

MISCELLANEA

THE POLITICS OF THE ONE*

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Two often repeated assertions about Plotinus are that he was not interested in mathematics or politics.¹ A recent book has clearly demonstrated his strong attraction to numbers though not necessarily mathematics,² but the second theory has not been challenged as seriously as it could be. O'Meara, an expert on Neoplatonic politics, discusses Plato and the later Neoplatonists more than he does Plotinus,³ yet some unsettling facts remain. Plotinus, after taking part in the emperor Gordian's ill-fated Persian expedition, went to Rome instead of Athens.⁴ It is likely that he wanted to avoid any philosophical competition in Athens, but it is also possible that he was to some extent drawn to Roman politics. Most troubling of all is the rationale behind his aborted Platonopolis project.

Politics in the *Enneads*

Politics is by its very nature amoral and potentially dangerous, a fact which Plato, a lover of politics, realised.⁵ O'Meara speaks of 'the raging storms of injustice' in relation to this concession of the master's.⁶ To consider only the Neoplatonists and those sympathetic to them we can enumerate the executions of Longinus, Sopatros the Elder and Maximus of Ephesus, and

* I would like to thank Mark Edwards and the anonymous readers for their help with this article.

¹ For example, Wallis 1995:18; Plott 1979:2:157.

² Slaveva-Griffin 2009.

³ O'Meara 2003.

⁴ Porph. *Vit. Plot.* 3.

⁵ Plato, *Apol.* 31d-32a; *Rep.* 6.496c-e.

⁶ O'Meara 2003:93.

the tortures of Hierocles and Isidore.⁷ Gallienus, the emperor who greatly honoured and venerated Plotinus, was assassinated, and his friends, relatives and infant son were murdered by the Roman senate.⁸ The naïve Damascius and his philosophical compeers fled the tyranny of Justinian only to discover cruelty, injustice and inhumanity in the Persian court they once idealised.⁹

In the *Enneads* Plotinus makes hardly any mention of politics,¹⁰ and he thus earned the criticism of Willy Theiler that he was only half a Plato.¹¹ Some exceptions to this are his discussions of the civic virtues, the return of the philosopher to the cave and, implicitly, human freedom.¹² Although he was a conscientious guardian and arbiter,¹³ Plotinus was largely indifferent to civic and moral concerns and was less certain than Plato of the wisdom of societal duty. His exposition of the civic virtues is based on passages in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*.¹⁴ The civic virtues – wisdom, courage, self-control and justice – are the means whereby one is made godlike; yet the World Soul does not possess these attributes.¹⁵ Plotinus further states that we cannot find the virtues in the Nous which indicates his low view of them. The civic virtues are less important than their Forms and less important than the purificatory virtues which mediate between them and the Forms.¹⁶ Plotinus seems to have come up with the idea of purificatory virtues, stimulated by his reading of Plato.¹⁷ Elsewhere, he is confident that those who engage solely in the civic virtues will be reincarnated as bees,¹⁸ although metempsychosis into insects was not necessarily a damning thing in Platonic philosophy.¹⁹

Following Porphyry's nit-picking interpretation,²⁰ participation in the purificatory virtues can be said to consist of two stages: purification and the state of being purified. There are therefore four stages in the virtuous

⁷ Grant 1985:186; O'Meara 2003:17-19, 25; Damascius, *Vit. Isid.* 45b, 141a, 143a.

⁸ Porph. *Vit. Plot.* 12; Cook *et al.* 1965:12:190.

⁹ O'Meara 2003:23.

¹⁰ Hadot 1993:98; Remes 2008:176.

¹¹ Theiler 1960:63-103.

¹² Plot. *Enn.* 1.2; 6.9.7 (Plato, *Rep.* 7.520c); 3.2-3.

¹³ Porph. *Vit. Plot.* 9.

¹⁴ Plato, *Phaed.* 67e-69e, 82a-b; *Rep.* 4.427e-434d.

¹⁵ Plot. *Enn.* 1.2.1.

¹⁶ Plot. *Enn.* 1.2.6.

¹⁷ Dillon 2013:6.

¹⁸ Plot. *Enn.* 3.4.2.

¹⁹ Plato, *Phaedr.* 259b-d; Dillon 1996a:260.

²⁰ Porph. *Sent.* 32.

ascent: the civic virtue, purification, the state of being purified and the direct knowledge of the Form itself. The scale of virtues would be expanded in fifth-century Neoplatonism to six levels: the natural, ethical, political, purificatory, paradigmatic and theurgic. In Damascius' *Vita Isidori* only Isidore, Heraiscus and Sarapio are portrayed as having attained the sixth level.²¹ Such extravagances, as with much of later Neoplatonism, were never part of Plotinus' original intention.

