Apprehending Our Happiness

Antilepsis and the Middle Soul in Plotinus, Ennead I 4.10

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In *Ennead I 4 [46] (Περὶ εὐδαμονίας) Plotinus squarely locates the good life (τὸ εὖ ζήν) in the noetic realm. The perfect, true, and real life is of an intellectual nature (I 4.3.33-34), and when a man has passed over into the perfect life, in other words, into *nous*, he actually 'is' this perfect life (I 4.4.14-15). This is the life which is higher soul perpetually enjoys in its conformity with intellect. It is a life wholly self-sufficient and unaffected by pleasures, pains, and all the fortunes of Priam that affect the compound body.

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1 At the end of his penultimate treatise, *Enn.* I 1 (On What is the Living Being and What is Man), Plotinus asks who it was that carried out the investigation in the previous chapters; he ascribes this activity to the superior life of the soul, νόημα, and concludes: 'For this [νοὲς] is also part of us and to this we ascend' (13.7-8). Cf. n. 2, below.

2 See I 4.4.6-8, I 1.9, VI 7.35.4-5, and further citations in Wallis, 72, n. 5. It may still need to be emphasized that the soul has the perfect life through its conformity with the transcendent intellect, the true νοǣ (νοῦς ἀληθινός), I 4.4.7f., cf. V 8.1.2, V 9.2.21f., VI 7.18.23), and not merely by its possession of the rational element (λογικός) or discursive reason (διάνοια); with these the soul judges and orders the external world in its hegemony over it. Confusingly, Plotinus sometimes refers to these latter faculties as νοǣ. On the two senses of νοǣ, see Blumenthal, 43, 101-105.

Plotinus discusses at some length the impregnability of our true happiness (I 4.5-8). The crowning stroke is that *eudaimonia* is ours even when we are asleep or unconscious (μὴ παρασκολουθεῖν). A good man, Plotinus argues, need not be conscious that he is wise, because wisdom is his substance (as opposed to a quality); as such it is ever active. Similarly, we do not apprehend by sense experience the activity of our physical growth. But what which grows, Plotinus quickly adds, is not really us. We are the ‘actuality of intellect’ (ἡ ... τοῦ νοούτος ἐνέργεια), so that when intellect is active, we are active (I 4.9).

Although we need not be conscious of the noetic activity that constitutes our happiness, Plotinus in the following section (I 4.10.1-21) does in fact allow us an awareness or apprehension (ἀντιλήψις) of the activity of

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3 Without the ascent or transition to *nous* one remains the animated being, the living beast, which *Enn.* I 1 shows to be a joint entity of the body and the reflection of the lower soul (‘reflection’ when applied to the soul in the body does not connote its lack of realessness but rather its subordination to higher principles; see Blumenthal, 15; see also n. 22, below). In this kind of life one cannot be happy nor even truly a man. For Plotinus makes it clear, in both *Enneads* I 1 and I 4, that man, especially the σοφοῦσσος, the good man, is not a *συμμορφότερον*, a complex or sum of body and lower soul. See especially I 1.10, I 4.14, I 4.16.9; cf. I 1.6.8-9, ‘the life of the compound will not be the life of the (higher) soul’ (τὸ τοῦ συμμορφότερου ἔτι οὐ τῆς ψυχῆς ἔσται); on the compound and its affections, see also IV 3.26 and Blumenthal, 20f., 59ff., Emilson, 31ff. In sections 3-4 of *Enn.* I 4 Plotinus makes it axiomatic that ‘life’ is an equivocal term, since it can be applied equally to rational and non-rational creatures. But the *good* life, which is happiness, cannot be attributed to plants and animals but only to man who alone has the potential to live the life of intellect. The multivalence of ‘life’ established in *Enn.* I 4 obtains throughout the later treatise I 1.

4 Though only a part of the good man, whose life is fully integrated with his higher self or *nous*, will be unaware of that activity: λανθάνοι δ’ ἂν αὐτῇ ἡ ἐνέργεια οὕς αὐτὸν πάντα, ἀλλ’ τι μέρος αὐτοῦ. (9.24f.). Smith, 293, remarks: ‘Therefore, some other part of us does notice. In that case some form of awareness is, after all, involved in our relationship to our higher self. This awareness is precisely that self-knowledge or internal consciousness which we have of our higher self when we have gone over to the level of our higher self or *nous.*’ Our present discussion, however, will not focus on the awareness or self-knowledge (such as συναισθησις or σύνεσις) that we possess on a higher level, but rather a lower, transient form of awareness that occasionally may grasp the happiness of our higher self.


6 Indeed towards the end of the next section (10.21ff.) Plotinus claims in effect that in a number of ordinary activities we are most happy when we are least conscious of it. Thus, to take a suggestion from Plotinus himself, I can say I have spent many happy hours reading Plotinus, though not aware at the time that I was happy. On the state of consciousness attending acts of concentration, see Becker, 35, Warren, 84f., 95f., but cf. Smith, 294f.