

PLOTINUS, THE ISLAMIC INTELLECTUAL TRADITION AND THE METAPHYSICS OF NATURE

by

BRIAN P. HANSEN

B.A., The University of British Columbia, 1970
Teaching Certification (Secondary), the University of British Columbia, 1974

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Department of CLASSICAL, NEAR-EASTERN AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Plotinus, the Islamic Intellectual Tradition and the Metaphysics of Nature examines the profound influence that the spiritual functions of nature as expressed by Plotinus (205-270 CE) exerted on certain developing philosophical and mystical currents in Islam during its first three centuries. In addition, this thesis demonstrates that Plotinus' metaphysics continues to live within contemporary Islamic intellectual circles, specifically in the work of a significant orthodox Islamic thinker— Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who, in allying himself and his religion with Plotinus' dynamic metaphysics, not only clarifies Islamic metaphysical doctrines, but also supplies a significant spiritual context for modern scientific inquiry into the physical world.

The first chapter describes and assesses what Seyyed Hossein Nasr defines as the *philosophia perennis*, paying particular attention to the role of the Intellect, simultaneously a metaphysical principle and potential human spiritual experience that is central in Plotinus, mystically-based Islamic philosophy and Sufism. The second chapter gives a brief analytical summary of Plotinus' metaphysical worldview, underscoring his double emphasis on the Unity experienced via Intellectual vision and the 'metaphysical transparency' of the natural world. The third explores the significant details of Plotinus' metaphysics of nature in preparation for specific demonstrations, in the chapter following it, of how and why Islam embraced elements of Plotinian metaphysics. The fourth chapter appraises the impact that Plotinus' teaching on the beauty and metaphysical transparency of the sensible world had on certain intellectual currents in Islam. This is presented via an historical overview and an analysis of thematic correspondences between Plotinus' metaphysics and the orthodox Islamic worldview as articulated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Finally, the fifth chapter evaluates, along with Nasr, the potential for a new scientific paradigm of nature and suggests areas for possible future study. All five chapters support our views that the Intellect functions both as metaphysical bridge between Plotinus and Islam, that its awakened vision is central to the search for the Divine in both spiritual 'ways' and that the insights of an awakened Intellect could contribute to the development of a new, efficacious scientific paradigm for nature.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my wife Carol and all my other mentors, especially Estelle

Hoyt, Warren Baker, Bernard Courtenay-Mayers, Paul Reynard

and Michel DeSalzman.

“To find ourselves is to know our source.”

Plotinus: Ennead VI.9.7.

INTRODUCTION: THESIS, METHOD & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THESIS AND METHOD

Our primary purpose is to explore how and why the spiritual functions of nature as expressed by Plotinus (205-270 CE) exerted a profound influence on certain developing philosophical and mystical currents in Islam during its first three centuries and beyond.¹ It is also our view that Plotinus' metaphysics continues to live within contemporary Islamic intellectual circles, particularly in the one represented by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. The surprising resilience of Plotinus' metaphysics of nature is exemplified by the emergence of this significant orthodox Islamic thinker who, in allying himself and his religion with Plotinus' dynamic metaphysical approach, not only clarifies Islamic metaphysical doctrines, but also supplies a significant spiritual context for modern scientific inquiry into the physical world.

This thesis is the product of a personal and eclectic intellectual journey that over the years has certainly created a familiarity with the academic debates centred on the interpretation of major themes in Plotinus' work.² We have not, however, elected to focus on any of the

¹ "In re-emphasizing the religious significance of the order of nature and outlining a philosophy of nature totally integrated into metaphysics, Plotinus created a philosophy that became easily absorbed into later schools of religious thought, leaving a profound mark upon both Jewish and Christian as well as certain dimensions of the Islamic intellectual tradition, where, although not known by name and confused with Aristotle, Plotinus was nevertheless called 'the spiritual teacher of the Greeks' (*shaykh al-yunaniyyin*)." Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Religion and the Order of Nature, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), page 91.

² These significant issues include: the fine points of Plotinus' mysticism, the character of the Plotinian 'Forms' (particularly the Forms of individuals), the reasons for the 'fall' of the Soul, Plotinus' view of consciousness, the nature of Intellectual 'seeing' and its relation to non-propositional thought and the functions of imagery and symbolism in the Enneads. For an introduction to some of these issues, see Lloyd P. Gerson, ed., The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Sara Rappe, Reading Neoplatonism: Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus and Damascius (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); John M. Rist, "Back to the Mysticism of Plotinus: Some More Specifics", Journal of the History of Philosophy 27:2, April, 1989 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989) and

nuances of these discussions. Rather, we have chosen to interpret Plotinus' ideas, particularly those pertaining to the metaphysics of nature, in light of their striking influence on orthodox Islamic philosophy as articulated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. We certainly are aware that there have been other equally significant trajectories of Plotinus' influence, particularly in Christianity³ and in Judaism⁴; but, in our view, the Plotinian trajectory into Islam takes on a broad, topical significance because of its dynamic impact on the dialectic of this contemporary Muslim scholar, who not only writes with considerable authority on philosophical and religious issues facing Muslims and non-Muslims alike, but on scientific ones regarding the material and spiritual functions of the natural world affecting us all.

In order to provide the intellectual background for our thesis, the first chapter will describe and assess what Seyyed Hossein Nasr defines as the *philosophia perennis*, paying particular attention to the role of the Intellect,⁵ simultaneously a metaphysical principle and potential human spiritual experience that is central in Plotinus, mystically-based Islamic philosophy and Sufism. The second chapter will give a brief analytical summary of Plotinus' metaphysical worldview, underscoring his double emphasis on the Unity experienced via

Richard T. Wallis, "Nous as Experience" in R. Baine Harris, ed., The Significance of Neoplatonism (Norfolk, Virginia: International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, 1976) pages 121-153.

³ See A.H. Armstrong, Plotinian and Christian Studies (London: Variorum, 1979); Thomas Finan and Vincent Twomey, eds., The Relationship between Neoplatonism and Christianity (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1992) and J.M. Rist, Platonism and its Christian Heritage (London: Variorum, 1985).

⁴ For an introduction, see Lenn E. Goodman, ed., Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1992).

⁵ "There is an intellectual intuition and a sensible intuition; one lies beyond reason, but the other... can only know the world of changing and becoming..., an inferior part of nature. The domain of (Intellectual) intuition... is the province of eternal and immutable principles; it is the realm of metaphysics." René Guénon: "Oriental Metaphysics" in Jacob Needleman, ed., The Sword of Gnosis (London: Arkana Books, 1986) page 44.

Intellectual vision and the 'metaphysical transparency' of the natural world. The third will explore the significant details of Plotinus' metaphysics of nature in preparation for specific demonstrations, in the chapter following it, of how and why Islam embraced elements of Plotinian metaphysics. The fourth chapter will also appraise the impact that Plotinus' teaching on the beauty and metaphysical transparency of the sensible world had on certain intellectual currents in Islam. We will accomplish this through an historical overview and an analysis of thematic correspondences between Plotinus' metaphysics and the orthodox Islamic worldview as articulated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Finally, the fifth chapter will evaluate, along with Nasr, the potential for a new scientific paradigm of nature and suggest areas for possible future study. All five chapters will support our views that the Intellect functions both as metaphysical bridge between Plotinus and Islam, that its awakened vision is central to the search for the Divine in both spiritual 'ways' and that the insights of an awakened Intellect could contribute to the development of a new, efficacious scientific paradigm for nature.

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR AND ADDITIONAL SCHOLARLY SUPPORT

Plotinus wrote the Enneads, from 253/4 CE to the time of his death in 270 CE, and their migration into Islam both historically and in modern times⁶ helps to unveil, as we shall see later, substantive reasons for the Muslim attraction to Plotinus' metaphysics and to his metaphysical appreciation of nature. For historical information concerning the migration of Plotinus' ideas into Islam and insight into Plotinus'⁷ metaphysics and its relationship to that of other religious

⁶ See in particular Majid Fakhry, A History of Islamic Philosophy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970).

⁷ Except when quoting scholars whose arguments and context necessitate using them, we have chosen not to use the terms *Neoplatonism* and *Neoplatonic*. Our focus is on the content of Plotinus' Enneads, how this text articulates a metaphysic of nature and how certain individuals in the Islamic intellectual tradition responded to particular metaphysical principles in this text via Arabic translations of it. *Neoplatonism* is a broad term that includes many other philosophers and their idiosyncratic brands of Platonism besides Plotinus and his; and as such, is a term extraneous to our purposes here. In place of *Neoplatonic*, we use the adjective *Plotinian* or *Plotinus'*.

traditions, we are indebted to a number of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's works.⁸ Nasr, a highly distinguished expert on Islamic science and spirituality and currently Professor of Islamic studies at George Washington University, has commented extensively on the need for a 'resacralization of nature'.⁹

Interpretations of Plotinus' metaphysics, psychological ideas, his ethics, his 'place' in the history of Platonism and Greek philosophical thought in general have been greatly assisted over the years by the works of A.H. Armstrong, John Deck, Lloyd P. Gerson, Pierre Hadot, Parviz Moorewedge, Sara Rappe, J.M. Rist, R.T. Wallis and Laura Westra,¹⁰ leading contemporary

⁸ See the following relevant books by Seyyed Hossein Nasr: Sufi Essays (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1972), specifically, Chapter III: "Revelation, Reason and Intellect in the Koran" and Chapter X, "The Ecological Problem in the Light of Sufism"; An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978) especially Part III: *Ibn Sina*; Ideals and Realities of Islam (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972); specifically Chapter I: "Islam, the last religion and the primordial religion- its universal and particular traits". This chapter's emphasis on Islam as essentially a way of knowledge is particularly helpful in guiding a study of Islam's affinities with Plotinian Platonism; Knowledge and the Sacred (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); History of Islamic Philosophy, Volumes I and II (London: Routledge, 1996); particularly the articles "The Meaning and Concept of Philosophy in Islam", "The Transmission of Greek Philosophy to the Arabic World", "Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi" and IX: "Islamic philosophy in the modern Islamic world"; Man and Nature (ABC International Group Inc., 1997) and Religion and the Order of Nature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), especially Chapter II: "The Order of Nature" and Chapter VI: "The Rediscovery of Nature: Religion and the Environmental Crisis". For a concise summary of Plotinus' explanation of the metaphysical significance of nature, see Chapter III: "Philosophy and the Misdeeds of Philosophy", page 91-93.

⁹ See in particular Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Religion and the Resacralization of Nature", Religion and the Order of Nature, (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹⁰ Major influential works include: A.H. Armstrong, Plotinus (London, 1953); John N. Deck: Nature, Contemplation and the One (Burdett, New York: Larson Publications, 1991); Lloyd P. Gerson, ed., The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Pierre Hadot, Plotinus: or the Simplicity of Vision (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993);

Plotinian scholars; as well, our explications of Plotinus have been influenced by the work of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and his contemporary intellectual colleagues: René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, Marco Pallis, Leo Schaya and Henry Corbin (the foremost of the so-called Traditionalists).¹¹

Parviz Moorewedge, ed., Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Sara Rappe, Reading Neoplatonism: Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus and Damascius (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); J.M. Rist, Plotinus: The Road to Reality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); R.T. Wallis, Neo-Platonism (London, 1972) and Laura Westra, Plotinus and Freedom (Queenston, Ontario: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990).

¹¹ The Sword of Gnosis, Jacob Needleman, ed., (London: Arkana Books, 1986)] is an excellent introductory selection of essays on traditional metaphysics and traditional spiritual practices by this intellectually challenging set of scholars who appear to be surprisingly little-known in academic circles. The more prominent members of this so-called 'Traditionalist school', in addition to René Guénon, include Frithjof Schuon (1907-1997), Swiss writer, painter and designer, whose written works include contributions to Études Traditionnelles since 1933, the English journal Studies in Comparative Religion since 1963 and the French review Connaissance des Religions since 1985— as well as the books mentioned in this paper's bibliography; Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984) wrote numerous monographs on sacred art and was considered to be one of the foremost authorities of Sunni Sufism; Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) was the Curator of Oriental Art at the Boston Museum Fine Arts. Well-known for his erudition, extremely wide-ranging scholarship and his linguistic abilities, he produced a colossal body of written work. His themes included such diverse topics as exegeses of Buddhist Tantras, analyses of Neoplatonic texts and examinations of the Flemish mystics. He is probably best known for his book The Transformation of Nature in Art, and is most conveniently approached through Roger Lipsey's two volume Coomaraswamy: his Life and Works; Martin Lings, curator of Arabic manuscripts in the British Museum and former professor at the University of Cairo, is probably best known for his last book, Muhammad, his Life Based on the Earliest Sources (London, 1983); Marco Pallis (1895-1989), Buddhist scholar and writer; Leo Schaya (1916-1986), a well-known Jewish scholar famous for his work L'Homme et L'Absolu selon la Kabbale (Paris, 1958, 1977, 1988); and of course Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Professor of Islamic Studies, George Washington University. Moreover, Jean Borella in "René Guénon and the Traditionalist School" in Modern Esoteric Spirituality (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1995) page 348 comments that "...it is impossible to review here all the authors who bear witness to this wisdom— authors from every continent, representing the principal languages of the world."

Although Nasr's et al.'s major point of departure for the study of religion is certainly neither popular nor a critical attitude shared by the majority of scholars of religion, in general the Traditionalists' knowledge and understanding of religious ideas and practices is indeed profound and well-documented, and their writing clear and forceful; but as one reviews and contemplates their work, one questions whether some of some Traditionalists' moral and intellectual positions are more doctrinaire and evangelically-entrenched than reasoned. One also suspects that 'traditionalism' taken to extremes could all too readily become an unnecessarily severe elitism. This could impede the ability to recognize (let alone acknowledge) first, the necessities of changes within a tradition that are intelligent responses to the changing conditions of contemporary life and second, the moral, intellectual and even spiritual benefits of other religious, philosophical and secular movements which lie 'outside' the bounds of their definition of what constitutes a bona fide 'Tradition'. Nevertheless, the Traditionalists' claim that they have deduced a common metaphysical core to all revealed religions raises fascinating and quite valid questions concerning the assumptions about the nature of reality that have come into unquestioned acceptance in contemporary intellectual circles: namely, that theories, methodologies and conclusions based on empirical proof and scientific evidence constitute the fundamental and complete means for determining the truth of a question, hypothesis, insight or assertion about the nature of the world and man's function(s) in it. As we shall see later, the metaphysical context of Plotinus' responses to these kinds of thought processes struck many chords of recognition among Islamic philosophers.

It certainly must be emphasized at this point that it is not within our purpose to espouse and defend Nasr's and the Traditionalists' dicta on the study, practices and purposes of religion. All we mean to do in the context of the 'trialogue' among Plotinus, Nasr's traditional, orthodox

Islam and modern science is to analyze the reasons for the sympathy between Plotinian and Islamic metaphysics of nature and elaborate three fundamental points in the substructure of our thesis. First, religion and Platonism raise vital questions about the nature of the world and our assumptions about it. Second, Nasr and his Traditionalist colleagues open the question concerning the validity, and even necessity, of a metaphysically based worldview. Third, Nasr et al. offer substantive challenges to scientifically based assumptions about the nature of the world around us, and the possible levels of human functionality in it.

OUR USE OF THE TERM 'NATURE'

At this point, in order to further clarify our method and terms of reference, it is necessary to present a working definition of the term *nature*.¹² As Deck points out, Plotinus uses the term to point to the essential quality of " ... a thing or principle." This is the sense of the term in which Plotinus can refer to the nature of the body (III, 6, 6, 33-34), the nature of form (III, 6, 4, 41-

¹² As we shall point out in some detail in Chapter Three, Plotinus is less concerned with portraying Nature (*phusis*) as a god than he is with describing Nature (*phusis*) as a principle (a conduit between the Intellectual Principle and Matter) that creates the material world via contemplation. In light of this, it is interesting to compare the Plotinian view of Nature (*phusis*) with the use of the term in Plato and later Hellenistic literature. "As a rule Plato avoids the word *phusis* when describing the highest stages of being. It is not a fixed term for him but is used non-technically to denote the true being of a thing and can often have the sense of 'idea' or 'essential being'. Hellenism: In contrast to older Grk. lit., *phusis* as 'universal nature' is in various ways associated with deity in Hellenism. This is so already in Stoicism, where all things are necessarily held together by the best of all essences.... In the school of Epic. this glorification is even stronger in Lucret. *De rerum natura*, 1, 56, cf. 1, 146 etc. and it is widespread in Hell., esp. in the equation of *phusis* with a female deity....

Phusis as the highest principle of the visible world is often distinguished from God.... God creates *phusis* through His word, and it appears as a beautiful female being which for its part plays a decisive role in the event of creation. We have here the basic elements of the Gnostic distinction between lower nature and the divine world as we have it in *Poimandres*." Gerhard Friedrich, ed., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974) page 259.

43)...”¹³ etc. More importantly, Plotinus also uses the term *nature* to signify a hypostatic function, the lower part of the All-Soul that bridges “the gap between the intelligible and the visible worlds....”,¹⁴ bringing the corporeal into being.¹⁵ Although our focus, especially in chapters three and four, is primarily on the metaphysical principle of nature as ‘bridge’ (the metaphysics of nature), we also use the qualified term *nature* to designate the visible natural world. This includes not only the earth and the physical laws governing its biosphere¹⁶, but the entire physical universe and the laws governing its physical operation.

THE ENNEADS: OUR ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF CHOICE

The primary textual support for our analysis of Plotinus’ metaphysics of nature is the English translation Seyyed Hossein Nasr himself uses when quoting Plotinus in his books and articles: Stephen MacKenna’s Plotinus: The Enneads. At first glance, MacKenna seems an unusual choice, given that A.H. Armstrong’s multi-volume translation is deemed by contemporary scholars to be the most accurate of any English one previously produced. MacKenna’s Plotinus was originally published by the Medici Society (1917-1930) with a revised edition by Faber and Faber in 1956, another by Pantheon in 1969, and the most recent Penguin Books publication, abridged with an introduction by John Dillon, published in 1991. The reasons

¹³ John Deck, Nature, Contemplation and the One (Burdett, New York: Larson Publications, 1991) page 83.

¹⁴ Ibid., page 83.

¹⁵ See Ennead IV. 4.13.

¹⁶ “The narrow zone that supports life on our planet, the biosphere, is limited to the waters of the earth, a fraction of its crust, and the lower regions of the atmosphere. The biosphere is made up of all the earth’s ecosystems. It is affected by external forces such as the sun’s rays, which provide energy, the gravitational affects of the sun and moon, and cosmic radiations.” Hilary McGlynn, ed., Scientific American Desk Reference (New York, Toronto: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 1999) page 307.

for choosing MacKenna (unabridged) are manifold. Translating Plotinus' often abstruse, idiosyncratic, syntactically odd and misspelled Greek is best left to experts. What commend MacKenna are not only his reported spiritual affinity with 'Plotty' (as he called him in more frustrated bouts of translation)¹⁷ and his Celtic passion for understanding Plotty's vision of things, but his unique brand of correspondingly artful interpretation in the act of translation. As MacKenna's biographer E.R. Dodds emphasizes, "What MacKenna is doing, like many great translators, is creating a work of art in its own right, rising out of the original,"¹⁸ As a case in point, Dodds quotes two translations of a selection of the oft-quoted Ennead I. 6, 8 (On Beauty), one by A.H. Armstrong and the other by Stephen Mackenna. Armstrong's is first:

"But how shall we find the way? What method shall we devise? How can one see the 'inconceivable beauty', which stays within 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."

MacKenna's comes next:

"But what must we do? How lies the path? How come to visions of the inaccessible Beauty, dwelling as if in consecrated precincts, apart from the common ways where all may see, even the profane?
He that has strength, let him arise and draw into himself, forgoing all that known by the eyes, turning away forever from the material beauty that once made his joy."

¹⁷ In a letter to E.R. Dodds, MacKenna complains, "'Tis all too difficult for me and I wish I were dead- tho' even that has its risks: I figure myself sometimes flying down the corridors of Hades pursued by Plotty and him roaring." E.R. Dodds, *Stephen MacKenna: A Biographical Sketch* in Stephen Mackenna, trans., Plotinus: The Enneads (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1991) page xxiii.

¹⁸ Ibid., page xx.

These passages embody the general differences in intent and style in the Armstrong and MacKenna translations. Even ignoring the jarring changes in person between sentences two and three (presumably loyalty in letter to Plotinus' grammatical idiosyncrasy) and the resulting decrease in feeling behind the speaker's inquiry, Armstrong's is a scientific translation, rendering an intensely compelling inner state didactic. Not so MacKenna's: his captures the intense immediacy of being in question, or of a being in question, the evocation of which is, as we shall see later, central to Plotinus' method. MacKenna takes the risk of reading behind the often-clumsy letter into the spirit of the author's intention:

“Plotinus is often to be understood rather by swift and broad rushes of the mind- the mind trained to his methods- than by laborious, word-racking investigation: we must know him through and through before we can be quite sure of his minuter meanings anywhere.”¹⁹

MacKenna's sensibility and a lifelong dedication to creating, in his own words, a translation that “... pretends to be faithful— and if we may be precise, literary rather than literal”, but one which, again according to Dodds “... would tease out all the nuances of Plotinus' crabbed and condensed language and reproduce it in English of proper nobility” recommends his pioneering work as our text of choice. In this context, it is impossible to resist quoting MacKenna one last time on the subject of Plotinus' stylistic skill, and to reiterate yet again the necessity for a ‘literary’ translation:

“Longinus, as may be learned from Porphyry's Life-sketch of Plotinus, so little grasped Plotinus' manner of expression as to judge ruinously erroneous the most faithful transcripts that could be: a version (translation) which should reproduce such a style as disconcerted and misled the most widely read contemporary critic of Greek letters would not

¹⁹ *Extracts from the Explanatory Matter in the First Edition* in Stephen Mackenna, trans., Plotinus: The Enneads (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1991) page xxvii.

be a translation in any useful sense of the word, or at least would not be English or would not be readable.”²⁰

Plotinus was not a writer.²¹ Cast in an ancient mould, Plotinus was a philosopher whose method directed toward the soul’s education was based on a typically and traditionally Platonic ‘recipe’: dialectic, self-inquiry and the striving towards right action with others, all seasoned with contemplation. The ancient Greeks gifted us with this paradigm for rigorous inquiry into man’s place within the beginning and end of things, the basis of which was predicated on the experience of being in question. Although central to the Socratic/Platonic/Plotinian method, the experience of perplexity and dependence on ‘aid from within and above’ when confronting the sense and purpose of one’s life is not confined to a particular time in history; and as the medieval and modern Islamic resonance to his metaphysics will help demonstrate, Plotinus’ response to this very human state of affairs is universal as well as timely.

