strands of Platonic thought in late antiquity and intellectual currents manifest within Nag Hammadi documents often classified as “Sethian.” Our honoree is of course among the scholars most deserving of both credit and thanks for his seminal leadership and path-breaking research on these issues. John Turner’s publications are among those that have been questioning past assumptions about Plotinus’ relationship to the persons whom he criticizes most pointedly in *Enn*. 2.9,¹ and the history of his intellectual engagement with them. Turner and others have challenged the tendency to imagine a wide gulf separating the philosophical agenda and strategies of Plotinus from those of these assumed interlocutors.

In the fresh exploration and corrective hypothesizing in this stimulating research, most of the focus has understandably been on technical arenas of philosophical conceptions, formulations, and argumentation. I wish to focus here on another dimension that invites significant correction, but to which far less attention has been paid to date. What can be said of the implications of this famous historical confrontation between Plotinus and his opponents for how the disputants actually conducted themselves in daily life? Not that the topic of behavior has been completely ignored by researchers. Indeed, Plotinus’ argument with these acquaintances has been one of the most commonly cited pieces of alleged evidence that competing worldviews led here to radically different patterns of ethical behavior. Often scholars have merely accepted Plotinus’ accusations of an absence of ethical concern or interest in virtue on the part of his opponents. There are serious problems with that viewpoint, as I will underscore. But here I am also interested in aspects beyond merely ethical norms: How was daily life in the material world likely experienced and negotiated by these people

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¹ It is generally acknowledged that what Porphyry rearranged as *Enn*. 3.8; 5.8; 5.5; and 2.9 originally constituted (in that order) a single large writing; see, e.g., Harder 1936; Roloff 1970. However, for present purposes the polemic most explicitly directed at opponents in *Enn*. 2.9 is most relevant.
whose views Plotinus attacks? For all the differences we might imagine during lecture hall debates over philosophical views, what about at home or in the agora? What about implications for social interactions, political involvements, economic behavior, the propensity to simple enjoyment of life, and so forth? To the extent that such questions have been raised at all, proposed answers have all too frequently consisted of skeletal Weberian-like typologies or a modern retooling and recycling of ancient polemical caricature. I suggest that much more can be said, including fundamental corrections to some conventional assumptions about life in (to borrow John Dillon's well-known phrase) the “Platonic underworld.”

In contrast with the insufficient consideration of such issues in the case of Plotinus' opponents, with respect to this philosopher himself there has been some interesting new thinking on this topic. There have been recent studies aimed at addressing (to quote Dillon again) “whether, in face of the firmly, not to say grimly, otherworldly emphasis of Plotinus' overall ethical stance, any place can be found in his thought for care for others, or concern for things of this world.”2 Examples of such analyses will be mentioned below. However, the argument that I shall make is that implications in these studies might be taken further, for the tendency has been to leave Plotinus' rhetoric against his opponents more or less in place. That rhetoric had tended to be left as an unexamined foil, to be contrasted with a revised profile of Plotinus himself in which he is now seen to be more socially and/or politically involved, more engaged with “things of this world,” than many scholars had always assumed. Though critics have questioned some aspects of this revised profile of Plotinus, it seems to me that at least certain fundamental elements in it are convincing, and have relevance to the present discussion. However, my argument is that the handy and still largely unquestioned contrast with Plotinus' opponents in this regard is misguided.

1. Plotinus the Social Mystic

I begin with a brief look at some arguments about Plotinus himself, and the relation of his deserved reputation as a contemplative mystic to the question of day-to-day social concern and involvement. The influential study by Pierre Hadot, *Plotin ou la simplicité du regard*, first published in 1963,3 was at

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2 In his review in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* of Song 2009, Dillon (2010) is actually critical of how far Song goes in her argument (on which, see below).

3 Hadot 1993 is the translation of the 1989 third edition.