Turning to his ideas of human freedom, we may note that Plotinus' view of humanity was optimistic, but in practice he was disdainful of his fellow men. While we should not discount an underlying shyness, this disdain is apparent on almost every page of the *Vita Plotini*. It is equally apparent in the *Enneads* where he looks down on those who engage in manual labour.²² There he also envisions one group of youths being attacked by a stronger group of youths, the whole scenario evoking nothing more from him than a laugh.²³ He was certainly not naïve. War explains politics, not politics war.²⁴ Life is war without truce,²⁵ and man is a wolf to man.²⁶ The fact that animals distrust and attack humans is nothing to wonder at.²⁷ Yet in his opinion the worst of men are connected to the Nous through their higher souls²⁸ as the best of men are connected to matter through their bodies. His guardianship of many children should additionally be contrasted with Augustine's belief that the child was laden with sin and incapable of violence only because of its weakness.²⁹ Like Plato, he believed no one could do wrong voluntarily.³⁰

Humans, therefore, are basically good, but there are evil men. The citizen who is oppressed by them should not remain passive, but should instead stand up for his rights. The citizen who allows evil men to defeat him is less evil than his oppressors, but he participates in evil insofar as he allows himself to be defeated.³¹ Life is characterised by war and misfortune,³² and God helps those who help themselves. The soldier who

²¹ O'Meara 2006:75-76, 86.

²² Plot. *Enn.* 3.8.2, 4, 7.

²³ Plot. *Enn.* 3.2.8; Dillon 1996b:324.

²⁴ Ousager 2004:237.

²⁵ Plot. *Enn.* 3.2.15.

²⁶ Plot. *Enn.* 3.2.4, 8, 15.

²⁷ Plot. *Enn.* 3.2.9.

²⁸ Plot. *Enn.* 2.9.2.

²⁹ Porph. *Vit. Plot.* 9; Aug. *Conf.* 1.7.

³⁰ Plato, *Apol.* 37a; *Prot.* 345d, 358c; *Gorg.* 488a; *Rep.* 9.589c; *Tim.* 85d-e; *Laws* 731c-d.

³¹ Plot. *Enn.* 3.2.8.

³² Plot. *Enn.* 1.4.7, 11.

comes out of battle safe is the one who fights; the farmer who yields a good crop is the one who tills, not the one who prays.³³ War is better than chains and slavery. Bad men rule by the cowardice (ἀνανδρία) of the ruled. Evil triumphs when weak men do nothing.³⁴

Plotinus' ideas of human freedom are reminiscent of early American political thought, with some of Nietzsche's respect for the strong thrown in. I do not wish to place him in this sublunary realm, but it is easy to see how his views could be made the basis of such a philosophy. Ousager finds him a devotee of orderly law and an opponent of tyrannical imperialism.³⁵ Yet the *Enneads* have no real political philosophy at all. Despite his optimistic view that evil cannot hurt the higher soul, Plotinus largely advises flight from politics and interaction with worldly things, and he does so even when mentioning the return of the philosopher to the cave.³⁶ The philosopher, unlike Heracles, a part of whom remains in Hades, should not be involved in action.³⁷ Political action is due to fear for the survival of oneself and one's family, not to the needs of his truest and innermost self. In his discussion of memory, Plotinus states that it is best to be detached from human concerns.³⁸ This tendency is based on a pessimistic strain in Plato's social thought and even in his political dialogue the *Laws*. In the *Epinomis* he said that people cannot become happy; in the *Theaetetus*, in a favorite passage of Plotinus's, he said that evil cannot be destroyed and urged flight from the world.³⁹

The Platonopolis Scheme

Politics plays a greater role in Porphyry's biography of Plotinus than it does in the *Enneads*.⁴⁰ Porphyry tells us that he had three senators for friends, as paradoxical as his having three physicians for friends. Two other members of his circle, Castricius and Zethos, were either politicians or attracted to politics. Plotinus kept attempting to dissuade Zethos from his interest in the subject, and he continually praised the senator Rogatianus for giving up

³³ Plot. *Enn.* 3.2.8.

³⁴ Plot. *Enn.* 3.2.8-9.

³⁵ Ousager 2004:12.

³⁶ Plot. *Enn.* 1.4.11; 2.9.9; 6.9.7.

³⁷ Plot. *Enn.* 1.1.12.

³⁸ Plot. *Enn.* 4.3.32.

³⁹ Plato, *Epin.* 973c; *Theaet.* 176a-b. I am indebted to B. Zimmerman's unpublished article 'Playthings, pessimism, and justice' for many of these observations.