²⁰ Ibid., page xxix.

²¹ Plotinus was a teacher, not a writer. As John Dillon points out, Porphyry’s biography of his teacher “... notes Plotinus’ remarkable method of instruction, his Socratic, or Wittgensteinian, habit of teasing out the intricacies of a question in common with his hearers, rather than pontificating in set discourses.” John Dillon: “Plotinus: an Introduction” in Stephen Mackenna, trans., Plotinus: The Enneads (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969) page lxxxix.

ONE

NASR, PLOTINUS AND INTELLECTUAL VISION

This chapter is a brief introduction to the basic tenets of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's orthodox Islamic worldview, with a particular focus on some of the characteristics of the Intellect²² relevant to Plotinian metaphysics. Nasr's analyses of religious, philosophical and even scientific doctrine and practice are grounded in the metaphysical hierarchy that is identical in essence with the Traditionalists' *philosophia perennis*, Plotinus' metaphysical worldview and with the metaphysical outlook of orthodox, philosophical Islam.

Some would argue that the dynamism of the Intellect is a seminal feature in the metaphysics of both Plotinus²³ and Islam. Fundamental to Seyyed Hossein Nasr's approach to the study of religion is its traditional,²⁴ metaphysical platform that is grounded in this level of

²² "One of the most basic doctrines of the *philosophia perennis* is that *intellectus* is not to be confused with *ratio*. Reason as currently understood is the reflection upon the plane of the mind of the Intellect, which is able to know God directly and which is at once divine and of access to human beings provided they are aware of who they really are." Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The *Philosophia Perennis*", The Need for a Sacred Science (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993) page 65, note 3.

²³ See in particular John F. Phillips, "Plotinus and the 'Eye' of Intellect", Dionysius, Vol. XIV (Halifax: Dalhousie University Press, 1990) pages 79-103 and Richard T. Wallis, "Nous as Experience", R. Baine Harris, ed., The Significance of Neoplatonism (Norfolk, Virginia: International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, 1976).

²⁴ According to Nasr, tradition "means truths or principles of a divine origin revealed or unveiled to mankind and, in fact, a whole cosmic sector through various figures envisaged as messengers, prophets, *avatars*, the Logos or other transmitting agencies, along with all the ramifications and applications of these principles in different realms including law and social structure, art, symbolism, the sciences, and embracing of course Supreme Knowledge along with the means for its attainment.... Tradition is inextricably related to revelation and religion, to the sacred, to the notion of orthodoxy, to authority, to the continuity and regularity of transmission of the truth, to the exoteric and esoteric as well as to the

Intellectual Being, simultaneously a metaphysical principle and a *noesis* accessible to individuals via spiritual practice. In fact Nasr and his colleagues in the Traditionalist school view the Divine Intellect to be the core of all religion and a concept central to their definition of what they claim to be the *philosophia perennis*:

“(Religion) is a reality of Divine origin. It has its archetype in the Divine Intellect and possesses levels of meaning and reality like the cosmos itself. If a religion were to cease to exist on earth, that does not mean that it would cease to possess any reality whatsoever. In this case its life cycle on earth would have simply come to an end, while the religion itself as an ‘Idea’ in the Platonic sense would subsist in the Divine Intellect in its transhistorical reality....

The traditional school does not neglect the social or psychological aspects of religion, but it refuses to reduce religion to its social or psychological manifestations. Religion in its earthly manifestation comes from the wedding between a Divine Norm and a human collectivity destined providentially to receive the imprint of that Norm.”²⁵

Complementary to those scholars who take, in whatever form, an historical, phenomenological, psychological or social-scientific approach to the examination of religious doctrine and practice, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and his Traditionalist colleagues, while not completely averse to these approaches to what they might call religious manifestation, emphasize the primacy of Intellectual vision (as we shall later see carefully and consistently defined by Plotinus, for example) in

spiritual life, science and the arts. The colors and nuances of its meaning become in fact clearer once its relation to each of these and other pertinent concepts and categories is elucidated.” Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “What is Tradition?”, Knowledge and the Sacred, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1989) page 68.

²⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Philosophia Perennis and the Study of Religion”, The Need for a Sacred Science, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993) page 56.

religion and traditional philosophy.²⁶ Since they are participants in their own respective religious paths, they examine the expressions of religion or philosophy through the lens of their particular religious understanding (often bolstered by formidable cross-cultural erudition and intricate arguments, particularly in the writings of Schuon, Guenon, Coomaraswamy and of course Nasr) which forms itself from each one's attempt to live his/her religion inwardly as well as outwardly. These processes are all guided, one assumes, by each individual's specific practices within his/her Tradition that facilitate an experiential understanding of the meaning contained in its sacred symbols, rituals and metaphysics.

Since Seyyed Hossein Nasr is probably the foremost representative of the Traditionalist point of view writing and teaching today, and since his views on religion and science and his interpretations of Islamic history, doctrine and practice figure so prominently in this paper, some brief information on his life and work²⁷ will probably be very useful at this juncture— if only to

²⁶ Ananda Coomaraswamy's "Vedanta and Western Tradition" expresses the representative flavour of Traditionalist arguments for the necessity that thinking people rediscover the metaphysical dimension of religion and traditional philosophy: "The educated man of today is, moreover, completely out of touch with those European modes of thought and those intellectual aspects of the Christian doctrine which are nearest those of Vedic traditions. A knowledge of modern Christianity will be of little use because the fundamental sentimentality of our times has diminished what was once an intellectual doctrine to a mere morality that can hardly be distinguished from a pragmatic humanism. A European can hardly be said to be adequately prepared for the study of the Vedanta unless he has acquired some knowledge and understanding of at least Plato, Philo, Hermes, Plotinus, the Gospels (especially John), Dionysius and finally Eckhart who, with the exception of Dante, can be regarded from an Indian point of view as the greatest of all Europeans." Ananda Coomaraswamy, "Vedanta and Western Tradition" Roger Lipsey, ed., Coomaraswamy Volume II: Selected Papers: Metaphysics, (Princeton, New Jersey: Bollingen Series LXXXIX, Princeton University Press, 1977) page 6.

²⁷ This paper's short biography of Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr has been adapted from a much longer one available from The Seyyed Hossein Nasr Foundation. See "A Biography of Seyyed Hossein Nasr", www.nasrfoundation.org/bios.

underscore his unique background spanning religious practice and scholarship, as well as in contemporary and traditional Islamic science.

A prolific writer and highly-respected scholar specializing in Islamic traditional science and art, Sufism and Comparative Religion, Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr is presently University Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University in Washington D.C. He was born in Tehran in 1933 into a family distinguished by its long tradition of physicians and scholars. Treading in his ancestors' educated footsteps, Nasr did an undergraduate degree in Physics at M.I.T., obtained a Master's degree in Geology and Geophysics (1956) and then at twenty-five graduated with a Doctor of Philosophy from Harvard in the History of Science and Learning under the collective supervision of professors I. Bernard Cohen, Hamilton Gibb and Harry Wolfson. Harvard University Press published Nasr's doctoral dissertation, "Conceptions of Nature in Islamic Art", in 1964 as An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines. Currently, Dr. Nasr has published over fifty books and five hundred articles.

He returned to Tehran in 1964 to take a position as Associate Professor of Philosophy and the History of Science at the Faculty of Letters in Tehran University; and there as an Associate Professor and later as Professor, Nasr dedicated himself to increasing his students' knowledge of Islamic and Oriental philosophies, especially Islamic philosophy in the light of its own traditions and history. During this time, he also strengthened the philosophical content in the Persian language programs at Tehran University. The Shah of Iran appointed Nasr President of Aryameyr University in 1972, and while there, Nasr supervised the development of comprehensive programs on Islamic thought and culture, emphasizing particularly the philosophy of Islamic science. In addition to pursuing the prescribed academic learning paths in

both the West and the East, Nasr also learned Islamic philosophy in the ancient oral way as a pupil of traditional masters in Iran. Throughout his early academic career, Nasr kept close ties with his colleagues at major universities in the United States, returning there frequently to teach courses, conduct seminars and give lectures at Harvard, Princeton and the University of Utah.

When Islamic revolution exploded in Iran in 1979, Nasr moved with his family to the United States, where he continues to live and teach, traveling frequently to Europe to give prestigious lectures including, for example, the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh, the substance of which later became his book Knowledge and the Sacred.²⁸ The breadth and depth of his knowledge of and dedication to Islam and to the concerns of all religions and traditional philosophies commend him as a scholar of comparative religion and philosophy par excellence. Besides his many well-known books (most of which appear in our bibliography and footnotes), along with William Chittick, he compiled the three-volume An Annotated Bibliography of Islamic Science;²⁹ helped with the planning and development of Islamic and Iranian Studies at Princeton University, the University of Utah and the University of Southern California; and, together with Ewert Cousins, chief editor and Professor of Medieval Philosophy at Fordham University, brought out the Encyclopedia of World Spirituality; helped the American Academy of Religion establish a section on Hermeticism and Perennial Philosophy; and is chairman of the board of *The Foundation for Traditional Studies*, established in 1984 to disseminate traditional thought, the key aspects of which are defined and examined in this paper. Seyyed Hossein Nasr is recognized as one of the foremost expositors of the traditionalist

²⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Knowledge and the Sacred, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1989).

²⁹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, An Annotated Bibliography of Islamic Science, 3 vols., Tehran: 1975-94).

perspective on religion, philosophy, science and art. In addition to his many academic pursuits, according to his biographer at The Seyyed Hossein Nasr Foundation, Dr. Nasr "...leads a very intense spiritual life spent in prayer, meditation and contemplation... (and provides) spiritual counsel for those who seek his advice and guidance."³⁰

In Nasr's orthodox Islamic (and Traditionalist) view, the principles of physics are, of course, drawn from nature itself; but the metaphysic intrinsic to the *philosophia perennis* places nature and its laws in the context of principles ultimately responsible for its gestation and functioning, principles which are 'above', 'beyond' and 'before it', recognizing at the outset that temporal and spatial adjectives are only metaphorical when qualifying ordering principles unconstrained by our concepts of time and space. This metaphysic expresses, in terms consonant with the culture in and through which this sapiential knowledge is revealed, the cosmic procession of levels of being from a 'causeless cause' (the One beyond being) to the world of physical materiality. In Nasr's and the Traditionalists' collective view, human beings are able—because of their largely dormant capacity to discriminate between the Real and the illusory via the Intellect,³¹ (simultaneously an individual, noetic function and a cosmic hypostasis)—to 'ascend' through these multiple grades of finer and more unified existence, ultimately returning to the Source. In whatever culture it finds expression, metaphysics describes a cosmos that is

³⁰ See "A Biography of Seyyed Hossein Nasr", The Seyyed Nasr Foundation, www.nasrfoundation.org/bios.

³¹ "There is an intellectual intuition and a sensible intuition; one lies beyond reason, but the other... can only know the world of changing and becoming..., an inferior part of nature. The domain of (Intellectual) intuition... is the province of eternal and immutable principles; it is the realm of metaphysics." René Guénon: "Oriental Metaphysics" in Jacob Needleman, ed., The Sword of Gnosis (London: Arkana Books, 1986) page 44.

hierarchical in terms of levels of being (and non-being).³² Nasr, Schuon, Guénon et al. identify this sole metaphysic as the ultimate *scientia sacra*³³ at the core of every revealed religion and traditional philosophy. They stress that 'realization' of metaphysical truth necessitates a union between knowledge and being in man or woman; as a result, guidance toward this kind of synthesis tends to be expressed in the more esoteric³⁴ (inner, secret) aspects of a particular

³² "The hierarchic nature of reality is a universal assertion of all traditions and is part and parcel of their religious practices as well as their doctrines, whether conceived in terms of various hosts and orders of angels as described in the famous Celestial Hierarchies of Dionysius, or levels of light and darkness as in certain kinds of Islamic esotericism, or as in various orders of gods and titans as in religions with a mythological structure such as Hinduism," Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Knowledge and the Sacred (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989) page 138.

³³ "Science is understood as an ever-changing knowledge of the physical world based on ratiocination and empiricism, whereas tradition, as understood by contemporary masters of the exposition of traditional doctrines who have been mentioned already in this work, implies immutability, permanence and knowledge of a principal and metaphysical order. It is, however, meaningful to speak of traditional science as a knowledge which, while not pure metaphysics, is traditional, that is, related to metaphysical principles, and through a science in the sense of organized knowledge of a particular domain of reality, it is not divorced from the immutability which characterizes the principal order. In all traditional societies, especially sedentary ones, many forms of traditional sciences have been cultivated ranging from the study of the heavens to that of the anatomy of an ant. These sciences are distinct from metaphysics, or gnosis, the supreme science which, as already mentioned, is the ultimate *scientia sacra*." Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Traditional Sciences", The Need for a Sacred Science (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) page 95.

³⁴ The exoteric aspect of a religion is its form: a corpus of articles of faith, regulations for individual piety and often laws governing social relations in the society in which the particular religion finds expression. The esoteric aspect is its essence. Metaphysical in nature and contemplative in practice, the esoteric paths within a particular religion are designed to lead participants toward a replication of their founder's inner experience, an intimate verification of the profoundest truths and revelations of their religion, to eternal life in this life. Neither aspect negates the other. Both are necessary for the healthy functioning of the religion in which they express themselves. According to The Dictionary of Religions, John

revealed religion or traditional philosophy, an 'inner path' of return to the Source intrinsic to each and every culturally-mediated expression of this *scientia sacra*:

"(Esoteric)...the hidden, inner, secret. As an outer symbol of an interior reality, the notion of secrecy refers to the need within the self to maintain a purity or separation of what is holy from what is profane, and, in the context of the interior life, this may be taken to mean the need to prevent one's ordinary, egoistic mind from appropriating the higher, more interior energies of the self. 'Do not let the left hand know what the right hand is doing.'"³⁵

The suggestion is that these 'higher, more interior energies of the self' somehow connect with the realm of metaphysical principles and with what Plotinus, for example, calls 'primal Man' (Ennead V.4.14), the vehicle of ultimate 'Return'. Nasr and the Traditionalists also stress, albeit with their typical severity, that authentic ecumenism can "only be esoteric, for religious harmony can only be achieved in the 'Divine Stratosphere', to quote Schuon, and not in the human

R. Hinnells ed., (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1995), the first recorded use of the term 'esoteric' was by Lucian,

"...who ascribed it to Aristotle as a classification of his own works into esoteric and exoteric, the latter simply meaning popular or untechnical. Later writers employed the term esoteric to mean secret doctrines taught to a select few. The same breadth of usage exists today, and esoteric work encompasses all philosophical disciplines concerned with the inner (Greek, *esoterios*, inner or interior) transformation of man." (page 156)

In the Sufi tradition in Islam, *batin* is term corresponding to the 'esoteric', the 'inner', the 'hidden'; it is

"... the opposite of *zahir*, q.v. The 'inner learning' (*al-'ilm al-batin*), which means esoteric or Sufic learning, is distinguished from the 'outer learning' (*al-'ilm az-zahir*) of the Doctors of the Law. *Al-Batin*, 'The Inner' is one of the names of God in the Qur'an." Titus Burckhardt, An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine, D.M. Matheson trans. (Lahore, Pakistan: Muhammad Asraf, 1971) page 143.

³⁵ Jacob Needleman: *Introduction II* in Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman, eds., Modern Esoteric Spirituality (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1995) page xxix.

atmosphere where so many seek it today at the expense of reducing the Divine Stratosphere to the human atmosphere.”³⁶ *Intellectus* is never, in no uncertain terms, to be confused with *ratio*.

According to Nasr and others belonging to this affinity of exegetes, apologists and scholars of comparative religion—religious ideas, rites and symbols have been revealed (in the religious sense) as culturally unique supports to verify the universal metaphysical vision of a set of hierarchical 'worlds', or 'levels of consciousness', accessible by man's Intellect.³⁷ The

³⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Philosophia Perennis”, The Need for a Sacred Science (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993) page 65.

³⁷ Titus Burckhardt, a prominent member of the Traditionalist enclave (see page 5, note 11 of our Introduction), distinguishes Intellect from discursive reason, as does Plotinus:

“What is in these days usually called the ‘intellect’ is really only the discursive faculty, the very dynamism and agitation of which distinguishes it from the intellect proper which is in itself motionless, being always direct and serene in its operation.”

Titus Burkhardt: An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine, trans. D.M. Matheson, (Lahore, Pakistan: Ashraf Press, 1971) page 10.

Vis-à-vis the Intellect, Plotinus writes: “Soul must be sounded to the depths, understood as an emanation from Intellectual-Principle and as holding its value by a Reason-Principle thus infused. Next, this Intellect must be apprehended, as Intellect other than the reasoning faculty known as the rational principle.... Thus we come to see Intellectual Principle almost as an object of sense: it is perceptible as standing above soul, father to soul, and it is one with the Intellectual Cosmos; we must think of it as a quiet, unwavering motion; containing all things and being all things.... It is not discriminate as are the Reason-Principles, which can in fact be known one by one: yet its content is not a confusion; every item stands forth distinctly, just as in a science the entire content holds as an indivisible and yet each item is a self-standing verity.” (VI.9.5) See also I.1.8: “This also (the Intellect) we possess at the summit of our being. And we have It as common to all or as our own immediate possession.”

Concerning intellectual intuition, René Guénon writes:

“There is an intellectual intuition and a sensible intuition; one lies beyond reason, but the other... can only know the world of changing and becoming..., an inferior part of nature. The domain of (Intellectual) intuition... is the province of eternal and immutable principles; it is the realm of metaphysics.” René Guénon:

experiential truth of this vision, which Nasr and his Traditionalist colleagues call *primordial wisdom*, is essentially shared, they contend, by all religions and traditional philosophies in the form of a unifying *religio perennis*. They argue that religion, because of its essentially revelatory nature, expresses metaphysical truth (and the Truth, by definition, is One, according to this school). Religion and traditional philosophy are also *ipso facto* repositories of expedient means by which the seeker can ascend through these levels of being indicated by the sacred symbols and scripture of the tradition in question to Intellectual vision and then to the One. Needless to say, Nasr et al. refuse to accept the conviction that the physical world is all that exists, and that the way to discover 'first principles' is by means of ever-more technologically sophisticated examinations of the sub-atomic, genetic and 'astronomical' manifestations of nature (in the broadest physical sense of the term), a world view generally supported by the attitudes, assumptions, processes and proponents of contemporary science.

The Traditionalist school's perspective on comparative religion³⁸ is best approached though its most influential representatives: René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon and of course Seyyed

"Oriental Metaphysics" in Jacob Needleman (ed.), The Sword of Gnosis (Arkana Books, London, 1986) page 44.

³⁸ The Traditionalists' premise is that traditional metaphysics and the search for contact with Intellectual vision constitute a sound foundation for not only the working toward a deeper understanding of religious doctrine and practice, but as a reasonable paradigm for the study of comparative religion as well. Implicit in their suggestion is that, again ideally, the scholar would be a practitioner of his or her own religion or traditional philosophy. We quote Nasr at length on this subject and suggest that, for a more in-depth exploration of the topic, the reader should refer to Frithjof Schuon's The Transcendent Unity of Religions:

"Another difficulty that modernism places in the way of a serious study of other religions is its own negation of the very metaphysical principles that underlie all religions. The 'science' of comparative religion or *Religionswissenschaft* began during the age of rationalism and came into its own as a separate discipline during the nineteenth century. The history of this discipline carries with it the limitations and prejudices of the period of its

Hossein Nasr. Space and time do not allow us to evaluate the Traditionalists' deductions that the existence of a *philosophia perennis* indicates the 'transcendent unity of religions'. Although there are indications of the tenets of their *philosophia perennis* in the metaphysics of nature presented in the Enneads of Plotinus and in Islamic mystical philosophy, it is not within our purpose to ratify or refute the Traditionalists' deductions concerning this concept.³⁹ Our focus is more directly related to an examination of the nature of the Intellectual vision that appears to be central in both Plotinus' and Islamic philosophy. Plotinus' philosophy and Nasr's traditional, orthodox Islam share a concern for the necessity of the marriage of wisdom and method, mediated by this Intellectual vision. At whatever level possible, the philosophical seeker is

formation. The 'age of enlightenment' saw itself as the final perfection of civilization and studied other religions as a prelude to Christianity with which it somehow identified itself despite its own rebellion against the Christian tradition. This attitude has continued to subsist to a certain degree.

... Phenomenology, which has criticized the shortcomings of the historical method and emphasized the morphological study of all religious manifestations, has been in a sense an improvement, but even that has not been sufficient. What has been lacking is true metaphysics, which alone can reveal the transparency of forms and bring to light their inner meaning. The study of religions began in the West when, on the one hand, the true metaphysical aspect of the Christian tradition had become eclipsed and nearly forgotten and, on the other hand, secular philosophies had become dominant which were from the beginning opposed to the very idea of the Transcendent and the *scientia sacra* which lies hidden within every religion. The study of religions, therefore, has been coloured by the mentality of modern Western man and seen under categories which have been either borrowed from later developments of Christianity or from reactions against Christianity. But in any case that metaphysical background which is indispensable for a study in depth of religion has generally been lacking." Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam and the Encounter of Religions", Sufi Essays (New York: State University of New York Press, 1972) page 127-9.

³⁹ The existence of a *philosophia perennis* is a contentious issue. For a point of view opposite to that of Nasr and the Traditionalists, see Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism", Steven T. Katz, ed., Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis (London: Sheldon Press, 1978) pages 22-74 and Steven T. Katz, "Mysticism and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture", Steven T. Katz, ed., Mysticism and Sacred Scripture (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) pages 7-67.

presented avenues to embark on a practical search for and experiential verification of the metaphysical truths communicated through his or her own religion or Traditional philosophy.

Contrary to other, equally valid and more scientifically objective approaches to the study of religion, Nasr's (and the Traditionalists') approach is predicated on religious faith. *A priori*, he (and they) insist that the *philosophia/religio perennis* has a Divine origin,

“...a single Divine Reality as the origin of all the millennial religions that have governed human life over the ages”... This Divine Reality is beyond all conceptualization and all that can said of It, and is referred to (for example) as the *La ilaha illa 'Lhah* (there is no divinity but God) of Islam; *neti, neti* (not this, not that) of the Upanishads; ‘Tao that can be named is not the real Tao’ of the Tao Te Ching also the ‘I am what I am’ in the Bible if the meaning of this well-known dictum is understood on the highest level.”⁴⁰

According to the Traditionalists' *philosophia perennis* perspective, this Absolute One produces (emanates or illuminates⁴¹ in the Plotinian vocabulary) Being as its first act: the creation of the divine order and ultimately all levels of manifestation from the celestial to the earthly, including the laws governing these interpenetrating worlds, come from this Primordial Act. The greater part of the resulting multi-leveled universe (the lesser part being the phenomenal, sensible world) is outside linear time, and the two grand movements of Creation and Return support the

⁴⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Religion and the Order of Nature, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) page 12.

⁴¹ A point of clarification: according to John Dillon: “... modern authorities on Plotinus would demur at the use of the term “emanation” to describe his doctrine, by reason of its rather Stoic connotations. For Plotinus, the creative process is a consequence rather of illumination, or irradiation from a higher principle, without loss of its essence, causing, in each case, first an indefinite and unformed projection of itself, and then a reversion upon it as source, which causes the hypostasis in question, Intellect, Soul or (the quasi-hypostasis) Nature to define itself and be productive in its turn- all this taking place, of course, not in any temporal sense, but eternally. .” John Dillon: “Plotinus: an Introduction” in Stephen Mackenna, trans., Plotinus: The Enneads (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969) pages xci-xcii.

interconnection of all levels. The metaphysical nature of this (timeless) created reality is the subject of each revealed religion because the metaphysical nature of things and divine revelation are two ends of the same stick. Our sensible world, as prescribed by its spiritually dependent and spiritually permeable nature, is made up of a plethora of symbols reflecting a higher order. In fact, it could be said that man needs religion for the understanding of Reality, and the Divine needs man's return to his Source to help justify and support the whole Cosmos.

At its best, Nasr's and his Traditionalist companions' world-view appears to be neither an empty call to return to some long-passed Golden Age, to 'better' times, nor an exhortation for us Western types to engage in a wholesale 'withdrawal from the world'. What Nasr et al. seem to be calling for is, at the least, a 're-valuing of values' in the West and an acknowledgment on the part of educated people that life is much more than 'name and form'; and even considering the subtle and 'non-physical' phenomena (in the quantum 'world' for example) discovered by a 'completely materialistic' modern science, the physical universe's source is much more subtle than even this most subtle materiality. According to Nasr and the Traditionalists, the *scientia sacra* (that is, the metaphysic) that they see at the core of religion and traditional philosophy points to the truth of the doctrine of levels of being— levels of presence, if you will— the realization of which correspond to man's 'birthright'.

In general, five major themes form the core of the Traditionalists' written work: a rigorous critique of the modern world and its materialistic values (including modern science, of course), and the four interdependent themes of metaphysics, tradition, symbolism and spiritual realization. René Guénon established the groundwork for these themes that continue to be reflected upon by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and other Traditionalists. In terms of a critique of the modern world, Nasr and his entire intellectual cadre contrast the reality of man's potential

metaphysical life in the Intellect with his sensory life ruled by impulse, materialism and the deification of the frequently misapplied powers of the rational mind. The following passage from Guénon's The Reign of Quantity is representative of this group's prevailing tone in examining this theme:

“Among the features characteristic of the modern mentality, the tendency to bring everything down to an exclusively quantitative point of view will be taken from now on as the central theme of this treatise. This tendency is most marked in the 'scientific' conceptions of recent centuries; but it is as conspicuous in other domains, notably in that of social organization: so much so that... our period could almost be defined as being essentially and primarily the 'reign of quantity'.”⁴²

True quality for Guénon— and for Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr— is situated in the metaphysical and is fittingly expressed by the richly evocative adjective, *primordial*. Considering the scope of this word's meaning and connotations, it will probably be most helpful and interesting to start examining the significance of this word in terms of the human condition, in light of how Guénon and his colleagues describe *primordial man* or the *primordial state*.

A principle to keep in mind while trying to give a clear picture of the primordial quality of man or the state of 'primordially' is that Guénon was vague on the subject. Presumably, this is because he and other like-minded Traditionalists think any specific descriptions of efficacious practices might be misunderstood and misapplied by people with 'experimental' natures and active imaginations⁴³, but who lack someone or some tradition to guide them and place their

⁴² Jean Borella, “René Guénon and the Traditionalist School,” Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman, eds., Modern Esoteric Spirituality, (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995) page 332.

⁴³ See the comment from Needleman on page 18.

practice into a context that would help rather than hinder their progress. Be that as it may, Guénon does delve, although not deeply, into those states of being realizable by man, “for all states of the being, considered under their primary aspect, abide in perfect simultaneousness in the eternal Now”,⁴⁴ a statement quite predictably, and quite traditionally, similar to Plotinus’:

“What then is the spirit (guiding the present life and determining the future?)
The Spirit of here and now.
And the God?
The God of here and now.” (III.4.3)

According to the metaphysic these scholars bring to the table, as ‘creatures in the image of God’, human beings are indeed graced with grand potential, each one being, as Plotinus has said, “an Intellectual cosmos”(III.4.3).

According to Guénon, Nasr et al., there is absolutely nothing in common with metaphysical realization and the means one thinks lead one to it or prepare one for it. Here, one assumes, they are stressing the complete difference in kind between anything said, read, intoned, sung, acted or danced with the completely incorporeal and universal nature of the Intellect. It is the difference between the moon and the finger pointing at it. However, what these symbols, rites and practices can do “is place the being in the position requisite for attainment, and that is all.”⁴⁵ What Guénon goes on to say in his essay “Oriental Metaphysics” is, in contrast, most interesting and most representative of the stance taken on the subject by major Traditionalist writers, and embraced by Seyyed Hossein Nasr into his orthodox Islamic worldview.

⁴⁴ René Guénon, “Oriental Metaphysics,” Jacob Needleman, ed., The Sword of Gnosis, (London: Arkana Books, 1986), page 48.

⁴⁵ Ibid., page 48.

Although some people need no preparation to receive metaphysical truth— and Alfred Lord Tennyson was apparently one of these people, ‘ascending’ into a mystical state, sometimes just by pronouncing his own name aloud— Guénon does concede that two things are absolutely necessary for most people: theoretical knowledge and concentration, the latter faculty “completely foreign to the mental habits of the West, where everything tends toward dispersion and incessant change.”⁴⁶ Dispersion and constant change are conceded, but we would submit that most people can concentrate when required: it is the power of attention at its many levels that is lacking, particularly that freer kind that can simultaneously take in oneself, what one is doing, and where and with whom one is doing it. As such, this function is much more flexible as well as wider and deeper in scope compared to concentration. Nevertheless, Guénon postulates three successive states of metaphysical realization, the first two ‘conditioned’ and the final one ‘unconditioned’.

The first stage is “the realization or development of all the potentialities that are contained in the human individuality... that reach out in diverse directions beyond the corporeal and the sensible.”⁴⁷ Since the language is so vague here, it may benefit from some careful, albeit somewhat speculative qualification. Human beings have the ‘positive’ capacities to think, feel, move, and exercise their will and to be consciously attentive to these processes in relationship to everyday life and to others; they also have the capacity to do all these things badly, perversely, or, sadly enough, in some cases seem hardly capable of doing many of them at all. It seems reasonable to assume, though, despite the beautiful, admirable and frightening variety of individuals in the human species, some want and seek a certain level of necessary balance, a

⁴⁶ Ibid., page 48.

⁴⁷ Ibid., page 49.

balance similar to that expressed by Plato in the Republic, where each part of oneself does the work best suited to it and no other.⁴⁸ In other words, emotions do not cloud the thinking, and thinking does not insert unnecessary deliberation into situations requiring emotional sensitivity and the corresponding acts of positive action, negative intervention or even informed indifference. Unnecessary tension in the body is a cause of both the incapacity to act and the impetus to act impulsively as well as a cause of disease. More examples could be listed, but it seems right to assume that the development implied by Guénon's comments might culminate in this elusive quality called 'balance'; a condition indicative of clarity in thought and a capacity to question who or what one is (in more meditative moments), sensitivity and receptivity in the feelings and a relaxed readiness for action in a healthy body. The search for this kind of balance seems to provide a reasonable formula for living a good life. It was reasonable even for Socrates, Plato and Plotinus. However, in addition to this balanced state that begins to approach the being of what Guénon, Nasr and their colleagues call 'primordial man', something more is needed. In this primordial state, the individual "...consciously possesses a faculty that is unknown to the ordinary man and that one might call the sense of eternity."⁴⁹

"The first thing to be done by those who wish to achieve true metaphysical understanding is to take up a position outside time we say deliberately in 'nontime' This knowledge of the intemporal can, moreover, be achieved in some real measure, if incompletely, before having fully attained this primordial state...."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ G.M.A. Grube, trans. Plato: Republic, (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 1992), *Book IV*, 435 c - 445 e, page 110-121.

⁴⁹ René Guénon, "Oriental Metaphysics," Jacob Needleman, ed., The Sword of Gnosis, (London: Arkana Books, 1986), page 50.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, page 50.

So this was the state— un-time bound, balanced, attentive, open and above all, completely non-violent— that was and is man's (and woman's) birthright. It appears that this is the experience that life is not passing one by when one is lost in 'thought', but that life is. By all reports, it is a state in which the mode of living is Now; a gap in one's own Symplegades opens to the Intellectual 'seeing' of the meaning in myth, symbol and rite. And by rights, the Traditionalists contend, as the human condition is shaken free of the cobwebs of dispersion, this state is the human being's birthright; at least this is the message of the representatives of the *philosophia perennis*, including Plotinus.

"When philosophy uses reason to resolve a doubt, this proves precisely that its starting point is a doubt that it is striving to overcome, whereas we have seen that the starting point of a metaphysical formulation is always something intellectually evident or certain, which is communicated, to those able to receive it, by symbolical or dialectical means designed to awaken in them the latent knowledge that they bear unconsciously, and it may be said, eternally within them."⁵¹

According to Guénon, Schuon and Nasr, the latent knowledge hidden within like a buried treasure, and expressed by the one metaphysic comprising the essence of all religions and traditional philosophies, has two last stages. The first of these, according to Guénon, is a supra-individual state in which the world of phenomena as we know them is completely transcended:

"The being, which can no longer be called human, has henceforth left the "flow of forms", to use a Far Eastern expression. There are, moreover, further distinctions to be made, for this stage can be subdivided. In reality it includes several stages, from the attainment of states that though

⁵¹ Frithjof Schuon, The Transcendent Unity of Religions, (Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1993) page xxxii.

informal still appertain to manifested existence, up to that degree of universality that is pure being.”⁵²

Plotinus fills in some of the details of this metaphysical experience, which corresponds to the

Being of the Intellect:

“All things (in the Intelligible World) are transparent, and there is nothing dark or resistant, but each Form is clear for all others right down to its innermost parts, for light is clear to light. Indeed, each has everything within it, and again sees all things in any other, so that all things are everywhere, everything is everything, each individual is all things, and the splendour is without end.” (V.8.4.)

“There, all things are filled, and, as it were, boiling over with life. It is though they flowed like a stream, from one source— not from one breath or warmth. Rather, it is though there were one quality, containing within itself and preserving all other qualities: that of sweetness along with the fragrance; the quality of wine along with the powers of every juice, with visions of colours, and with all that is known by the sense of touch. Let there also be all that the ear can hear; each melody and every rhythm.” (VI.7.12.)

The state described by Guénon and filled out in more detail by Plotinus implies many things, one of which is an unimaginable transformation of the individual. The human being previously described as Primordial Man is taken, like Enoch was taken, for example, and is absorbed by the consciousness of a unity created by the timeless and space-less interpenetration of all the Forms which give rise to all that governs life death and transformation in the sensible world. “All things are everywhere, and everything is everything.” (Ennead V.8.4.). It is certainly striking that before one is able to come to these supra-individual states, it is implied that one must ‘become oneself’; the suggestion seems to be that one must work for and be helped toward a kind of transitional state which Guénon, Nasr and the Traditionalists have termed *Primordial*, for it is in

⁵² Rene Guenon: “Oriental Metaphysics,” Jacob Needleman, ed., The Sword of Gnosis, (London: Arkana Books, 1986), page 51.

this attitude that a man or woman find themselves 'permeable' to the Intellect, and able, as Plotinus says, to "Shut your eyes and change to and wake to another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use." (I.6.8.)

The last state, the final goal of metaphysical realization lies beyond Being, however universal, in the realm of Plotinus' One:

"It is precisely because there is nothing within the One that all things are from it: in order that Being may be brought about, the source must be no Being but Being's generator, in what is to be thought of as the primal act of generation. Seeking nothing, possessing nothing, lacking nothing, the One is perfect and in our metaphor, has overflowed and its exuberance has produced the new: this product has turned again to its begetter and been filled and has become its contemplator and so an Intellectual-Principle.

That station toward the One (the fact that something exists in presence of the One) establishes Being; that vision directed upon the One establishes the Intellectual- Principle; standing towards the One to the end of vision, it is simultaneously Intellectual-Principle and Being; and, attaining resemblance in virtue of this vision, it repeats the act of the One in pouring forth a vast power." (V.2.1.)

According to Guénon, all the above supra-formal states are just that: even though they are the source for the existence and dynamic structure of our phenomenal world, they have nothing to do with phenomena as we know them on this sometimes all-too-sensible world. With the right kind of guidance, Guénon is certain that the human personality and essence can undergo a radical transformation, eventually leaving, as Prospero says in The Tempest "... not a rack behind. We (as individuals) are such stuff/ As dreams are made on, and our little life/ Is rounded with a sleep."⁵³ Even so, the Traditionalists never tire of emphasizing that the *religio/ philosophia*

⁵³ William Shakespeare, "The Tempest," Act IV, scene I, lines 156-8, G.B.Harrison, ed. Shakespeare the Complete Works, (New York/Chicago: Harcourt, Brace and World Inc., 1952) page 1495.

perennis is at the heart of every Traditional religion and philosophy, because of its basis in revealed and realizable Truth communicated via the Intellect. According to them, the realization of other levels of much grander Life within us is possible; and numerous texts, rites and symbols, they stress, attest to this fact, from almost the totality of earthly cultures.

Time and space do not permit us to perform a convincing primary source analysis of this statement to the extent required; but the following examinations of Plotinian metaphysics and 'certain currents in the intellectual life of Islam will allow us to acknowledge the possibility— along with Guénon, Schuon and especially Nasr— that despite the numerous forms of devotional and intellectual expression within Islam, at this religion's core is a synergy with Plotinian metaphysics. Based on Nasr's explications of Islamic science and philosophy, and according to the testimony of rigorous inquiry into the nature of the world and man that Plotinus has recorded in the Enneads, this metaphysic could be viewed as a veritable sacred science; and, if we are to take Plotinus on his own terms, an experiential one as well. Nasr's brand of mystically-inspired intellectual Islam and Plotinus' Platonism emphasize that to pursue this scientific path, the mind, heart and body have to be balanced and 'quickened', and the Intellect awakened. In order to point out how and why Plotinus' 'traditional' metaphysics was readily absorbed by formative intellectual currents in Islam, our next chapter will attempt to approach Plotinus 'on his own terms'.

TWO

PLOTINUS: THE MAN AND HIS INTELLECT

The following is a brief analytical distillation of Plotinus' character, the life in his school (what little we truly know of these things, based on the few specific references we have from the biography of him written by Porphyry⁵⁴) and the major themes in his metaphysics, with an emphasis on the pivotal role of the Intellect (the Intellectual Principle). In terms of the context in which metaphysical ideas are studied, it appears that in the late third century C.E. and most likely even today, the medium in which great 'seed' ideas such as Plotinus' are sown, grown, transmitted, verified and lived is in an atmosphere that evokes attention, refining it and attracting spiritual vision (*noesis*); this seems to require a community of 'companions on the way', organized on principles fostering a supportive, vivifying and rigorous atmosphere for the pursuit of self-knowledge in action and in meditation. The philosophical climate that settled around Plotinus on the outskirts of Rome was just such a one.

Considering the grand Unity of the spiritually energized Cosmos and man's function in it that Plotinus develops in the Enneads, it is initially surprising that he is "too often confined to the footnotes of philosophy."⁵⁵ This kind of anonymity might not have troubled the great philosopher in the least; for as evidenced by his pupil Porphyry's anecdotal reports, Plotinus by far preferred

⁵⁴ Porphyry, "On the Life of Plotinus and the Arrangement of his Work", Plotinus: The Enneads, trans. Stephen MacKenna (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969).

⁵⁵ Arnold A. Davidson, "Introduction", Pierre Hadot: Plotinus, or The Simplicity of Vision, trans. Arnold A. Davidson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993) page 1.

a modest life in an 'undiscovered country' to any and every form of personal aggrandizement. A case in point:

"... when Amelius persisted in urging him to allow of a portrait being made he (Plotinus) asked him, "Do you really think that I must also consent to leave, as a desirable spectacle to posterity, an image of the image?"⁵⁶

In his biography, Porphyry characterizes Plotinus as humble, detached from the personal, actively in but not of the world. He was an innovative teacher who regarded his teaching as neither innovative, nor even his own: "...our doctrine here is the explanation of an earlier and can show the antiquity of these opinions on the testimony of Plato himself." (V.1.8) As such, Plotinus' teaching is grounded in the verification of the hierarchical Cosmos metaphysics describes,⁵⁷ having been assisted in his search by what appear to be time-honoured, contemplative methods: "... by the ways of meditation and by the methods Plato teaches in the Banquet."⁵⁸ According to Plotinus' testimony, these practices and their fruits can help lift the soul in its ascent to the One, a flight that is "an infinite quest after the absolutely simple."⁵⁹

As indicated by the anecdotes in Porphyry's biography and by the Enneads themselves, the pursuit of spiritual liberation, is, in one sense, a solitary experience, the "passing of solitary to solitary" (VI.9.11), as Plotinus said; however, it appears that this search may be sustained by a living reciprocity between a system of ideas and 'skillful means' provided to individual seekers by their Tradition and a community of mutually supportive 'companions on the Way'. Porphyry

⁵⁶ Porphyry, page 1.

⁵⁷ See page 17, note 30.

⁵⁸ Porphyry, page 17.

⁵⁹ Hadot: Ibid., page 20.

reports, in sometimes hagiographic fashion, that as the representative of this living Platonic tradition, Plotinus was dedicated to a life of kindness, gentleness and attention, "... able to live at once within himself and for others... (never relaxing) from interior attention unless in sleep."⁶⁰ In fact, Plotinus and his companions pursued the study of philosophy in the heart of life within an often boisterous household: "not a few men and women of position, on the approach of death, had left their boys and girls, with all their property, in his care."⁶¹ The Master oversaw his wards' financial and educational needs, all the while keeping himself available to his many pupils with characteristically benevolent interest; yet according to Porphyry, all this activity "... never interrupted, during waking hours, his (Plotinus') intention toward the Supreme."⁶² Although much of the daily detail of life in Plotinus' school is missing in Porphyry's biography, it is reasonable to assume that, in addition to the responsibilities just mentioned, Plotinus regularly offered personal instruction to his pupils in facing life's problems and in meditation as well as in the fine points of philosophical argument, both in writing and in formal and informal exchanges.

In this context, in his summary of Porphyry's biography, John Dillon underscores "Plotinus' remarkable method of instruction, his Socratic, or Wittgensteinian, habit of teasing out the intricacies of a question in common with his hearers, rather than pontificating in set discourses."⁶³ A plethora of questions fills the Enneads: every tractate gathers momentum with

⁶⁰ Porphyry, "On the Life of Plotinus and the Arrangement of his Work," Plotinus: The Enneads, trans. Stephen MacKenna (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969) page 7.

⁶¹ Ibid., page 7.

⁶² Ibid., page 7.