⁴⁰ Remes 2008:176.

his career in order to become his disciple.⁴¹ What we are dealing with, then, is an individual who had no use for the political arena. So what are we to make of the twelfth chapter of Porphyry's life? He writes that Plotinus once approached the emperor Gallienus with the proposal for a city called Platonopolis which would be governed in accordance with Plato's *Laws*. The city was to be in Campania and was said to have once been a city of philosophers. The emperor was open to the idea, but it was brought to nothing by the envy of his courtiers. Modern scholars have assumed the courtiers were moved more by financial considerations than envy.⁴² David Armstrong goes further and says the project was probably shot down by Gallienus' treasurer.⁴³ The imperial treasury was losing money, and the currency had been debased. Gold coins weighed less than they once did and silver coins contained no silver except for a transient wash.⁴⁴

The Platonopolis project can be compared with Augustine's short-lived Servants of God project and Bishop Berkeley's aborted Bermuda project; both men were readers of Plotinus.⁴⁵ At these crucial times in their lives Augustine was in his thirties, Berkeley in his forties, and Plotinus, an inveterate late bloomer,⁴⁶ in his fifties. Augustine's project lasted three years, Berkeley's (at the most) three years, and Plotinus's not at all. Augustine's project was wholly apolitical, and Berkeley's was a collegiate society intended for spiritual rather than political transformation. The Bermuda project, mainly because of its envisioned size, more fully mirrored Platonopolis than did the Servants of God fellowship. Bradatan describes it as a scholarly society 'dedicated to cultivating superior arts and sciences' and located in a privileged space.⁴⁷ The same, we may justly infer, can be said of Platonopolis. That Platonopolis was meant to be nothing more than a philosophical society is proven by the facts that the tract of land on which it was to stand had been a city of philosophers⁴⁸ and that Plotinus, as we have seen, often attempted to dissuade his friends from their interest in politics.

What did Plotinus, or Porphyry, mean by his reference to the νόμοις τοῖς Πλάτωνος? I take this to be a swank. Platonopolis was more akin to

⁴¹ Porph. *Vit. Plot.* 7.

⁴² Edwards 2008:147.

⁴³ Armstrong 1987:239.

⁴⁴ Grant 1985:173.

⁴⁵ Corrigan 2005:118, 236, 238.

⁴⁶ Porph. *Vit. Plot.* 3-4.

⁴⁷ Bradatan 2003:40.

⁴⁸ Porph. *Vit. Plot.* 12.

Scholastic monasticism than it was to a political society intended to be governed in accordance with the *Laws*. It was a pagan cenobitic community that anticipated the atmosphere surrounding the later Neoplatonism of Proclus.⁴⁹

In sum, Plotinus, unlike Plato, had no enthusiasm for politics. The personal and mystical elements of his philosophy were inimical to the establishment of a political organisation. Neoplatonism, in contradistinction to Catholicism or Arianism, was innocent of all ambitions to engender such a community.⁵⁰ Plotinus' courtship of the emperor Gallienus was based on Gallienus' veneration of him and on the apolitical aspects of his personality. Gallienus' portraits, unlike those of his predecessors and successors, depict an intellectual, one who was initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries and who halted the persecution of minorities.⁵¹ His rule, it has been observed, bore all the elements of an Arthurian romance: the presence of his wife in his camp, his creation of the office of the Roman *protector*, his secondary marriage to a Germanic princess, his challenge of the Gallic emperor to single combat, and his death.⁵² Escape to politics in Plotinus' case was an escape from politics, and Edwards is therefore vindicated in finding in the Platonopolis project an attempt to facilitate the flight of the alone to the Alone.⁵³

Edwards' opinion is seconded by the criticism of Jaspers that Plotinus' philosophy is brought up short at times 'when action in the world is essential, when the individual takes on importance ... when extreme situations are taken seriously.'⁵⁴ Yet there were many souls like Plotinus's in late antiquity. Action did not seem essential to them even though they lived in a calamitous time when plague⁵⁵ led to widespread death, emperors were murdered in rapid succession, and Sassanian Persia impinged on the borders of the Eastern frontier.⁵⁶ It is no true criticism of Plotinus' philosophy to note that he was an escapist or that he took refuge in unfrequented places.⁵⁷ His utopia was not intended as a realm of social harmony or disharmony, but a realm of meditation, solitude and with-

⁴⁹ De Blois 1994:173; Kharlamov 2009:87.

⁵⁰ Schall 1985:692.

⁵¹ Grant 1985:172.

⁵² Mathew 1943:67.

⁵³ Edwards 2008:147.

⁵⁴ Jaspers 1966:83.

⁵⁵ Porph. *Vit. Plot.* 2.

⁵⁶ De Blois 1997:1; Cooper 2007:74.

⁵⁷ G. Dominici *apud* Ousager 2004:192.

drawal from the world, a realm in which the philosopher would attain to the unknowing knowledge of the One.⁵⁸

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⁵⁸ Plot. *Enn.* 6.9.4.

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