⁶³ John Dillon, "Plotinus: an Introduction", Stephen MacKenna, trans., Plotinus: The Enneads (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969) page lxxxix.

them. Ennead I.6, for example, the oft-quoted piece on Beauty, develops its theme via thirty-four sequential questions, most of them presumably asked by Plotinus' pupils and answered by the great man himself. In fact, one of Plotinus' most famous responses closes this Ennead. In answer to the question "But how are you to see into a virtuous Soul and know its loveliness?" Plotinus says:

"Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smooths there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also: cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast, labour to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiseling your statue, until there shine out on you from it the godlike splendour of virtue, until you shall see the perfect goodness surely established in the stainless shrine. When you are self-gathered in the purity of your being, nothing now remaining that can shatter that inner unity, nothing from without clinging to the authentic man, when you find yourself wholly true to your essential nature, wholly that only veritable Light which is not measured by space, not narrowed to any circumscribed form nor again diffused as a thing devoid of term, but ever immeasurable as something greater than all measure and more than all quantity— when you perceive that you have grown to this, you are now become very vision: now call up all your confidence, strike forward yet a step— you need a guide no longer— strain, and see. This is the only eye that sees the mighty Beauty."
(I. 6. 9)

The above passage suggests that questions implied by passages in the Enneads are often just as provocative as the recorded ones Plotinus and his pupils ask in the text. For example, considered psychologically and spiritually, who (or what) is the 'you' that can "Bring light to all that is overcast"; who (or what function) is it that "cuts away all that is excessive" and "straightens out all that is crooked"? And what exactly is the "lovely face", as perfect presumably as that 'possessed before birth' in Zen parlance? Cooperating with or contacting this

inner artisan seems to require the kind of experience Plotinus embodied, experience tempered in the crucible of rigorous self-study and 'midwived' by what has been previously described as a sacred community of 'companions on the way'.

Although Porphyry reports in his biography that his teacher "was entirely free from all the inflated pomp of the professor"⁶⁴ and that "his lectures had the air of conversation"⁶⁵ – Plotinus is also characterized as intellectually formidable, demonstrating "the most remarkable power of going to the heart of a subject...always as ready to entertain objections as he was powerful in meeting them."⁶⁶ Plotinus possessed a finely trained mind grounded in the Platonic, as well as Pythagorean and Stoic traditions; and according to Porphyry, Plotinus was

"concise, dense with thought, terse, more lavish of ideas than of words, most often expressing himself with fervid inspiration. He followed his own path rather than that of tradition, but in his writings both the Stoic and Peripatetic doctrines are sunk; Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, especially, is condensed in them, all but entire.

He had a thorough theoretical knowledge of Geometry, Mechanics, Optics and Music, though it was not in his temperament to go practically into these subjects."⁶⁷

It seems that Plotinus was a Neo-Platonic, pre-Renaissance Renaissance man, observant of Socrates' admonition that "An unexamined life is not worth living".⁶⁸ But Porphyry's comment vis-à-vis Plotinus' following "his own path rather than that of tradition" might refer

⁶⁴ Porphyry, page 12.

⁶⁵ Ibid., page 12.

⁶⁶ Ibid., page 9.

⁶⁷ Ibid., page 10.

⁶⁸ Benjamin Jowett trans., *Apology, Dialogues of Plato*, Justin D. Kaplan ed., (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), 38a, page 34.

less to the substance and more to the flavour of Plotinus' questions and explanations: because Plotinus was a Platonist through and through. To reiterate, he did say that: "our doctrine here is the explanation of an earlier and can show the antiquity of these opinions on the testimony of Plato himself." (V.1.8) Plotinus also appears to have been a mystically inspired, idiosyncratic seeker. But so were Plato and Socrates, especially Socrates. And a deeper study of Plato's ideas and those of Plotinus might be substantively supported by first recognizing that at their foundation is a vision of a hierarchical cosmos expressing successive and interpenetrating levels of Being that appears to have been personally realized at least by Plotinus. By extension, this hierarchy is realizable by others. Indeed, having an inner search for Being is one of the characteristics distinguishing the Platonic and Plotinian philosophers from most of the more modern brand. Plotinus quite sensibly predicates entry into the way of philosophy on knowing and feeling that one indeed has the interest and capacity to search in this way:

"The seeker is soul and it must start from a true notion of the nature and quality by which soul may undertake the search; it must study itself in order to learn whether it has the faculty for the inquiry, the eye for the object proposed, whether in fact we ought to seek; for if the object is alien, the search must be futile, while if there is relationship the solution to our problem is at once desirable and profitable." (V.1.1)

As 'guru' of his Platonic ashram, Plotinus, according to Porphyry, lived his teaching in living with others.⁶⁹ He paid attention to them, his actions and presence probably reminding them

⁶⁹ It is essential to remember that "philosophy near the end of Antiquity was, more than anything else, a way of life. One went into a philosophy, so to speak, as one went into a religion: as the result of conversion, which brought about a complete change of one's existence. The philosopher was less a professor than a spiritual guide; he exhorted his charges to conversion, and then directed his new converts— often adults as well as young people— to the paths of wisdom. He was a spiritual adviser. To be sure, he did some teaching, and his classes could be even rather technical, dealing with questions of logic or physics. These intellectual

to search for the truly good in themselves. In this context, Porphyry relates a revealing example of Plotinus' highly principled and seemingly prescient guidance. Having learned that Porphyry intended to commit suicide, Plotinus "...discerned my purpose: he came unexpectedly to my house where I had secluded myself, told me that my decision sprang not from reason but from mere melancholy and advised me to leave Rome."⁷⁰ (It appears that, among the practical benefits accruing to a consummate spiritual search is a sense of perspective). This perspective is truly such because its foundation rests on a relationship to a much larger view and experience of a grander world of which this one is just a part. Plotinus seems to have personally digested all this and applied the results to the practical round of daily living:

"For on earth in all succession of life, it is not the Soul within but the Shadow outside of the authentic man, that grieves and complains and acts out the plot on this world stage which men have dotted with stages of their own constructing. All this is the doing of man knowing no more than to live the lower and outer life; and never perceiving that in his weeping and in his graver doings alike, he is but at play; to handle matters austere is reserved for the thoughtful: the other kind of man is himself a futility. Those incapable of thinking gravely read gravity into frivolities which correspond to their own frivolous nature. Anyone that joins their trifling and so comes to look on life with their eyes must understand that by lending himself to such idleness he has laid aside his own character. If Socrates himself takes part in the trifling, he trifles in the outer Socrates.

We must remember, too, that we cannot take tears and laments as proof that anything is wrong; children cry and whimper when nothing is amiss." (III.2.15)

exercises were only part of a method of education directed toward the soul in its entirety."

Pierre Hadot: Plotinus, or The Simplicity of Vision, trans. Arnold A. Davidson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993) page 75-76.

⁷⁰ Porphyry, page 9.

As a result of these kinds of everyday demands affecting the inner and outer life of his school, Plotinus' own search was probably continually strengthened by exchange on a variety of levels. As well, his attentive work with others also probably served as a constant reminder to remember and to strive toward his ultimate goal, at the same time attracting the essential 'interior attention' for the journey; and he 'lifted himself' often according to his biographer:

"... by the ways of meditation and by the methods Plato teaches in the Banquet, to the first and all-transcendent God—... the God who has neither shape nor form but sits enthroned above the Intellectual Principle and all the Intellectual sphere."⁷¹

Plotinus' life, at least the significant anecdotal pieces of it that we have thanks to Porphyry, suggests intimate reciprocity between the relation of the inner life of the Master to the inner and outer lives of his school or 'ashram': "The role of the sage is not— as in the radically mistaken view of Europeans— to explain things from zero and to construct a system, but firstly to 'see' and secondly to 'cause to see'."⁷² The previously mentioned characterization of Plotinus- as-Socratically-inspired-teacher certainly communicates part of his method in helping his pupils come to this.

The Sage Plotinus began to write down the results of his 'seeing' when he was fifty. The passage below is from his 'first effort':

"... when you are self-gathered in the purity of your being, nothing now remaining that can shatter that inner unity, nothing from without clinging to the authentic man, when you find yourself wholly true to your essential nature, wholly that only veritable Light which is not measured by space, not narrowed to any circumscribed form nor again diffused as a thing devoid of term, but ever immeasurable as something

⁷¹ Ibid., page 17.

⁷² Huston Smith, Forgotten Truth, (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) page 80.

greater than all measure and more than all quantity— when you perceive that you have grown to this, you are now become very vision: now call up all your confidence, strike forward yet a step— you need a guide no longer— strain, and see. This is the only eye that sees the mighty Beauty.”
(I. 6. 9)

The passage immediately above is taken from *On Beauty* (I.6), which, according to Porphyry's chronology, is the first tractate Plotinus ever wrote. Here, even in Plotinus' 'first effort' and in others written in what Porphyry terms Plotinus' 'early period'— when “ the talent (was) not yet matured to the fullness of nervous strength.”⁷³ — Plotinus' spiritual experience appears to be profound and the writing inspired by an equal necessity to communicate a 'view from the Real world' grounded in this experience. In fact, it is important to keep in mind, when examining any aspect of Plotinus' philosophy that:

“...all the traditional terminology with which Plotinus describes stages in the ascent of the Soul to the One ...(expresses) an inner experience. All these levels of reality (including the "all-transcendent God) become levels of inner life, levels of the self...the human self is not irrevocably separated from its eternal model, as the latter exists within divine Thought. The true self— the self in God— is within ourselves.”⁷⁴

In light of Hadot's comment above, the general impression given by concentrated exposure to the *Enneads* is that in Plotinus' view the inner and outer lives are two aspects of one Life of cosmological dimensions that can be experienced via contemplation.

In his first nine years as a writer, Plotinus completed twenty one treatises: difficult, demanding and some poetically inspired, they explore a broad range of subjects including ethics, metaphysics, cosmology, physics and some contain fragments of spiritual practices; and over the

⁷³ Porphyry, page 5.

⁷⁴ Pierre Hadot: *Plotinus, or The Simplicity of Vision*, trans. Arnold A. Davidson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993) page 26-27.

next six years as one of Plotinus' closest pupils, Porphyry edited his master's writing and participated in what one must have been a boisterous and spiritually rigorous daily round of 'school life'. During their intimate, six-year association, a time that Porphyry considered his master to be at "... the utmost reach of his powers",⁷⁵ Plotinus wrote twenty-four more treatises. But for Plotinus, writing was merely a compassionate accession to others' needs. Of primary importance to him—and to Porphyry as well—was to become uniate, one with God.

"There was shown to Plotinus the Term ever near: for the Term, the one end of his life was to become Uniate, to approach to the God over all: and four times during the period I passed with him, he achieved this Term, by no mere latent fitness but by the ineffable Act. To this God, I also declare, I Porphyry, that in my sixty-eighth year I too was once admitted and entered into union."⁷⁶

It would be reasonable to assume that the articulation of Plotinus' 'system of ideas' was informed and formed at all times in his writing 'career' by the quality of contemplation mentioned previously;⁷⁷ and those profound mystical experiences that Porphyry alludes to above were, in Plotinus' case, probably not the only times he had had privileged experiences of this kind. They had undoubtedly also occurred even before he began to write, shaping his thought and action in the microcosm of his school and in the macrocosm of the world in general.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Porphyry, page 5.

⁷⁶ Porphyry, page 17.

⁷⁷ See page 26.

⁷⁸ Porphyry says that Plotinus "had a large following (Porphyry, page 6); and although completely apolitical, Plotinus was not without powerful, political connections. For example, Porphyry says that "There were among Plotinus' hearers not a few members of the Senate" (Porphyry, page 6) and that Plotinus was "greatly honoured and venerated by the Emperor Gallienus and his wife Salonina." (Porphyry, page 9).

Plotinus wrote the final nine treatises in the last two years of his life while Porphyry was in Sicily on an enforced rest, one suggested to him, as noted above, by Plotinus himself. After Plotinus' death, Porphyry organized the fifty-four treatises into six thematically cohesive groups: the First Ennead: ethics; the Second: disquisitions on the world; the Third: the philosophical implications of some of the features of the world; The Fourth: treatises dealing with the Soul; The Fifth: concerning the Intellectual Principle; and the Sixth: Multiplicity to the One (our title).⁷⁹ It is important to emphasize that Porphyry imposed an organization on Plotinus' written work that in its original form exemplified the spirited spontaneity of its writer, spontaneity indicative of the refined quality of attention and being Plotinus appears to have embodied:

“Plotinus could not bear to go back on his work even for one re-reading; and indeed the condition of his sight would scarcely allow it; his handwriting was slovenly; he misjoined his words; he cared nothing about spelling; his one concern was for the idea: in these habits, to our general surprise, he remained unchanged to the very end.

He used to work out his design mentally from first to last: when he came to set down his ideas, he wrote out all at one jet all he had stored in mind as though he were copying from a book.

Interrupted, perhaps, by someone entering on business, he never lost hold of his plan; he was able to meet all the demands of the conversation and still keep his own train of thought clearly before him; when he was free again, he never looked over what he had previously written- his sight, it has been mentioned, did not allow of such re-reading- but he linked on what was to follow as if no distraction had occurred.”⁸⁰

Much has been written about Plotinus' mysticism and metaphysics— the spiritual world, if you will. For example, it is probably safe to say that Ennead I.6 (*Beauty*) and Ennead VI.9 (*On*

⁷⁹ For a summary of Porphyry's organizational rationale for the final form of the Enneads, see *Porphyry*, pages 18-20.

⁸⁰ Porphyry, page 7.

the Good or the One) are 'spiritual classics'; given the number of times excerpts from them have been quoted and analyzed in anthologies and scholarly papers⁸¹. One theme emerging from the Enneads, and from these 'classics' in particular, is that Plotinus' inner and outer experience affirmed the world and its inhabitants and relations— all of them, at all levels; because "... in each of us is an Intellectual Cosmos, linked to this world by what is lowest in us, but, by what is the highest, to the Divine Intellect." (III.4.3)

So, we shall see that Plotinus' ideas reflect inner experiences interpreted in light of the Platonic Tradition which unveils a hypostatic Cosmos composed of interpenetrating levels of being (levels of Presence, if you will). Each level— except for the highest, the One— contemplates a higher level and, as a result of the generative nature of this quality of contemplation, irradiates or illuminates a lower⁸². According to Plotinus, man's fully realized Presence, his 'essential being' at its highest level is this living, hypostatic vision ("in each of us is an Intellectual Cosmos." III.4.3)

Plotinus' vision establishes a corresponding hierarchical 'place' for each level of reality, all of which are, of course, connected intimately to the physical one; and because each level, even the most imperfect, looks toward the level above it— in the sensible world's case, to the

⁸¹ Examples of these perennial favorites are found for example in introductory 'popularizations' of mysticism such as: F.C. Happold, Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1963) and Walter T. Stace, The Teachings of the Mystics, (New York: The New American Library, 1960). More contemporary scholarly examples of this kind of 'overview' are to be found in Bernard McGinn, The Foundations of Mysticism (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991) and Steven T. Katz, ed., Mysticism and Sacred Scripture (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁸² On the generative nature of contemplation in Plotinus, see "Nature, Contemplation and the One" (III.8) and "The Three Initial Hypostases", specifically V.1.6.

Intelligible Realm via Soul— it is obviously ignorant to judge the world we live in based on criteria that unfairly “rate it too high”:

“nor may we grant that this world is of unhappy origin because there are many jarring things in it. Such a judgment would rate it too high, treating it as the same as the Intelligible Realm and not merely its reflection.” (II.9.4)

To do this would be analogous to denigrating the essential qualities of a predatory animal— its grace, its unique marriage of form and function, its capacity for courage and sacrifice in order to protect its young and its skill at the kill in order to contribute unconsciously to the ‘balance of nature’ — and to castigate it for being vicious and bloodthirsty. Each thing in the sensible world has a role to play, and while playing that role it is, in effect, ‘transparent’, for:

“what reflection of that world (the Intelligible World, Plato's World of Forms) could be conceived more beautiful than this of ours? What fire could be a nobler reflection of the fire there than the fire we know here? Or what other earth than this could have been modeled after that earth? And what globe more minutely perfect than this could have been conceived in the image and self-centred circling of the World of Intelligibles? And for a sun figuring the Divine sphere, if it is to be more splendid than the sun visible to us, what a sun it must be!” (II.9.4.)

Because the natural world has its source in the world Above (in the Intelligible Realm) and That world has its source in the Prime Generator (the One), then the world we see partakes in some manner of the Divine; and because it does this, it has to be the way it is, imperfectly reflecting its Source via its own natural limitations. No so-called ‘gnostic’ condemnation of the natural world is necessary. In speaking of the Cosmos, Plotinus says:

“...This thing that has come into being is (not a mass of fragments but) the Cosmos complete: do but survey it, and surely this is the pleading you will hear:
I am made by a God: from that God I became endowed with every form of life, adequate to my function, self-sufficing, lacking nothing: for I am the container of all, that is, of every plant and of every animal, of all the Kinds of created things,

and many Gods and nations of Spirit-Beings and men happy in their goodness. And do not think that, while earth is ornate with all its growths and with living things of every race, and while the very sea has answered to the power of Soul, do not think that the great air and the ether and the far-spread heavens remain void of it: there it is that all good Souls dwell, infusing life into the stars and into that orderly circuit of the heavens which in its conscious movement ever about the one centre, seeking nothing beyond, is a faithful copy of the divine Mind. And all that is within me strives towards the Good; and each, to the measure of its faculty, attains. For from that Good all the heavens depend, with all my own Soul and the Gods that dwell in my every part, and all that lives and grows, and even all in me that you may judge inanimate.

There are, it would seem, degrees of participation: here no more than Existence, elsewhere Life; and, in Life, mainly that of Sensation, higher again that of Reason, finally Life in all its fullness. We have no right to demand equal powers in the unequal: the finger is not to be asked to see; there is an eye for that; a finger has its own business— to be a finger and have finger power.” (III.2.3)

Here, we have a clear depiction of the interdependence of living systems composing the being of the All and the implied analogy to the being of the Complete Man (The Proficient). Various expressions of the interpenetration of levels of reality that point to the essence of the Enneads’ message all require verification through visionary (Intellectual) experience by which, or through which, the individual human soul, in Plotinus’ schema, finds itself able to return to the ‘Fatherland’.

Beyond the Fatherland (the Intellectual Sphere, the Divine Mind) is the One. In Plotinus, every description of the One is paradoxical: it is nothing and everything, beyond Being and yet it is being’s generator:

“The Unity, then, is not Intellectual-Principle but something higher still: Intellectual-Principle is still a being but that First is no being but precedent to all Being: it cannot be a being, for a being has what we call the shape of its reality, but the Unity is without shape, even shape Intellectual.

Generative of all, The Unity is none of all; neither thing nor quality nor quantity nor intellect nor soul; not in motion, not at rest, not in place, not in time: it is the self-defined, unique in form or, better, formless, existing before Form was, or Movement or Rest, all of which are attachments of Being and make Being the manifold it is." (VI.9.3)

It is the 'absolutely simple', void of qualities that can be precisely conveyed in words. For Plotinus, it is the 'Term' of our search, our Ultimate Source, and simply the Good. Its perfection is by necessity creative and Its creation or irradiation is the Divine Plan, the living eternal blueprint of everything, on every level from the coarse to the fine. This is the Intellectual Principle, which, as an irradiation of the One and having It as the object of contemplation, has following quality of Being:

"... for all is transparent, nothing dark or resistant; every being is lucid to every other, in breadth and depth; light runs through light. And each of them contains all within itself, and at the same time sees all in every other, so that everywhere there is all, and all is all and each all, and infinite the glory." (V.8.4.)

"There, all things are filled, and, as it were, boiling over with life. It is though they flowed like a stream, from one source— not from one breath or warmth. Rather, it is as though there were one quality, containing within itself and preserving all other qualities: that of sweetness along with the fragrance; the quality of wine along with the powers of every juice, with visions of colours, and with all that is known by the sense of touch. Let there also be all that the ear can hear; each melody and every rhythm." (VI.7.12.)

The Intellectual Realm (*Nous* or Divine Mind) expresses true unity in diversity; the images of vibrant transparency used by Plotinus to depict this metaphysical level describe what really only can be experienced as a result of climbing the inner ladder of meditation. Designed to stimulate one's mind and feeling to resonate with the vast beauty of this vision of the interpenetration of forms, qualities and principles of literally everything living, the image of *Nous* prefigures

William Blake's "infinity within a grain of sand and eternity in an hour".⁸³ Plotinus' descriptions of this Intellectual Realm include some of the most inspired and evocative poetic images extant in Western sacred texts. Perhaps the evocation intended by Plotinus was designed to lead the attention in the mind, feeling and perhaps even sensation away from a quantitative and temporal engagement with the world toward a perception that might be termed qualitative (in the senses of Platonic balance of mind, feeling and body and of expansion of Presence) and timeless (in the sense of an experience of the instantaneous interpenetration of forms and events, including 'oneself').

In the spirit of what might be coined 'Enneadic' thought, consider, for example, what the Form of a human life might be, and 'might be' is the operative phrase here. It could express a unity, from birth to death: all levels of potential and realized relationship, with others, with humanity as a whole and with all of Nature and the Cosmos from the lowest to the highest levels of Being (including the One), perceived in eternity— in an instant, all at once. Perhaps this is not too distant from a relatively accurate description of the living experience of the totality of oneself, the consciousness of the Complete or Perfect Man, which, according to Plotinus,

"And each of them contains all within itself, and at the same time sees all in every other, so that everywhere there is all and each all, and infinite the glory" (V.8.4)

This Presence, the Complete Man's soul, is incomprehensible to the discursive intellect, but it is with questions concerning the Soul, Plotinus' third Hypostasis, that methods for the ascent come

⁸³ "To see a world in a Grain of Sand
And Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour."
William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence" Geoffrey Keynes, ed., Blake: Complete Writings, (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) page 431.

into view, specifically in light of how the dialectical encounter with great ideas (which form a complete and practical metaphysic, as the Enneads seem to) can be catalysts for this ascent.

The metaphysical substrate of great ideas, particularly as they are expressed by Plotinus' dialectic in the Enneads, brings two potentially spiritually transforming notions into human thought: the previously mentioned idea of 'quality', particularly as it refers to interpenetrating levels of Being, and the idea of 'unity'. These ideas and the experiences and articulations that give them life are constantly and consistently revolutionary. Seemingly capable of simply overtaxing the discursive mind and quieting it, they are completely different in kind from the ordinary cast of rational thought that is grounded in the self-limiting concepts of linear time and the perceived separation of objects in the sensible world in space. Language-based descriptions of the world are based on the apparently self-limiting boundaries of these largely unquestioned modes of perception.

"Understanding is... the balance between being and knowledge in man, the point of contact which man may establish between a certain quality of material vibration and the forms and perceptions that make up the social self, or personality, of a human being. Metaphysically, this can be taken as the contact between the immensity of a great cosmos and the interior, individual cosmos of a man or woman on earth. Universal concepts in all their interrelationships represent or express this contact and have, over the ages, been communicated through the vehicle of mythic language. The gods of ancient Egypt, for example, were translated into discursive and abstract modes by Plato in order to communicate the way to truth to a scientific-minded Athenian culture, not unlike our modern scientific culture in its preoccupation with the logical, combinatory functions of the cerebral brain. Thus in Plato, the philosophic generalization (the idea of the Good, Justice, Virtue, and so forth) can be roughly equated with the representation of a metaphysical state of affairs in which the greater level (the universal) penetrates and influences a lesser level (the

particular). Understanding is thus a material or cosmic state of affairs represented by mental formulae.”⁸⁴

What metaphysics brings to an inquiry into the meaning and end of life is the notion of Being and its many levels. Plato (and Plotinus) do certainly take metaphysics out of the realm of mythic story, which makes use of fantastic geography, epic quests and supernatural beings to express aspects of inner search, and place it within the vehicle of ideas— but for a specific reason: when their verification of these ideas is pursued seriously, the ordinary time and space-bound mind can be brought to a particular kind of ‘stop’, to a kind of ‘open perplexity’. Without question, given what we know about what he taught and how he taught it, Plotinus certainly understood this. This state might attract a relaxed readiness in the mind that possibly could resonate to higher levels of being, via a ‘new way of seeing’ that Plotinus emphasizes throughout the Enneads. This is a fundamental Platonic technique. Plato presents Socrates’ primary teaching technique in the earlier Dialogues⁸⁵ as bringing one to this state of intense perplexity, to a realization that one’s discursive intellect is merely a collection of opinions rather than a source of true knowledge; but in experiencing perplexity, especially when confronting a metaphysical idea in the midst of conditions as were produced in Plotinus’ school, one’s philosophical feet could be set on the right path toward truth. Perhaps the ‘ascent to Heaven’ can begin only in a state like this, because attention has been qualitatively expanded and directed within and ‘above’.

The understanding of great ideas, then, depends upon what Needleman has called “a point of contact between the immensity of a great cosmos and the interior, individual cosmos of

⁸⁴ Jacob Needleman, “Gurdjieff, or the Metaphysics of Energy,” Jacob Needleman and George Baker, eds., Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and his Teaching, (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1996) page 77-78.

⁸⁵ See Plato's Meno for an excellent, representative example, particularly 80 a-e.

a man or woman on earth”.⁸⁶ To reiterate, Plotinus understood this: the Enneads explore “the immensity of a great cosmos”; and in confronting this immensity, it could be said that Plotinus’ fellow seekers— in whatever century they find themselves— encounter their ‘individual cosmos’ first at the level of being ‘in question’. In fact, great cosmological ideas, by their very nature, are questions. Perhaps, without their goading and the requisite conditions provided by Plotinus or someone like him and what has been called the sacred community, the seeker would neither know what to search for, nor would he or she be prepared to use the methods offered by the particular Tradition to support the search. So, it seems that the question of ‘what we really are’ is fundamental to beginning this inner journey and commensurate with facing ideas about “the immensity of a great cosmos”:

“But we ourselves. What are we?

Are we that higher or the participant newcomer, the thing of beginnings in time?

Before we had our becoming here, we existed There (in the Intelligible Realm, the Divine Mind), men other than now, some of us gods; we were pure souls, Intelligence inbound with the entire reality, members of the Intellectual, not fenced off, not cut away, integral to that All. Even now, it is true, we are not put apart; but upon that primal Man there has intruded another, a man seeking to come into being and finding us there, for we were not outside of the universe.

This other has wound itself about us, foisting himself upon the Man that each of us was first. Then it was as if one voice sounded, one word was uttered, and from every side an ear attended and received and there was effective hearing, possessed through and through of what was present and active upon it: now we have lost the first simplicity; we are become the dual thing, sometimes no more than that later foisting, with the primal nature dormant and in a sense no longer present.” (VI.4.14.)

⁸⁶ Jacob Needleman, “Gurdjieff, or the Metaphysics of Energy,” Jacob Needleman and George Baker, eds., Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and his Teaching, (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1996) page 77-78.

Always consistent because his metaphysics was tested in the crucible of own experience, Plotinus again emphasizes that the seeker has never been cut off from the Source, but he/she has, in a sense, misplaced himself or herself, having been hypnotized by the man of sense, the one who has “wound itself about us”, binding us to the world of linear time and spatial separation. In order to know how to extricate itself, “the Soul must be trained.” (I.6.9.) Training, for Plotinus, is “the habit of remarking first all noble pursuits, then the works of beauty produced not by the labour of the arts but by the virtue of men known for their goodness: lastly, you must search the souls of those who have shaped these beautiful forms.” (I.6.9.) The noblest pursuit is, of course, Philosophy; and, as has been mentioned, the great ideas contained within Philosophy can reveal what to question and how to deepen this questioning through exchange with others in the philosophical school and alone in meditation. In Plotinian terms, philosophy is a way of purification. “For, as the ancient teaching was, moral-discipline and courage and every virtue, not even excepting Wisdom itself, all is purification.” (I.6.6) It is indeed interesting that Plotinus, like Plato, does not have much faith in art and its ability to reflect the Beautiful, but rather it is the actions of virtuous people and the souls of those people that call for attention and emulation.

Both Rist⁸⁷ and Hadot⁸⁸ agree that one of the central problems addressed by Plotinus was how to live in order that one’s life experiences support one’s own ascent and help others do the

⁸⁷ J.M. Rist, Plotinus: The Road to Reality, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). See in particular Chapter 12: “The Self and Others”. “In practice, (Plotinus) has recognized that concern for others does not entail the withdrawal of the mind from higher things and its submergence in the lower. The Plotinian Soul is a subtle instrument; it can contemplate the higher and care for the lower at the same time.” (page 168).

⁸⁸ Pierre Hadot: Plotinus, or The Simplicity of Vision, trans. Arnold A. Davidson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993). See in particular Chapter 5: *Virtues*.

same. Specifically, according to Hadot, the question is: how to live one's life in such a way that the act of living prepares one for contemplation and vice versa? For Plotinus, the ascent to the One has transforming power, one that engenders virtue; and after this privileged experience, one's presence and one's actions in life express what one has received in the moment of ecstasy:

"There is thus a converse in virtue of which the essential man outgrows Being, becomes identical with the Transcendent of Being. The self thus lifted, we are in the likeness of the Supreme: if from that heightened self we pass still higher— image to archetype— we have won the term of our journeying. Fallen back again, we waken the virtue within until we know ourselves all order once more; once more we are lightened of the burden and move by virtue towards Intellectual Principle and through the Wisdom in That to the Supreme. This is the life of gods and blessed among men, liberation from the alien that besets us here, a life taking no pleasure in the things of earth, the passing of solitary to solitary." (VI.9.11.)

The statement "A life taking no pleasure in the things of the earth" needs some qualification because Plotinus is neither a dour ascetic, nor in any way is he tinged with hatred of or disgust with the body as are the Gnostics, whom he so severely castigates in II.9:⁸⁹ one of the major thrusts of his dialectic is that experiencing the levels of presence he describes in the Enneads fundamentally changes one's orientation to living. According to Plotinus, free will has nothing to do with man's capacity or incapacity to act in the sensible world, but everything to do with a Vision of the real world that includes this one in the 'cosmic immensity':

⁸⁹ Plotinus' fundamental objections to the Gnostics are that they condemn the material world and the body as evil, ignorantly malign the ancient Greek tradition and "... neglect all mention of virtue" (II.9.13). In Ennead II.9, Plotinus levels a total of eighty-four challenging questions at the Gnostics' 'principles', or lack thereof. He addresses all these questions with the sagacity characteristic of the union of knowledge and being that is the mark of his contemplatively-inspired stance throughout the Enneads.

“Thus our freedom of act, our self-disposal, must be referred not to the doing, not to the external thing done but to the inner activity, to the Intellection, to virtue’s own vision.”
(VI.8.6)

Throughout the Enneads, Plotinus makes it perfectly clear that the metaphysical view of the world is only truly verifiable through this Intellection, this ‘other kind of seeing’. In fact, one could say that according to Plotinus, the noblest purpose of a human life is to ‘see and cause others to see’ in this fashion. The kind of ‘seeing’ Plotinus talks about appears to have the power to transform one’s life. For example, from the perspective of this inner sight:

“What else is Sophrosyny, rightly so-called, but to take no part in the pleasures of the body, to break away from them as unclean and unworthy of the clean. So too, Courage, is but being fearless of the death which is but a parting of the Soul from the body, an event which no one can dread whose delight is to be the unmingled self. And Magnanimity is but disregard for the lure of things here. And Wisdom is but the Act of the Intellectual Principle withdrawn from the lower places and leading the Soul to the Above.” (I.6.6)

Another major theme emerging from Plotinus’ teaching is *reciprocity*, the life-sustaining exchange of energies among beings on the same plane of existence, and between this level and higher levels of being via contemplation and emanation. In Plotinian terms, the act of contemplation mediates a reciprocity between mystical vision and virtue and implies, of course, not only a method for awakening the “virtue within” but suggests a subtle work of attention which might be an aspect of the particular kind of ‘seeing’ to which Plotinus refers throughout the Enneads. Plotinus directly states that one needs to be shown how to look towards the higher: “For to say ‘Look to God’ is not helpful without some instruction as to what this looking imports... God on the lips without a good conduct of life, is a word.” (II.9.15.) In fact, everything he says about practising the behavioral virtues (moderation, gentleness, courage etc.) implies a collecting of the valuable energy of attention— which otherwise, as noted previously, would be

squandered by the 'foisting one' or the 'outer man' — and having it serve the growth of benevolent, grander perspective on the world of sense. Plotinus appears to have lived an exemplary life in this regard, standing fast in his conviction that in order to encounter the Good life absorbed in the Supreme, it was necessary first of all to come to a point of contact as was said between 'the immensity of a great cosmos' and the question of who (or what) one truly is and what one could be. Presumably, if this contact is sufficiently intense and protracted, well-supervised and repeated daily over many years, for example, it might be possible to discover what Plotinus calls 'the essential man' (V.9.11) who may, in the next stage of ascent:

"...outgrow Being, (become) identical with the Transcendent of Being. The self thus lifted, we are in the likeness of the Supreme: if from that heightened self we pass still higher— image to archetype— we have won the term of our journeying."(V.9.11)

Plotinus also gives meditation exercises in the Enneads, although additional insights into the specifics of practice appear to be omitted, primarily, one assumes, because the majority of his teaching was oral, requiring a direct master-pupil relationship. Nevertheless, there are outlines of Plotinian meditation practices throughout the Enneads, including exercises in inner listening to refine the attention:

"... we must turn the perceptive faculty inward and hold it to attention there. Hoping to hear a desired voice, we let all others pass and are alert for the coming at last of that most welcome of sounds. So here, we must let the hearings of sense go by, save for sheer necessity and keep the Soul's perception bright and quick to the sounds from above."
(V.1.12.)

The pupil is instructed here, and elsewhere, to listen for "that God who is silently present" (V.8.11), an effort presumably helping to relax the body and free the ordinary attention from the

myriad of associative distractions with which the psychic and sensual lives are filled. As we have already seen, Plotinus' dialectical teaching style was also designed with this purpose in mind.

There are further indications that Plotinus instructed his pupils in visualization, a practice reminiscent of complex Tibetan Buddhist techniques⁹⁰ for stilling the ordinary mind and attracting a finer, more receptive attention:

"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, say the outer orb of the heavens, shall bring immediately with it the vision, on the one plane, of the sun and of all the stars with the 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 a gleaming representation of a sphere, a picture holding all the things of the universe moving or in repose or (as in reality) some at rest, some at motion. Keep this sphere before you, and from it imagine another, a sphere stripped of magnitude and of physical 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." (V.8.9.)

The demanding exercise given above and the interpenetrating levels of reality pictured in it are further testimony to the spiritual depth of vision expressed by what has been called Plotinus' thought. Throughout the Enneads, spiritual exercises and the rigorous 'Socratic' atmosphere of

⁹⁰ For an introduction to the theory and practice of these kinds of techniques, see Giuseppe Tucci: The Theory and Practice of the Mandala (Samuel Weiser Inc., New York, 1969). And further, in reference to Ennead V.8.9: "The parallel noted by scholars to the exercises of other religious traditions suggests that such passages are no mere poetic imagery, and thus constitute a third type of evidence that a definite experience is involved." Richard T. Wallace, "Nous as Experience", R. Baine Harris, ed. The Significance of Neoplatonism, (Norfolk, Virginia: International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, 1976) page 124.

questioning that supported them— evidence of the depth of his own spiritual experience and his dedication to living a life full of attention on himself, on others and on the Divine— suggest that Plotinus was a paragon of spiritual guides, an extraordinarily accomplished ‘cosmological’ man:

“He that has the strength, let him arise and draw into himself, foregoing all that is known by the eyes, turning away forever from the material beauty which once made his joy. When he perceives those shapes of grace that show in body, let him not pursue: he must know them for copies, vestiges, shadows, and hasten away towards That they tell of....
 ‘Let us flee to the beloved Fatherland’: this is the soundest counsel. But what is this flight? How are we to gain the open sea? For Odysseus is surely a parable to us when he commands the flight from the sorceries of Circe or Calypso— not content to linger for all the pleasure offered to his eyes and all the delight of sense filling his days.

The Fatherland is There whence we have come, and There is the Father.

What then is our course, what the manner of our flight? This is not a journey for the feet; the feet bring us only from land to land; nor need you think of coach or ship to carry you away; all this order of things you must set aside and refuse to see: you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use.” (I.6.8.)⁹¹

Central to Plotinus’ method and pivotal to metaphysical understanding, this ‘seeing’ is “an intuitive, non-discursive, a-rational rather than rational form of *noesis*....”⁹² The whole point of Plotinus’ teaching is to help rediscover this Intellectual capability: to do this is really, in Socratic terms, to know oneself, because “in each of us is an Intellectual Cosmos” (III.4.3) and

⁹¹ Stephen MacKenna (trans.): Plotinus: The Enneads (George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1953) page 137.

⁹² Laura Westra, “Self-Knowing in Plato, Plotinus and Avicenna”, Parviz Moorewedge, ed., Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), page 100.

“when the soul begins to mount, it comes not to something alien, but to its very self” (VI.9.11).

The teaching is father of the primal Man.

Plotinus’ presentation of a dynamic metaphysical hierarchy realizable by Intellectual (*noetic*) vision plus the fragments we have of his life as recounted by Porphyry all suggest that the major thrust of his teaching was to show a way to “escape the limits of discursivity... and to call attention to the quality of interior vision itself, and in particular, its capacity to be at once unitary and multi-faceted in a way that exterior vision is not”.⁹³ In fact, it is our view that Plotinus’ double emphasis on the Unity experienced via Intellectual vision and the ‘metaphysical transparency’ of the natural world inspired Islam to embrace him.⁹⁴ Although necessarily painted with bold, broad strokes, this portrait of Plotinus and his teaching now allows us to examine the Plotinian metaphysical dimensions of nature in more detail in the next chapter, in preparation for a further analysis of the metaphysical commonality between the Intellect and nature in Plotinus’ Platonism and significant currents in the Islamic intellectual tradition. Plotinus lays out the relevant metaphysical context for all this with characteristic precision:

“... an object is great in itself and its greatness is due, not to any external but to its participation in the Absolute great.”(VI.3.11)

⁹³ Sara Rappe, “Metaphor in Plotinus’ Enneads V 8.9”, Ancient Philosophy 15 (Mathesis Publications, 1995) page 165.

⁹⁴ This point will be further illustrated in Chapter Four. See page 59, note 94.

THREE

PLOTINUS AND THE METAPHYSICS OF NATURE

Plotinus' metaphysics is based on the principle of relativity, of interrelationship among levels of being, the most creative and 'Authentic' ones unconstrained by time and space as we know and experience them. When placed in an 'Absolutely great' context, living things in the sensible world appear as 'shadows' cast by what Plotinus terms their real 'Authentic Existents',⁹⁵ that in turn are ultimately unified in the 'otherness' of the One. Viewed even theoretically from this celestial perspective, the plethora of separate living beings and systems composing the sensible world is one of the necessary, law-conforming lower planes in an essentially 'vertical' cosmos, the higher ones being Soul, the Intellectual Principle (Nous) and the One. Each interrelated level is self-defined by its degree of self-conscious unity. According to Plotinus, temporal events, things and beings in the sensible world are, as a result of their place in the ontological scheme of things, "images and shadow-pictures, fugitives that have entered into Matter- to adorn and to ravish where they are seen." (I.6.3); but simultaneously, these events and objects are signs pointing to the subtle and deep spiritual reality vivifying them:

"The Intellectual Principle, then, in its unperturbed serenity has brought the universe into being, by communicating from its own store to Matter: and this gift is the Reason-Form flowing from it. For the emanation of the Intellectual Principle is Reason, an emanation unfailing as long as the Intellectual Principle continues to have place among beings."
(III.2.2)

⁹⁵ See in particular Ennead V.9 "The Intellectual Principle, the Ideas, and the Authentic Existence".

We have examined Plotinus' hypostatic vision of the 'Absolutely great',⁹⁶ previously, but the brief reiteration above is meant to serve as introduction to Plotinus' incredibly striking statements concerning the creative power released by Nature's contemplative activity and man's relationship to it. Focusing primarily on Ennead III.2 and 3 ("On Providence"), Ennead III.8 ("Nature, Contemplation and the One") and Ennead VI.3 ("On the Kinds of Being: Third Treatise"), our analysis of Plotinus' metaphysics of nature will address three questions: how Nature is the result of contemplation, how "the labour and productiveness of the earth" (III.8.1) depends on Nature's own contemplation and how each element in nature is a symbol whose essential qualities point to elements of Real Being. This chapter will also begin to reveal why certain currents in Islamic intellectual life were most receptive to Plotinus' expression of the *philosophia perennis et universalis*.⁹⁷

In establishing parameters for our discussion, the natural world (the sensible world, the material world) embraces, in Plotinian terms of reference, all animate and inanimate organized

⁹⁶ It is really more accurate to say "a point of contact between the immensity of a great cosmos and the interior, individual cosmos of a man or woman on earth" (see page 37) because Plotinus' metaphysics expresses the cosmic dimension of the 'essential man' (V.9.11).

⁹⁷ "... although the Muslims were not interested in the Olympic pantheon, through Greek philosophical and scientific works they came to learn of the Orphic-Pythagorean element of the Greek tradition, which interested them immensely, precisely because it was an assertion of the doctrine of Divine Unity. If they called Plato the imam of the philosophers and Plotinus 'the Shaykh of the Greeks' (namely, their Sufi master) it was again because in their writings they saw the expression of that metaphysical doctrine that Islam was to expound later. In the Ishraqi theosophy of Suhrawardi, moreover, there is continuous reference to the universality of a wisdom which was shared by all nations of old and which found its universal expression in Islamic gnosis. It was that wisdom which Steuben, Leibnitz and the Neoscholastics were later to call the *philosophia perennis*, an expression to which A.K. Coomaraswamy quite rightly added the epithet *et universalis*." Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Sufi Essays, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1972) page 146.

aggregations of matter and energy and their interrelationships, all of which combine to express the entire cosmos, from the subatomic to the galactic. In effect, this could be postulated as comprising the body of the universe; the All-Soul the Soul of the universe, the Intellectual Principle the Spirit of the universe and the One its transcendent and immanent Source. Human beings as living entities participate in the material cosmos; but in addition, according to Plotinus, the human soul has interior access via contemplation to all the levels of being in the aforementioned universe. By virtue of being an 'Intellectual cosmos' (III.4.3), the realized human being (the 'Proficient',⁹⁸ in Plotinian terminology) occupies a unique 'viceregal' place in the metaphysical scheme of things. Strictly speaking, Nature, in Plotinian terms, is not synonymous with the natural world, but exists ontologically prior to it as the lowest phase of the All-Soul. "... what we know as Nature is a Soul, offspring of yet an earlier Soul (the All-Soul) of more powerful life...." (III.8.4). Details of these metaphysical relationships will be explained in due course, but for now we should keep in mind that Plotinus presents Nature as a unique mediator, a relatively insubstantial but ultimately celestially-ordered expression of the refined, generative contemplation begun in the Intellectual Principle:

"The being we are considering is a living unity, and therefore necessarily self-sympathetic: it is under a law of reason and therefore the unfolding process of its life must be self-accordant: that life has no haphazard, but knows only harmony and ordinance: all the groupings follow reason: all single beings within it, all the members of this living whole in their choral dance are under a rule of number." (IV.4.35)

All ontological levels described in Plotinus' metaphysics express more and more inclusive degrees of unity, the One being the ultimate, the absolutely transcendent 'simplicity'. All levels

⁹⁸ A man who "... giving freely to his intimates of all he has to give, he will be the best of friends by his very union with the Intellectual Principle." (I.4.15) See also III.4.6: "What, then, is the achieved Sage?"

are ordered and connected, by a 'rule of number'. As we continue to explore the details of how the material world is precipitated via successive stages of contemplation, we shall identify Plotinus' statements concerning the characteristics of nature that garnered his attitudes respect and emulation in Islam, namely his assurances of the spiritual foundation for the order in nature and the goodness and justice implicit in it.

All the objects, beings and systems making up the natural world have been created ultimately by the Intellectual Principle: "The Intellectual Principle, then, in its unperturbed serenity has brought the universe into being, by communicating from its own store into Matter." (III.2.2); and despite the mediation by Nature, "the Over-World (the Intellectual Principle) cannot be cut off from the World of Sense. The higher shines down upon the lower, and this illumination is Providence in its highest aspect." (III.3.4). The All-Soul "...in its primal phase... (as) inhabitant of the Supreme (III.8.5) looks to the Intellectual Principle. The fruit of this contemplation is a formative energy that "goes forth ceaselessly as Life Streaming from Life." (III.8.5) The aforementioned formative energy is, according to Plotinus, a secondary weakened contemplation the All-Soul makes of its lower phase; this radiates toward Matter, producing Nature, "an image of Wisdom in the All-Soul." (IV.4.13)

"Thus the Intellectual Principle possesses: the Soul of the All eternally receives from it; this is the Soul's life; its consciousness is its intellection of what is thus eternally present to it; what proceeds from it into Matter and is manifested there is Nature, with which- or even a little before it- the series of real being comes to an end, for all in this order are the ultimates of the intellectual order and the beginnings of the imitative." (IV.4.13)

Plotinus' concept of Nature is fraught with complexity, but it is worthwhile sorting through it in order to get an insider's view, so to speak, of why the natural world is sacred, rather than face a gauntlet of sentimental pronouncements that it is so. Deck points out that Plotinus

“equates contemplation with producing” and that “...nature contemplates the visible cosmos”.⁹⁹

However, Plotinus characterizes Nature’s contemplation as weak; consequently its production is a relatively coarse set of dim reflections of the Ideas in the Intellectual Principle. Dim though they may be, they echo the Principle that formed them, and as such indicate their sacred source:

“But, if Nature entire is in question here, it is identical with the Reason-Principle; and any part of it that is unmoved is the Reason-Principle. The Nature-Principle must be an Ideal-Form, not a compound of Form and Matter; there is no need to possess (such a changeable element as) Matter, hot and cold: the Matter that underlies it, on which it exercises its creative act, brings all that with it, or, natively, without quality, becomes hot or cold, and all the rest, when brought under Reason: Matter, to become fire, demands the approach not of fire but of a Reason-Principle.” (III.8.2)

The Nature-Principle Plotinus refers to is of course part of the object of the All-Soul’s primary contemplation. Nature, whole and parts- body (the visible, sensible world), Soul (Life in the All-Soul) and Spirit (Idea in the Intellectual Principle)- is spiritual in foundation, contemplative in action:

“And Nature, asked why it brings forth its works, might answer if it cared to listen and to speak:

‘It would have been more becoming to put no question but to learn in silence just as I myself am silent and make no habit of talking. And what is your lesson? This: that whatsoever comes into being is my vision, seen in my silence, the vision that belongs to my character who, sprung from vision, am vision-loving and create vision by the vision-seeing faculty within me. The mathematicians from their vision draw their figures: but I draw nothing: I gaze and the figures of the material would take being as if they fell from my contemplation. As with my mother (the All-Soul) and the Beings that begot me so it is with me: they are born of a Contemplation and my birth is from them, not by their Act but by their Being; they are the loftier Reason-Principles; they contemplate themselves and I am born.’

⁹⁹ John Deck, Nature, Contemplation and the One, (Burdett, New York: Larson Publications, 1991) page 84.

Now what does this tell us?

It tells: that what we know as Nature is a Soul, offspring of a yet earlier Soul of more powerful life; that it possesses, therefore, in its repose, a vision within itself; that it has no tendency upward nor even downward but is at peace, steadfast, in its own Essence; that, in this immutability accompanied by what may be called Self-Consciousness, it possesses- within measure of its possibility- a knowledge of the realm of subsequent things perceived in virtue of that understanding and consciousness; and, achieving thus a resplendent and delicious spectacle, has no further aim." (III.8.4)

So Nature's effortless contemplation, its 'vision-seeing faculty', calls up the being of the material world's inhabitants, but not their materiality; and matter is potentiality, which although striving to be, never does. The best analogy Plotinus comes up with for matter is that it is a 'mirror' for being; and the reflections in the mirror constitute the beings, things and processes our ordinary senses and our electronically-assisted ones tell us exist in the material world around us.

"But would this mean that if there were no Matter nothing would exist?

Precisely as in the absence of a mirror, or something of similar power, there would be no reflection.

A thing whose very nature is to be lodged in something else cannot exist where the base is lacking- and it is in the character of a reflection to appear in something not itself."
(III.6.14)

From the Plotinian perspective, the material world is truly 'virtual reality'. Furthermore, Plotinus gives Nature's entire contemplative product a dream-like quality, as the connotations of 'transience' attached to the noun 'spectacle' suggest. At this point it is important to emphasize that the 'being' Nature gives to 'figures in the material world' is not the same quality of being they have when reflected in Matter's mirror:

"For the vision on which Nature broods, inactive, is a self-intuition, a spectacle laid before it by virtue of its unaccompanied self-concentration and by the fact that in

itself it belongs to the order of intuition. It is a Vision silent but somewhat blurred, for there exists another, a clearer, of which Nature is the image: hence all that Nature produces is weak; the weaker act of intuition produces the weaker object.” (III.8.4)

Incarnated within Plotinus’ metaphysical overview of things, the being of all ‘figures in the material world’ brought to life by Nature’s ‘somewhat blurred’ vision is termed ‘bodies in flux’ (VI.3.2); whereas, the ‘being’ of these same ‘figures’ as ‘Ideas’ in the Intellectual Principle is immutable, partaking in the sacred:

“The Intellectual Principle; beautiful; the most beautiful of all; lying lapped in pure light and in ‘clear radiance; circumscribing the Nature of the Authentic Existents; the original of which this beautiful world is a shadow and an image....” (III.8.11)

Presumably, Plotinus sees this world as beautiful because it is full of signs pointing to a higher one, and as such full of supports for contemplating its Source: “...as one looks up into the heavens and sees the splendour of the stars thinks of the Maker and searches....” (III.8.11). This kind of pondering is probably the beginning for training in contemplation for one so disposed. Surprisingly enough, Plotinus does not restrict contemplation in this world of ‘shadows and images’ to human beings: all things contemplate, or at least if they do not appear to contemplate directly, their actions are a result of a contemplation effected on some prior (in the Plotinian sense) level:

“When living things reproduce their kind, it is that the Reason-Principles within stir them; the procreative act is the expression of a contemplation, a travail toward the creation of many forms, many objects of contemplation, so that the universe may be filled full with Reason-Principles and that contemplation may be, as nearly as possible, endless: to bring anything into being is to produce an Idea-Form and that again is to enrich the universe with contemplation: all the failures, alike in being and in doing, are but the swerving of visionaries from the object of vision:

in the end the sorriest craftsman is still a maker of forms,
ungracefully.” (III.8.7)

This passage exemplifies Plotinus’ unique genius for transmitting metaphysical niceties. At first glance, he appears to be reiterating (yet again) core principles wound into every Ennead; and these principles appear throughout because we are not seeing a development and maturing of thought from Ennead I through to Ennead VI: from Porphyry’s biography we can deduce that, despite Porphyry’s observation, Plotinus’ thought was mature from the outset of his career as a writer, his Vision was whole years before he started to write, and the marriage of his inner life and his teaching a *fait accompli* then as well. All Plotinus’ core themes therefore appear in all the Enneads: I.6 (Beauty), for example, contains all of them. Be that as it may, the passage just quoted is unique because of the indications about how to think, presumably in preparation to contemplate the sacred qualities embodied by living things in the natural world. We seem to be invited to ponder the meaning behind the participation of living beings in a unified process of endless creation and expansion: quite possibly, this image reflects a living Idea in the Intellectual Realm. The repeating cycle of birth, growth and death for the multiplicity of forms on this plane is an image of a particular Idea governing this process on a higher one, an Idea the true understanding of which is only accessible, of course, through the human Intellect. Nature, therefore, not only contemplates; each object produced by nature contemplates and is a potential object of human contemplation:

“The Seer’s art ... is the reading of the scriptures of Nature which tell of the ordered and never condescend to the disorderly; the movement of the Universe utters its testimony to him and, before men and things reveal themselves (before separation, that is), brings to light what severally and collectively they are.
Here conspires with There and There with Here, elaborating together the consistency and eternity of a Cosmos and by

their correspondences revealing the sequence of things to the trained observer...." (III.3.6)

In light of general notions prevalent today concerning the exclusive authenticity of the material world, Plotinus' ideas are probably more provocative now than they were in his own day. Plotinus is direct in his call to 'awake to a new way of seeing' oneself and world around one. A significant result of this particular kind of noetic 'seeing' is that our natural world is an image and vehicle for the impression of the sacred. And this emphasis in Plotinus' teaching on the metaphysical order in Nature was one of the significant attributes allowing it to resonate with Islam and enrich its intellectual tradition:

"In re-emphasizing the religious significance of the order of nature and outlining a philosophy of nature totally integrated into metaphysics, Plotinus created a philosophy that became easily absorbed into later schools of religious thought, leaving a profound mark upon both Jewish and Christian as well as certain dimensions of the Islamic intellectual tradition, where, although not known by name and confused with Aristotle, Plotinus was nevertheless called the spiritual teacher of the Greeks" (shaykh al-yunaniyyin)."¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Religion and the Order of Nature, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), Page 91.

FOUR

PLOTINUS: THE SHAYKH AL-YUANIYYIN AND THE THEOLOGY OF ARISTOTLE

The major purposes of this chapter are to present a brief overview of the migratory path the Enneads took to enter Islam's philosophical stream and to suggest, again from Nasr's perspective, why certain elements of the Plotinian metaphysics of nature found resonance there. At this point, however, it must be stressed that our analysis of why Islam embraced ideas from the Enneads is predicated on precise terms of reference for the religion in question and for religion in general. For example, according to Nasr, any discussion of the purposes of religion, of any religion really, and particularly in the case of Islam, is bound to be muddled and therefore unnecessarily contentious if distinctions are not made between its exoteric and esoteric expressions. The first step preliminary to our main points of discussion will be, with the assistance of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, to define these terms and present them as mutually dependent, bona fide responses to the Qur'anic revelation¹⁰¹.

In using language to express metaphysical truths, a religion develops dogma, a systemized set of doctrines ideally designed to grow faith in a Higher Power and inculcate moral

¹⁰¹ For an interesting point of view on this discussion, see Frithjof Schuon, The Transcendent Unity of Religions, (Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1993), particularly *Chapter 2: The Limits of Exotericism*; *Chapter 3: Transcendence and Universality of Esotericism* and *Chapter 7: Christianity and Islam*; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ideals and Realities of Islam, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), particularly *Chapter IV: The Shari'ah- Divine Law, social ends and human norm* and *Chapter V: The Tariqah, the spiritual path and its Quranic roots*; Henry Corbin, History of Islamic Philosophy, (London: Kegan Paul International, 1993), in particular *Part One, Chapter VI: Sufism* and *Part Two, Chapter II: The Metaphysics of Sufism*; and Ananda Coomaraswamy, Traditional Psychology, Roger Lipsey ed., Coomaraswamy 2: Selected Papers: Metaphysics, (Princeton, New Jersey: Bollingen Series LXXXIX, Princeton University Press, 1977) page 333-378.

sense and duty in the community of believers. According to Schuon, the exoteric perspective is "... fundamentally the point of view of individual interest considered in its highest sense... extended to cover the whole cycle of existence of the individual and not limited to terrestrial life."¹⁰² Hence the interminable arguments about whether one's familiar, earthly (or even earthy as the case may be) personality exists 'eternally' after death in 'heaven' or 'hell'. Nevertheless, actions and beliefs prescribed by the exoteric expression of a religion are not coercive, but regulatory in intent. First, because of their relation, although partial, to the essence of the particular revelation, they act as potential supports for the discovery of the path toward experiential verification of the truths embedded in the particular religious teaching, these truths being culturally-modulated expressions of what Nasr and the Traditionalists have identified as aspects of the *scientia sacra* and *philosophia perennis*. Second, exoteric precepts appear to be designed to regulate and vivify the attention, emotional life and everyday actions of the individual believer. Through the consistent practice of a particular religion's prescribed outward behaviours, the believer theoretically can be moved toward a more receptive and less 'personal' state where living according to one's religion begins to change fundamentally. In Plotinian terms, 'good civic behaviour' can be one of the influences leading to Intellectual 'seeing'. Under this influence, the personality would be correspondingly transformed, but from 'above' through compassion and Truth, not from 'below' through proscription and constraint. Further, as well as offering access via the 'letter' to the 'spirit' behind religious dogma, in Nasr's view exoteric prescriptions and proscriptions provide rudimentary supports for the stability of the culture in

¹⁰² Frithjof Schuon, The Transcendent Unity of Religions, (Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1993) page 7.

which they find expression. The social and human norms as described by the Islamic *Shari'ah* are relevant examples.

“The *Shari'ah* is the ideal pattern for the individual's life and the Law which binds the Muslim people into a single community....The word *Shari'ah* itself is derived etymologically from a root meaning road. It is the road which leads to God. It is of great symbolic significance that both the Divine Law and the Spiritual Way or *Tariqah*, which is the esoteric dimension of Islam, are based on the symbolism of the way or journey.”¹⁰³

Both the *Shari'ah* and *Tariqah*¹⁰⁴ are paths of religious ‘development’, but their goals differ in kind. The former ideally leads to the actualization of the potentialities inherent in the individual human being, and the latter to the realization of potentialities that are, in effect, suprahuman- to what Islam calls *al-insan al-kamil* (Universal Man)¹⁰⁵. Plotinus, in terms

¹⁰³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ideals and Realities of Islam, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) page 93.

¹⁰⁴ For a lucid introduction to Islamic esotericism and to Sufi methods of interpreting Islamic scripture, see Peter Awn, “Classical Sufi Approaches to Scripture”, Steven T. Katz, ed., Mysticism and Sacred Scripture (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000) pages 138-153. For a brief, informative overview of the origins and development of Sufism, see Geoffrey Parrinder, “Muhammed and the Sufis”, Mysticism in the World's Religions (London: Sheldon Press, 1976).

¹⁰⁵ For a definition of this term from the perspective of traditional Sufi doctrine, see Titus Burckhardt, An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine, (Lahore, Pakistan: SH. Muhammad Ashraf, 1971), in particular Chapter VI: *Universal Man*. Similar in essence to Plotinus' description of the ‘essential man’ who is an ‘intellectual cosmos’, *al-Insan al-kamil* is described by Burckhardt as the name “... applied to all men who have realized Union or ‘the Supreme Identity, to men such as the great spiritual mediators and especially the prophets and ‘poles’ among the saints”. (page 89). The term also designates “... the permanent and actual synthesis of all states of Being, a synthesis which is at the same time both an immediate aspect of the Principle and the totality of all relative and particular states of existence.” (page 90). *Al-Insan al-kamil* is “...at the same time the Spirit, the totality of the universe and the perfect human symbol”. (page 90).

consonant with the Traditionalists' definition of the *philosophia* and *religio perennis*, which they say also forms the 'kernel' of Islam, explains the exclusivity of each 'road' and the relationship between them in the following way:

"The solution is in understanding the virtues and what each has to give: thus the man will learn to work with this or that as every several need demands. And as he reaches to loftier principles and other standards these in turn will define his conduct: for example, Restraint in its earlier form will no longer satisfy him; he will work for the final Disengagement; he will live, no longer the human life of the good man- such as Civic Virtue commends- but, leaving this beneath him, he will take up another life, that of the Gods.

... to model ourselves upon good men is to produce an image of an image: we have to fix our gaze above the image and attain likeness to the Supreme Exemplar." (I.2.7)

Ideally, the *Shari'ah* sets out in concrete terms prescriptions for how to live the Muslim version of a perfectly virtuous human life, "the human life of the good man", as Plotinus states above, in which every object and act is overtly categorized as "... obligatory (*wajib*),... forbidden (*haram*),... reprehensible (*makruh*),... (or) indifferent (*mubah*)."¹⁰⁶ According to orthodox Muslims, Nasr being one, the essence of the *Shari'ah*, whether explicit or implicit in expression, is contained in the Qur'an. The development of the *Shari'ah*'s further refined expression over time has been assisted and qualified in the prophetic *Hadith* and the *Sunnah*;¹⁰⁷ and all these explanations of Islamic Law are ratified by consensus in the Islamic community. So

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., page 96.

¹⁰⁷ "The words which came to him (the Prophet) when in a state of trance are held sacred by the Muslims and are never confounded with those which he uttered when no physical change was apparent in him. The former are the Sacred Book (Qur'an); the latter the Hadith or Sunnah of the Prophet." Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, "Introduction", The Meaning of the Glorious Koran: an explanatory translation, trans. Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, (New York: New American Library, 1970) page xi.

the Law governing every set of behaviours in the community of Islam has its source in either Divine inspiration (the Qur'an), the Prophet's comments on the Qur'an and the four schools of Sunni law (the *Malikite*, *Hanafite*, *Shafi'ite* and *Hanbalite*). *Shi'te* Islam, both *Twelve-imam Shi'ism* and *Isma'ilism*, allow for authoritative changes or adaptations of the Law through their living *Imam* (in *Isma'ilism*) or through qualified representatives (*mujtahids*) of their *Imam* in occultation (in *Shi'ism*)¹⁰⁸. It is certainly not within our scope to delve into the historical details of the refinements and enactments of Islamic law. It is important, however, to present a brief sketch of the cultural pervasiveness of the exoteric aspect of this religion merely to point out the ubiquitous emphasis on the religious significance of even the minutiae of everyday ordinary life in traditional Muslim society. In the first and primary analysis, a person is a Muslim if he accepts the *Shari'ah*.¹⁰⁹ The *Shari'ah* establishes the sustaining environment in which Islamic esotericism, the *Tariqah*, is practised. Having their roots firmly planted in the Qur'an, these two modes are mutually dependent, the *Tariqah* protected and sustained by the religio-social background provided by adherence to the *Shari'ah*, and the fundamental principles behind the *Shari'ah* verified and vivified by those on the *Tariqah* who wish to "... transcend (their) own human limitations and approach the Divine."¹¹⁰

The search on the *Tariqah* is for wisdom (*hikmah*) and Truth (*al-Haqq*), for experiential verification of the fundamental doctrines of Islam¹¹¹: *La ilaha ill' Allah* (there is no divinity but

¹⁰⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ideals and Realities of Islam, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) page 104.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., page 121.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., page 128.

¹¹¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ideals and Realities of Islam, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) page 134.

the Divinity) and *Muhammedun rasul Allah* (and Muhammad is His Prophet). Islam is predicated on the Unity of God, and the Prophet Muhammad reflects the spiritual values and virtues that are vehicles for the realization of this Unity, in this life. The model for the spiritual ascent sought by seekers on the *Tariqah*, either in a Sufi order or in a traditional philosophical school primarily concerned with the attainment of *hikmah*, is the Prophet's *mi'raj*, his nocturnal ascent through multiple states of being to Divine Unity, the Transcendent Unity of Being:

“On a certain night, while in Mecca, the Prophet was taken to Jerusalem and there ascended through the heavens, or the multiple states of being which the concentric heavens of traditional astronomy symbolize, to the Divine Presence itself. Accompanied by the archangel Gabriel, who was his guide, the Prophet journeyed through all the worlds until he reached a limit when the archangel refused to pass any further saying that if he were to proceed his wings would ‘burn’, implying that the final stage of the journey was beyond even the highest stage of manifestation which is that of the archangel. Moreover, the prophet accomplished this journey not only ‘mentally’ or ‘spiritually’ but also ‘physically’. This implies that the journey symbolizes the integration of his whole being including the body just as resurrection is also bodily and, in another context, the Qur’an was received in the body of the Prophet.”¹¹²

Nasr emphasizes that for the Muslim on the *Tariqah*, represented by the variety of Sufi or traditional philosophical schools in the world of Islam, guidance in reaching the spiritual states reflected by the Prophet's ascent is fundamentally based in the Qur'an, the Hadith and the Sunnah. All doctrines and spiritual methods have their basis in the Sacred Book and in the sayings of the Prophet. Those on the *Tariqah* honour the *Shari'ah* as they pursue their search for the realization of the metaphysical principles upon which the Qur'an is based and which are expressed by Prophet's life and *mi'raj*. In addition, Sufi orders trace their lineage back to the

¹¹² Ibid., page 133.

Prophet himself and to those given esoteric instruction by him. As such, connected to Islam's formative metaphysical principles and the methods by which to realize them, Islamic esotericism is a source of vital authority in doctrinal disputes, a 'protector of the faith' from sentimental or even potentially destructive outside influences and, depending on the quality of spiritual realization of its members, a source of validation and reinforcement of the essentially metaphysical source of the *Shari 'ah*. According to the Traditionalist perspective, if this esoteric nucleus disappears:

"... the religious edifice is shaken, or even suffers a partial collapse, and finally becomes reduced to its most external elements, namely literalism and sentimentality. Moreover, the most tangible criteria of such a decadence are, on the one hand, the failure to recognize, even to the point of denial, metaphysical and initiatory exegesis, that is to say the mystical sense of the Scriptures- an exegesis that has... a close connection with all aspects of the intellectuality of the religious form under consideration; and on the other hand, the rejection of sacred art, that is to say, of the inspired and symbolic forms by means of which that intellectuality is radiated and so communicated in an immediate and unrestricted language to all intelligences."¹¹³

Islam appears to have entered the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with its metaphysics intact. In our view, the primary reason for this is indicative of one of the reasons why Plotinus' ideas received such a warm welcome into the more intellectual and esoteric expressions of Islam. At their respective cores, Plotinus' philosophy and this brand of Islam emphasize the 'metaphysical transparency' of nature and the necessity for man to learn to read the spiritual

¹¹³ Frithjof Schuon, The Transcendent Unity of Religions, (Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1993) page 10.

signs mirrored by the sensible world¹¹⁴; but in order to examine the affinities Islam and Plotinus' Platonism have in this regard, we need to trace the path the Enneads took in their migration to Islam.

According to Majid Fakhry, "the Arab conquest of the Near East was virtually complete in 641 (CE)"¹¹⁵ The factors contributing to this consummate victory were the usual and predictable ones in warfare: major Arab enemies, namely the Persians and Byzantines, were railing against each other, so Arab armies were able to crush them in their preoccupation; and the usual rancorous religiously-inspired bickering among the different religious factions (in this case, *Nestorians*, *Monophysites* and *Melchites*) populating the Near Eastern war zone drove the subject peoples in Egypt, Syria and Iraq into collectively wishing for what all downtrodden subject peoples wish for in times like these: a liberator from all this '*Sturm und Drang*'. The liberators appeared in the form of the Arab armies. The trod-upon subject peoples hoped against hope that these liberators would give them needful respite from the oppressive chains of orthodoxy wound around them by the central authority in Constantinople. All this battlefield background aside, one of the major effects of this Arab conquest was not only to spread Islam but to promote and disseminate, yet again, the Greek science and culture in this part of the world, but this time in

¹¹⁴ By way of introduction to this similarity in emphasis, compare Plotinus' assurance that the Seer's art finds the Higher reflected in the lower "... the reading of the scriptures of nature will tell of the ordered and never descend to the disorderly, the movement of the universe utters its testimony to him...." (Ennead III.3.6) and the Qur'an's: "... and the water which Allah sendeth down from the sky, thereby reviving the earth after its death, and dispersing all kinds of beasts therein, and in the ordinance of the winds, and the clouds obedient between heaven and earth: are signs (of Allah's sovereignty) for people who have sense." (Qur'an II.164 M.M. Pickthal trans., The Meaning of the Glorious Koran, (New York: New American Library, 1970) page 47.

¹¹⁵ Majid Fakhry, A History of Islamic Philosophy, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970) page 16.

'Islamicized' guise. Greek philosophy, particularly the Platonism of Plotinus, who was unknown to the Muslims by name and confused with Aristotle, had a seminal influence on the development and articulation of Islamic philosophy through what came to be known as The Theology of Aristotle. In outlining this work's content and influence, Henry Corbin emphasizes,

"What should be stressed is the considerable influence exerted by certain pseudepigraphic works. In the first place there is the famous Theology attributed to Aristotle. This, as we know, is a paraphrase of the last three Enneads of Plotinus, possibly based on a Syriac version dating from the sixth century, an epoch during which neo-Platonism flourished both among the Nestorians and at the Sasanid court."¹¹⁶

We shall explore the Theology of Aristotle's migration and content in a little more detail later; but at this introductory juncture, Corbin goes on to say that "...the Theology lies at the basis of neo-Platonism in Islam."¹¹⁷, one of the primary reasons being that the now famous Ennead IV.8.1, paraphrased in the Theology, exemplifies one of, if not the central, exemplary mystical experience of Islam, around which the legitimacy of Muhammad's prophecy turns: his 'celestial assumption'. Plotinus' experience seems to echo the Prophet's:

"Many times it has happened: lifted out of the body into myself; becoming external to all other things and self-enc centred; beholding a marvelous beauty; then, more than ever, assured of community of the loftiest order; enacting the noblest life, acquiring identity with the divine; stationing within It by having attained that activity; poised above whatsoever within the Intellectual is less than the Supreme; yet there comes the moment of descent from intellection to reasoning, and after that sojourn in the divine, I ask myself how it happens that I can now be descending, and how did

¹¹⁶ Henry Corbin, History of Islamic Philosophy, trans. Liadain Sherrard with the assistance of Philip Sherrard (London/New York: Kegan Paul International, 1993) page 18.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., page 18.

the Soul ever enter into my body, the Soul which, even within the body, is the high thing it has shown itself to be.”
(Ennead IV.8.1)

As mentioned previously¹¹⁸, Muslims, especially the mystically-inclined philosophers and Sufis, have regarded, and continue to regard the above passage “... as both the exemplar of the Prophet’s celestial assumption (*mi‘raj*), which is reproduced in its turn in the Sufi experience, and the exemplar of the vision which crowns the efforts of the Divine Sage, the Stranger, the Solitary.”¹¹⁹ The ‘glory that was Greece’ finds itself resurrected, so to speak, in the more contemporary glory that is Islam: which point leads us— before examining the metaphysics of nature as expressed in Plotinus, in his Islamic incarnation via the Theology and in Islamic philosophy— to more historical milestones in the ‘Islamicization’ of Hellenism in the Near East and the increasingly sophisticated articulation of Islamic doctrine and practice. While tracing some of the more significant aspects in the story of the early growth of Islam, we need to keep in mind that we are examining the development of Islam from the Traditionalist perspective on the developmental nature of a religion, and as Schuon states:

“A religion is an integral whole comparable to a living organism that develops according to necessary and exact laws; one might therefore call it a spiritual organism, or a social one in its most outward aspect. In any case, it is an organism and not a construction of arbitrary conventions; one therefore cannot legitimately consider the constituent elements of a religion independently of their inward unity, as if one were concerned with a mere collection of facts. This error is one, however, that is frequently committed even by those who judge without preconceived opinions but who nevertheless endeavor to establish correspondences from the

¹¹⁸ See page 73-74.

¹¹⁹ Henry Corbin, History of Islamic Philosophy, trans. Liadain Sherrard with the assistance of Philip Sherrard (London/New York: Kegan Paul International, 1993) page 18.

outside, without perceiving that a religious element is always determined by the germ and starting point of the integral religion, and that a given element, a personality or a book, for example, can have a different significance from one religion to another.”¹²⁰

As we have mentioned previously, according to Nasr and the Traditionalists Islam’s ‘germ’ is the Qur’an. Muhammad is the exemplar for living one’s life inspired by God; Islam “... is not based directly on the Prophet but on the Koran, thus on an affirmation of Divine Unity, which does not consist in a perpetuation of Muhammad but in a ritual and legislative conformity of man and society to Koranic Law and therefore to Unity.”¹²¹ Since Divine Unity has always been fundamental to Islam in both its exoteric and esoteric manifestations, historical movements in its development, especially in Sufism and in mystically based philosophy¹²², absorbed elements from other cultures, particularly the Greek, that expressed this fundamental doctrine articulately and convincingly. It is absolutely no wonder then why Plotinus, in the guise of Aristotle in the Theology of Aristotle, was praised as the *Shaykh al-yuniyyin*, the Greek Sage (Sufi master).

In the seventh century C.E., the study of Greek philosophy was centred in Alexandria, although a certain Greek philosophical concentration had also begun in Persia a century earlier: after Justinian closed the academy in Athens in 529 C.E. and sent the pagan philosophers packing, these very same philosophers were welcomed by the Persian court. A little later in 555 C.E., the School of Jundishapur was founded by Chosroes I in a successful attempt to establish

¹²⁰ Frithjof Schuon, The Transcendent Unity of Religions, (Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1993) page 108.

¹²¹ Ibid., page 109.

¹²² “Virtually all of the philosophers in the Islamic world were committed to mysticism in one form or another, and those who were not, such as Ibn Rushd, stand out as a result.” Oliver Leaman, A Brief Introduction to Islamic Philosophy (Malden, Maine: Blackwell Publishers, 1999) page 73.

“... a major institution of Hellenic learning in western Asia, whose influence was destined to extend to the world of Islam...”¹²³ After the mid-seventh century C.E. Arab conquest of the Near East was complete, not much time was wasted in making Arabic the official state language, and this was brought about under the Ummayyads by the end of the seventh century. Fakhry reports that translations of Greek texts into Arabic began with the more ‘pragmatic’ ones: medicine, alchemy and astrology for example; but this process “... did not begin in earnest until the Abbasid period began, and in particular until the reign of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur (754-775).”¹²⁴ As translation of Greek texts began to increase in earnest through the first three decades of the ninth century C.E., a new (and predictable) penchant for “... greater accuracy (which) made it necessary to re-translate current philosophical and scientific texts or to improve on already existing translations by a closer scrutiny of the original texts.”¹²⁵ It was within this intellectually rigorous and pious atmosphere that Ibn Na‘imah al-Himsi translated the so-called Theology of Aristotle, a text that generated a profound influence on the articulation of an increasingly expansive Islam, in both the philosophical and geographical senses of the term. This expansion was fuelled by a search for harmony “... not only (between) Greek philosophy and Islamic dogma, but also (among) the divergent elements in Greek philosophy itself.”¹²⁶ The motivation of motivations behind all these developmental movements was Islam’s fundamental doctrine of the Unity of God:

¹²³ Majid Fakhry, A History of Islamic Philosophy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970) page 16.

¹²⁴ Ibid., page 16.

¹²⁵ Ibid., page 25.

¹²⁶ Ibid., page 32.

“How Islamic philosophers interpreted the doctrine of Unity lies at the heart of Islamic philosophy. There continued to exist a tension between the Qur’anic description of Unity and what the Muslims had learned from Greek sources, a tension that was turned into a synthesis of the highest intellectual order by such later philosophers as Suhrawardi (1155-1191 CE) and Mulla Sadra (1572-1641). But in all treatments of this subject from al-Kindi (801-873 CE) to Mulla ‘Ali Zunuzi and Hajji Mulla Hadi Sabziwari during the thirteenth/nineteenth century and even later, the Qur’anic doctrine of Unity, so central to Islam, has remained dominant and in a sense has determined the agenda of the Islamic philosophers.”¹²⁷

Our short history of The Theology of Aristotle begins with Ibn Na‘imah al-Himsi, part of a ‘translation team’ supervised and directed by the Islamic philosopher Abu Yusuf ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (801-873 C.E.), “...the first of the so-called ‘Hellenizing philosophers’ whose works have survived, in part at least.”¹²⁸ The prevailing atmosphere in the ‘Arabacized’ Near East, as Nasr indicates above, was tense; and that tension created by the confrontation “... between the Qur’anic description of Unity and what the Muslims had learned from Greek sources” is reflective of two additional movements in the historical ‘organic’¹²⁹ development of a religion: one, the healthy yet defensive and rightfully exoteric “... insistence that no principle of faith or conduct was valid unless it could be traced, through the study of a vast body of tradition to the Prophet’s own

¹²⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Qur’an and Hadith as source and inspiration of Islamic Philosophy”, History of Islamic Philosophy Part 1, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman, eds., (London/New York: Routledge, 1996) page 32.

¹²⁸ Henry Corbin, History of Islamic Philosophy, trans. Liaddain Sherrard with the assistance of Philip Sherrard, (London/New York: Kegan Paul International, 1993) page 154.

¹²⁹ See the quotation from Frithjof Schuon on page 77.

Arabian Islam..."¹³⁰ and two, the potentially injurious confusion within a religion vis-à-vis the bounds of exoteric authority and those of the esoteric. The study of Greek philosophy and science by Muslim "... intellectuals of a more cosmopolitan bent..."¹³¹ was more than just a reaction to the "...mounting tide of Arabism";¹³² it was a both a conscious and unconscious manifestation of the intrinsically cosmopolitan and unifying essence of Islam:

"In a particular sense Islam refers to the religion revealed through the Qur'an but in a more general sense it refers to religion as such. Some Muslim sages in fact see three different levels in the word 'Muslim'. Islam is actually like a several storied mountain and everything in it has different degrees and levels of meaning including the concept Muslim itself. Firstly, anyone who accepts a Divine revelation is a 'Muslim' in its most universal sense, be he (or she) a Muslim, Christian, Jew or Zoroastrian. The Islamic point of view did not take into account the Indian religions until historic contact was made with them, but this definition would refer to them as well, as Hinduism came to be called by later Muslim sages the 'religion of Adam'. In its first meaning, therefore, Muslim refers to that human being who through the use of his intelligence and free will accepts a divinely revealed law."¹³³

Although this statement concerning the 'universal' nature of Islam comes from a contemporary Muslim scholar and as such bears witness to some of the fruits of the 'organic' developments in Islam's ability to articulate the details of doctrines contained in the Qur'an and Hadith, Islam in

¹³⁰ F.W. Zimmermann, "The Origins of the So-called Theology of Aristotle", Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages: The Theology and Other Texts, Jill Kraye, W.F. Ryan and C.B. Schmitt eds., (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1986) page 111.

¹³¹ Ibid., page 111.

¹³² Ibid., page 111.

¹³³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ideals and Realities of Islam, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) page 27.

the 9th and 10th centuries C.E. mirrored these qualities 'in vitro': hence the fascination in mystically-based Muslim philosophical circles with the Theology of Aristotle.

Our next step is to point out how this 'Islamicized redaction' came down to us and to analyze a few representative excerpts that both illustrate the sympathy between Islamic and Plotinian metaphysics of nature and some examples of the subtle modifications made to the original text which enfold Plotinus into the enlarging 'Islamicized' world.

According to F.W. Zimmermann, the previously mentioned Ibn Na'imah al-Himsi, translator of The Theology of Aristotle, most likely based his work on an Arabic paraphrase of Enneads IV- VI, a paraphrase which is now lost.¹³⁴ Further, as yet there is no way of determining "what, if anything, intervened between Porphyry's edition of Plotinus in late third-century Italy and the appearance of AP (the Arabic Paraphrase) in early ninth-century Baghdad."¹³⁵ There is some speculation that Porphyry may have edited the Enneads himself and the abridgement, later to be called The Theology of Aristotle, migrated into a Syrian Christian locale, there to be invested in its translation into Arabic with all manner of "Syriac literary conventions"¹³⁶. So Ibn

¹³⁴ F.W. Zimmermann, "The Origins of the Theology of Aristotle" J. Kraye, W.F. Ryan and C.B. Schmitt, eds., Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages: The Theology and Other Texts, (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1986) page 112.

¹³⁵ Ibid., page 113.

¹³⁶ "If there are indications of a Syriac background, that does not mean that there must have been a Syriac *Vorlage*. For example, at KI.21 (in the al-Kindi-supervised translation of the Arabic Paraphrase) (this corresponds to Ennead IV.8.1), Plotinus' metaphor of waking from a state of sleep is replaced with that of doffing a garment. S.P. Brock has shown that the doffing metaphor, not uncommon in Greek literature, rose to new heights of popularity in Syriac, where it was also given a distinctive twist. While the Greeks had tended to doff things so as to achieve a state of nakedness, the Syriacs tended to doff one thing in order to don another." Ibid., page 114.

Na'imah al-Himsi's translation was an adaptation of an adaptation, the original editor remaining unknown. The Theology has had a long and honoured history in Islam:

"References or traces of the *Theology* are to be found in the writings of al-Kindi (ob.873), al-Farabi (ob.950),...; the Ikhwan al-safa (10th cent.)...; ibn Sab'in (12th cent. Spain)...; al-Ghazzali (ob. 1111)...; Sadr ad-Din ash-Shirazi (ob. 1641)...; a commentary by Ibn Sina (ob. 1037)...; 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi (ob. 1231)...; Qadi Sa'id Qommi (ob.1691)....

However, the work gained wide celebrity through the famous passage on ecstasy... adapted from *Enneads* IV.8.1 which was cited by numerous Muslim and Jewish Neoplatonists."¹³⁷

A developing Muslim philosophy, mystically-based with its roots in the Qur'an, was eager to absorb those scientific and philosophical attributes of Greek culture that reaffirmed the legitimacy of the Prophet's mystical 'ascent' and its Qur'anic view of 'the beginning and end of things', including its doctrine of the metaphysical transparency of Nature: in the language of the Qur'an, "We shall show them our portents upon the horizons and within themselves, until it be manifest unto them that it is the Truth."¹³⁸

Our short comparative analysis of representative passages from the Enneads and the Theology of Aristotle will focus on two selections: first, the justifiably famous "Many times it has happened: lifted out of the body...." (*Ennead* IV.8.1) with its parallel in the Theology

¹³⁷ Paul B. Fenton, "The Arabic and Hebrew Theology," *Ibid.*, page 259-60, note 2.

¹³⁸ Qur'an, XLI; 53, The Meaning of the Glorious Koran, trans. Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthal, (New York/Toronto: New American Library, 1970) page 343-44.

(Theologia I, 21-42)¹³⁹; and second, a selection from Ennead VI.7.12 on the 'metaphysical transparency' of this world, compared with its paraphrase in the relevant lines of Theologia VIII.11-15¹⁴⁰. These 'twin' passages (and they are most definitely fraternal, not identical) have been chosen for two reasons: they are reflective of the sympathy of mystical Islam to Plotinian metaphysics and the contemplative experience which verified its truth; and they display aspects of the 'Islamicization' of Plotinus' Platonism so that it is in accord with Qur'anic revelation, (the essence of which, by the way, can be found Sura II *The Cow*, "... the Koran in little...")¹⁴¹ Further, these passages are two small examples of a grand inclusive movement in Islam that gave vital affirmation to its fundamental truths and the esoteric methods by which to realize them:

"If the world of Islam was able to dominate intellectual life from India to the Atlantic Ocean for many centuries, this can justly be ascribed to the fact that it had found in the work of Plotinus and his spiritual descendents a powerhouse which made it possible for it always to restore its creative impulses in a way which its purely religious foundations, broad and inspiring though they were, would have been unable to provide."¹⁴²

References to the Prophet's nocturnal ascent (*mir'aj*) and the respect (in fact, the homage) paid to the passage in the Theology of Aristotle which paraphrases it are illustrative of Islam's

¹³⁹ "Plotiniana Arabica", trans. Geoffrey Lewis, Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolph Schwyzer, Plotini Opera: Enneads IV-V, (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer et Cie, 1959) page 225-229.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., page 465.

¹⁴¹ Qur'an, XLI; 53, The Meaning of the Glorious Koran, trans. Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthal, (New York/Toronto: New American Library, 1970) page 33.

¹⁴² Franz Rosenthal, "Plotinus in Islam: The Power of Anonymity", Greek Philosophy in the Arab World, (Brookfield, Vermont: Gower Publishing Group, 1990) page 437.

tendency to perhaps not always 'restore' but to broaden and clarify the Qur'anic message. Non-violent and unconstrained submission (*al-Islam*) is to a Higher Authority; and a powerful way to help this happen— especially to those as yet unmoved by or unconverted to Islam or to those thinking people whose intellectual capacities crave spiritual direction via the mind to the Intellect— is by supporting and further legitimizing Islamic doctrines via Platonic ones, whose convincing and in a sense 'universal' philosophical language is based in deep mystical experience. Who in the Greek philosophical world better to do this than Plotinus?

The Prophet's *mir'aj* has its roots in the Qur'an:

"Glory be He Who carried His servant by night from the Inviolable Place of Worship to the Far Distant Place of Worship the neighbourhood whereof We have blessed, that We might show him Our tokens. Lo! He, only He, is the Hearer, the Seer."¹⁴³

Moreover, as we have mentioned previously¹⁴⁴, the *mir'aj* is "... the prototype of the experience which each Sufi (or mystically-inspired philosopher) in turn attempts to capture for himself."¹⁴⁵ As such, the veiled Qur'anic language in *surah* XVII quoted above has been complemented by a famous *Shi'ite hadith* (which we shall quote in due course) and many Sufi commentaries, including one by the "...Persian Sufi poet Sana'i whose *Mi 'raj-namah* (*Treatise of the*

¹⁴³ Qur'an, XVII "The Children of Israel"; 1, The Meaning of the Glorious Koran, trans. Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, (New York/Toronto: New American Library, 1970) page 204.

¹⁴⁴ See page 72-73.

¹⁴⁵ Henry Corbin, History of Islamic Philosophy, trans. Liadain Sherrard with the assistance of Philip Sherrard (London/New York: Kegan Paul International, 1993) page 187.

Nocturnal Ascent), along with certain other Sufi sources, served as an inspiration for Dante.”¹⁴⁶

For interest and for a forthcoming comparison with *Ennead* IV.8.1 and the relevant passage in the *Theology*, we quote the *Shi‘ite hadith* concerning the Prophet’s celestial ascent:

“It has been accounted of the Prophet- upon him and his family be peace- that he said: “When I was taken on the nocturnal ascension to heaven and I entered paradise, I saw in the middle of it a palace of red rubies. Gabriel opened the door for me and I entered it. I saw in it a house made of white pearls. I entered the house and saw in the middle of it a box made of light and locked with a lock made of light. I said, ‘Oh, Gabriel, what is this box and what is in it?’ Gabriel said, ‘Oh Friend of God (*Habiballah*), in it is the secret of God (*sirrallah*) which God does not reveal to anyone except to him whom He loves.’ I said, ‘Open this door for me’. He said, ‘I am a slave who follows the Divine command. Ask thy Lord until He grants permission to open it.’ I therefore asked the permission of God. A voice came from the Divine Throne saying, ‘Oh Gabriel open its door,’ and he opened it. In it I saw spiritual poverty (*faqr*) and a cloak (*muraqqa*). I said, ‘What is this *faqr* and *muraqqa*?’ The voice from heaven said, ‘Oh Muhammed, there are two things which I have chosen for thee and thy people (*ummah*) from the moment I created the two of you. These two things I do not give to anyone save those whom I love, and I have nothing dearer than these.’”¹⁴⁷

This *hadith* recounts the metaphysical ascent in language that is typically religious, that is, replete with concrete images suggestive of Beauty and Truth that are fundamentally indescribable. In addition, the language is couched in the intimate communication among human and divine individuals, the angel Gabriel, God and a human being beloved by Him. Each image—

¹⁴⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) page 133. In addition, see Peter Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sina)*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), in particular “Part Three: The Mir ‘aj Nama”, page 109-143.

¹⁴⁷ Ibn Abi Jumhur, *Kitab al-mujli*, Tehran, 1329, p. 379, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1972) page 109-110.

the palace of red rubies, the house of white pearls, the box of light, its contents and God Himself— is probably representative of progressively finer spiritual states, the natures of which are suggested by imagery alone, unassisted by any kind of qualification or explanation. A religious event such as the Prophet's *mir'aj* is never explained 'wholesale'; but it can accrue a grander context that further emphasizes its centrality in the religion in question, makes it less opaque to those intuiting the possibility of its verification and renders it more authoritative by aligning it with an authority as widely respected as its own. Such was the case with the 'mirror image' of the Prophet's *mir'aj* in the Theology of Aristotle.

For ease of comparison, Ennead IV.8.1 and Theologia I, 21-42 are quoted below:

<u>Ennead IV.8.1</u>	<u>Theologia I, 21-27</u> (al-Kindi translation) ¹⁴⁸
<p>"Many times it has happened: lifted out of the body into myself; becoming external to all other things and self-enclosed;</p> <p>beholding a marvelous beauty; then, more than ever, assured of community of the loftiest order; enacting the noblest life,</p> <p>acquiring identity with the divine; stationing within It by having attained that activity; poised above whatsoever within the Intellectual is less than the Supreme;</p>	<p>21 "Often I have been alone with my soul and have doffed my body and laid it aside and become as if I were naked substance without body, so as to be inside myself, outside all other things.</p> <p>22. Then do I see within myself such beauty and splendour as I do remain marveling at and astonished, so that I know I am one of the parts of the sublime, surpassing, lofty, divine world, and possess active life.</p> <p>23. When I am certain of that, I lift my intellect up from that world into the divine world and I become as if I were placed in it and cleaving to it so as to be above the entire intelligible</p>

¹⁴⁸ The Theology of Aristotle, trans. G.L. Lewis, F.W. Zimmerman, "The Origins of the Theology of Aristotle", J. Kraye, W.F. Ryan and C.B. Schmitt, eds., Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages: The Theology and Other Texts, (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1986) pages 138-139.

yet there comes the moment
of descent from intellection
to

reasoning, and after that
sojourn in the divine, I ask
myself how it happens that I
can now be descending, and
how did the Soul ever enter
into my body, the Soul
which, even within the
body, is the high thing it has
shown itself to be.”

(Ennead IV.8.1)

world, and seem to be standing in
that sublime and divine place.

24. And there I see such light and
splendour as tongues cannot describe
nor ears comprehend. When that light
and splendour overwhelm me and I
have not strength to endure it, I
descend from mind to thought and
reflection.

25. When I enter the world of
thought, thought veils that light and
splendour from me, and I am left
wondering how I have fallen from
that lofty and divine place and am
come to the place of thought, when
my soul once had the power to leave
her body behind and return to herself
and rise to the world of mind and
then to the divine world until she
entered the place of splendour and
light, which is the cause of all light
and splendour.

26. Wonderful it is too how I have
seen my soul filled with light, while
she was still in my body like her
appearance, not leaving it.

Aside from the obvious difference in the first few sentences (the ‘doffing’ image we have alluded to previously),¹⁴⁹ there are two even more striking differences between the two texts which reveal how Plotinus has been ‘Islamicized’. First, the Theology’s tone is personal: the first person pronoun is used throughout the passage, echoing the Qur’anic language characterized by intimate communication among individuals, however divine. The Theology’s translator also

¹⁴⁹ See page 82, note 134.

added "And there I see such light and splendour *as tongues cannot describe nor ears comprehend*", a parallelism syntactically reminiscent of "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for those that love Him", a saying that by the ninth century "... was circulating among Muslims as a certified saying of the Prophet."¹⁵⁰ In contrast, Plotinus' tone is impersonal, except after the moment of 'descent' when it changes to the personal. Knowing something of Plotinus' experience of the Intellect, which is true unity in multiplicity and as such 'beyond' the personal, we recognize his intent in the shift in person.

"Indeed, each has everything within it, and again sees all things in any other, so that all things are everywhere, everything is everything, each individual is all things, and the splendour is without end." (V.8.4.)

Further, Plotinus uses the extraordinarily Plotinian image "... lifted out of the body into myself...", a phrase charged with meaning, and like many phrases in the Enneads, one that encapsulates a fully-worked out doctrine consistently expressed throughout their entirety: namely, the highest phase of the soul has not "come down", has not been "severed from its prior":

"Thus it is that, entering this realm, it (the soul) possesses still the vision inherent to that superior phase in virtue of which it unchangingly maintains its integral nature."(IV.1.1.)

In Plotinus' grand scheme of things, the highest part of the soul looks to Intellect and is connected to what he has called "the essential man". In addition, "...lifted out of the body and

¹⁵⁰ F.W. Zimmerman, "The Origins of the Theology of Aristotle", " J. Kraye, W.F. Ryan and C.B. Schmitt, eds., Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages: The Theology and Other Texts, (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1986) page 141.

into myself..." situates the body in the soul, another Plotinian assertion: "Plato therefore is wise when, in treating of the All, he puts the body in its soul and not its soul in the body... (IV.3.22)

The Theology I passage captures some of the flavour of these assertions, but softens them with a first person narrative because the original translator was "... out to make the Muslim reader at home with Plotinus."¹⁵¹ Plotinus' most striking assertion, though, is something that exoteric, orthodox Islam would never admit: identity with God. After all, Plotinus did say, "...our concern is not merely to be sinless but to be God." (Ennead I.2.5): and here in IV.8.1 he is consistent: "lifted out of the body into myself... enacting the noblest life acquiring identity with the divine." In tempering some of Plotinus' assertions and personalizing the tone, the Shaykh al-yuniyyin is seen to align himself more acceptably with orthodox Islam, his insights respectfully preserved almost completely intact; for

"... the aim of Kindi and his circle in exploring Greek metaphysics will have been to propagate a natural theology transcending factional dogma.... He uses Koranic language, not as an instrument of polemic, but as a vehicle of religious sentiment- the sentiment of a lofty monotheism calculated to appeal to all citizens of the world of Arabic letters."¹⁵²

In Ennead VI.7.12 and in Theologia VIII.11-15 quoted below, we have a theme dear to the Muslim heart¹⁵³: the spiritual essence of the natural world. The insignificant changes made to Ennead VI.7.12 in the Arabic translation indicate complete resonance with his idea.

¹⁵¹ F.W. Zimmerman, "The Origins of the Theology of Aristotle", " J. Kraye, W.F. Ryan and C.B. Schmitt, eds., Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages: The Theology and Other Texts, (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1986) page 142.

¹⁵² Ibid., page 119.

¹⁵³ "The order of nature is seen in the Islamic perspective to derive according to Divine Wisdom from the prototype of all existence in the Divine Order, the prototype which is identified according to the language of Quranic cosmology

<u>Ennead VI.7.12</u>	<u>Theologia VIII.11-13</u> ¹⁵⁴
<p>Since in our view this universe stands to That as copy to original, the living total must exist There beforehand; that is the realm of complete Being and everything must exist There.</p> <p>The heaven There must be living and therefore not bare of what are known here as stars- for stars are included in the very meaning of the word. Earth too will be There, and not void but even more intensely living and containing all that lives and moves upon our earth and the plants obviously rooted in life;</p> <p>sea will be There and all waters with the movement of their unending life</p>	<p>11. ... all this sensible world is but a likeness and an image of that world, so if this world is alive then a fortiori that first world is alive, and if this world is complete and perfect than a fortiori that world is more complete and more perfect, for it is that that pours forth onto this world life and power and perfection and continuance.</p> <p>12. If the upper world is complete in the highest degree, there is no doubt that all things which are here exist there, though they are in it in a higher and more sublime fashion, as we have many times said.</p> <p>13. There is a heaven there possessed of life, with stars in it like these stars which are in this heaven, except that they are brighter and more numerous, with no such division between them as is seen here, for they are not corporeal.</p> <p>14. There exists there an earth which has no saline swamp-land but is alive and flourishing, and on it are all the animals, like the natural earthly animals which are here, and on it is vegetation</p>

with the Pen (*al-Qalam*) and the Guarded Tablet (*al-Lawh al-mahfuz*). God wrote by means of the Pen, which symbolizes the active principle of Creation, the realities of all things, upon the Guarded tablet, which remains eternally with Him, while through the cosmogenic act, the realities written upon the Tablet were made to descend to lower levels of existence and finally to the world of nature. The order of nature, therefore, reflects and issues from the order that exists in the Divine Realm. Seyyid Hossein Nasr, Religion and the Order of Nature, (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) page 60.

¹⁵⁴ Plotiniana Arabica trans. Geoffrey Lewis, Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolph Schwyzer, Plotini Opera: Enneads IV-V, (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer et Cie, 1959) page 465.

<p>and all the living things of the water; air too must be a member of that universe with the living things of the air as here.” (VI.7.12)</p>	<p>planted in life, and on it are seas and rivers flowing, and that which flows with an animal flow, and on it are all the aquatic animals. There is air there, containing aerial animals, alive and resembling that air. The things there are all alive, and how should they not be alive, when they are in the pure world of life, quite unsullied by death? The natures of the animals there are like the natures of these animals, except that nature there is higher and nobler than this nature because it is intellectual and not at all animal.</p>
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Plotinus’ ideas on the subject above are wholeheartedly adopted in total in the Theology.

(However, considering the translator’s tedious rhetorical repetitions, one is even more appreciative of Plotinus’ economy; as well, one wonders why ‘saline swamp-lands’ have no prototype when seemingly everything else does; but this detail is most likely attributable to the translator’s philosophical inexperience). Be that as it may, the concept of the spiritual essence of the natural world is central to Islam¹⁵⁵; and as we have seen, given Plotinus’ eloquent emphasis throughout the Enneads on the beauty of the sensible world and its metaphysical transparency, Sufis and mystically-inspired Muslim philosophers readily absorbed Plotinus’ metaphysics of nature.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ “Unto Allah belong the East and the West, and whithersoever ye turn, there is Allah’s countenance.” Qur’an, Surah II, ‘The Cow’; 115, The Meaning of the Glorious Koran, trans. Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, (New York/Toronto: New American Library, 1970) page 43.

¹⁵⁶ Nasr’s language is often just as much ‘Plotinian’ as it is Islamic: “The beauty of nature is the direct reflection of the beauty of God; it is therefore an interiorizing beauty which, although seemingly outward, does not disperse but brings man back to the Center wherein abides the ineffable beauty of the One.” Seyyed Hossein Nasr, The Need for a Sacred Science, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993) page 122.

FIVE

CONCLUSION: A SCIENTIA SACRA FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

There is no doubt that Plotinus' articulation of metaphysics had a significant influence, both historically on the philosophical development of Islam and in modern times among religious intellectuals, especially Seyyed Hossein Nasr. But although the aspects of Islamic philosophy and the Platonism of Plotinus discussed here exhibit profound affinities in their articulations of the metaphysics of nature, these essential correspondences certainly do not constitute sufficient evidence for the existence for what Nasr and other Traditionalists identify as the *philosophia perennis*.¹⁵⁷ Still, the Intellectual vision intrinsic to Plotinus and Islamic philosophy and the perceived 'metaphysical transparency' of nature in both these philosophical 'systems' remains unshaken as a foundation for our concluding remarks, which will address the potential influence of Plotinus' metaphysics on the contemporary scientific worldview. Further, in light of Nasr's seminal ideas on the necessity for science's 'rapprochement' with the metaphysics, we shall also suggest further areas for future study.

¹⁵⁷ A thorough critique of this concept is necessary, one that could be very productive if it draws on recent scholarship in the field of mysticism. In this regard, see the following comprehensive and compelling works, edited by Steven T. Katz: Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis, (London: Sheldon Press, 1978); Mysticism and Religious Traditions, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Mysticism and Language, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Mysticism and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

A prevailing theme in many of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's essays and books¹⁵⁸ is whether a widespread realization of the multi-leveled nature of reality among enough people would provide substantive direction to the solution of our environmental crisis. Positive that in essence this crisis is a spiritual one, Nasr also ponders the planetary repercussions of an almost wholesale forgetting of what he calls (and Plotinus and Islam explore) humanity's primal relationship to essentially spiritual laws that engender, govern and illuminate the level of being represented by the material world. From the metaphysical standpoint represented by Plotinus and Islamic philosophy, for example, the forms and functions of animal and plant species reflect laws that are not only environmental, genetic, molecular or even subatomic, but also supra-formal, all nature being tied to a dimension accessible to human consciousness via time-honored, contemplative methods, largely unique to each religion, that can provide an opening to the noetic Intellect in man and woman. To study nature in harmony with it, there is not only the necessity to resacralize nature, but to resacralize the science that studies it.

After all, whether sacred or profane, science— like Plotinus' Platonism and what Nasr calls the *scientia sacra*— is a way of verification. Contemporary biological and physical science search for verification of the truth about how things in the physical world work through testable hypotheses, rigorous experimentation, exhaustive analysis, thorough peer review and rational conclusions. This complex process of testing a hypothesis is informed by a necessarily capricious 'scientific intuition' which influences what to hypothesize, how to experiment and even what experimental results might mean. This contemporary 'unsacralized' science is a materially

¹⁵⁸ See in particular, Knowledge and the Sacred, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1981); An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978); Sufi Essays, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1972) and Religion and the Order of Nature. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

focused analogue (or 'shadow', to be more Platonically precise) for the path of metaphysical realization, which we have heard Nasr identify over and over again as a sacred science grounded in religious and philosophical tradition, even more rigorous in its approach to the delineation of natural laws than contemporary science is. Both pursuits seek Beauty and Truth, but on levels so different they might be described relating as zero does to infinity. Be that as it may, an increased rapprochement between the two could come from the search not only how things work but for why they do, and what the relationships among them signify in a spiritual sense; and not only theoretically, but experientially. This kind of science that begins to partake in the sacred, does not, according to Nasr, exclude the modern variety and its discoveries. On the contrary, it makes available:

“... a worldview where the religious understanding of the order of nature in the traditional sense would be accepted as authentic along with sciences based on particular dimensions of nature, such as the quantitative, all within a metaphysical whole where in fact each mode of knowledge would be accepted as part of a hierarchy leading to the highest science, which is the science of the Real as such, or *scientia sacra*.”¹⁵⁹

Whatever humble insights into the 'nature of Nature' that have found their way into our work have come largely from Plotinus and from a cautiously appreciative response to the writings of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and his Traditionalist colleagues; cautious because when one takes a pessimistic view of this possible 'rapprochement', the gulf (or should we say 'abyss') dividing the often strident and sometimes arch-conservative faction of Traditionalists from that of the equally strident and conservative proponents of modern 'scientism'¹⁶⁰ does not appear to

¹⁵⁹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Religion and the Order of Nature, (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) page 273.

¹⁶⁰ 'Scientism' is the indiscriminate application of the empirically based methodology and worldview of contemporary science to all aspects of human

be bridgeable— at least by means of the kinds of doctrinaire and ‘evangelical’ arguments and pronouncements typically advanced by both these extremist camps on either side of this philosophical divide. Further, would most modern scientific disciplines in their innate need for continual empirical self-definition and research grants even consider re-defining the world (and their practice) via characteristics lying outside their capabilities to observe and measure quantitatively?

From a more positive point of view, it might be possible for the Platonism of Plotinus to help scientifically inclined people rediscover the sacred metaphysics implied by the forms and functions of the animate and inanimate in the physical world. After all, Plotinus’ almost ‘scientific’ clarity of purpose, his metaphysical dialectic and his experiential authority have historically garnered cross-cultural, religious and philosophical allies. But this rediscovery, as we have previously indicated, is a tall order. It necessitates the construction of a new paradigm for our relationship with nature based on its place in a chain or ladder of being, a vision central, as we have seen, to Plotinus and to Islamic philosophy. However, as Nasr points out:

“Even if such a ‘space’ were opened up and the religious view of the order of nature reasserted, it would of course have to be of necessity on a scale global in its intellectual outlook, although local in its practical applications. The integral teachings of the Western religious tradition must be

endeavor, including religion and philosophy. The overt assumption of scientism is that science’s empirical view of the world is the only valid one and that ultimately everything can be and will be explained by it and it alone. There is probably no more eloquent and widely respected proponent of this questionable point of view than the famous biologist E.O. Wilson, and probably no more concise summaries of scientism than the following: “Material reality discovered by science already possesses more content and grandeur than all religious cosmologies combined.” E.O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1998) page 289. And “The central idea of the consilience worldview is that all tangible phenomena, from the birth of stars to the workings of social institutions, are based on material processes that are ultimately reducible, however long and tortuous the sequences, to the laws of physics.” Ibid., page 291.

rediscovered and reformulated beyond the distortions and limitations imposed upon them by five centuries of secularist sciences and philosophies. Moreover, the view of other traditions must also be expounded both for the followers of each tradition and for a global religious perspective on the order of nature that would be able to confront in a united voice those who deny any meaning, purpose or sacred quality to nature.”¹⁶¹

However laudable the above mission of the Traditionalists may be, the ‘burning question of the day’ at this point, however, is whether in fact the contemporary scientific worldview is moving toward the ‘religious view of the order of nature’, or are both views destined to remain worlds apart? If they are not averse to ‘rapprochement’, what practical initiatives can help bring them closer together in quest of a new paradigm of nature that would be adopted on a global scale?

Nasr thinks the so-called *Gaia Hypothesis*,¹⁶² originally formulated by James Lovelock,¹⁶³ is a step in the right direction by contemporary science; and as Nasr points out, it is truly remarkable “to discover the web of relations between forests in the Amazon and droughts in the Sahara or the use of refrigerants and the hole in the ozone layer... or the relation of the blood content of polar bears to the pollution of the Hudson River”¹⁶⁴ or to realize that water molecules we breathe in may have come from somebody perspiring in Timbuktu, or to know that some of

¹⁶¹ Ibid., page 274.

¹⁶² Very simply put, this hypothesis conceives the earth to be a single, self-regulating organism, “in which all the individual elements exist in a symbiotic relationship.” Hilary McGlynn, ed. The Scientific American Science Desk Reference, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1999) page 316.

¹⁶³ See James Lovelock, Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); and James Lovelock, The Ages of Gaia, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988).

¹⁶⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Religion and the Order of Nature, (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) page 283.

the atoms in one's body may have once vibrated in Plato's. These interesting facts about interrelationships in the physical world do not even scratch the surface of meaning contained in a seemingly infinitely empirical earth, solar system, galaxy and universe. But however complex these relationships are and however vast the systems studied by contemporary science may be, they are still confined to the physical, and the resulting understanding of those data merely superficial. However,

“Gaia could be envisaged again as the Earth (which in fact Gaia means in Greek) understood in the context of religious cosmology without doing injustice to the physical component of it. The unity sought then could embrace man in all levels of reality, including the spiritual as well as the cosmos, extending beyond the physical order but including the physical and its laws.”¹⁶⁵

In like manner, Nasr uses Bell's Theorem to indicate the impasse a purely materially based science reaches in confronting quantum mechanics' sub-atomic world. In brief, Bell's Theorem

“... is based on the remarkable behaviour of particles in two different points in space in which the change of state in one is detected *immediately* in the other without an apparent causal nexus between them, leading some physicists to speak of the transfer of information at superluminal speeds, something that Einstein rejected.”¹⁶⁶

We have seen that *simultaneity* is both characteristic of the Plotinian Intellectual Realm and of the noetic seeing that we have examined as a major recurring theme in the Enneads. The fact that laws governing time and space as we know them do not exist in either the world of what we might call micro-materiality or the macro-world of Plotinus' Intellectual Realm is provocative, to

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., page 283.

¹⁶⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Religion and the Order of Nature, (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) pages 148-149.

say the least. One of the implications, at least in the context of Bell's Theorum, is that the laws on which our material world is based have nothing to do with cause-effect logic and the perceived separation of objects and events, and everything to do with unity. Compare this with what Plotinus says about separation in the Intellectual Principle:

“The authentic and primal Cosmos is the Being of the Intellectual Principle and the Veritable Existent. This contains within itself no spatial distinction, and has none of the feebleness of division, and even its parts bring no incompleteness to it since the individual is not severed from the entire.” (III.2.1)

The preceding passage and other similar ones in the Enneads indicate the necessity for what Nasr has called, in his discussion of the implications of Bell's Theorum, a “transformation of consciousness in order to perceive that whole in whose matrix alone the behavior of the ‘parts’ can be understood.”¹⁶⁷ Plotinus agrees and his text implies that without this transformation of consciousness which depends on “another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, a birthright of all, which few turn to use” (I.6.8), the world will just be a world of veritable shadows, dim images of their Source.

Obviously missing from the worldview of contemporary science are the notions of consciousness and levels of Being; and to Plotinus' Platonism these principles were, as we have seen, more than ‘notions’. They were a set of spiritual experiences central to his expression of the continuing Platonic tradition, all of which constituted guidance on the exploration of inner ‘undiscovered country’ in a radically inclusive state of consciousness that transformed the way the world and life in it were perceived:

“There must be a radical restructuring of the intellectual landscape to enable us to take this type of knowledge of

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., page 149.

nature seriously, which means to accept the findings of modern science only within the confines of the limitations that its philosophical suppositions, epistemologies and historical development have imposed upon it, while rejecting completely its totalitarian claims as *the* science of the natural order. It means to rediscover a science of nature that deals with the *existence* of natural objects in their relation to Being, with their subtle as well as gross aspects, with their interrelatedness to the rest of the cosmos and to us, with their symbolic significance and with their nexus to higher levels of existence leading to the Divine Origin of all things.”¹⁶⁸

Intellectual landscapes have been restructured many times before. One only has to look at the history of religion and the rise of modern science and philosophy to find obvious examples. This time, however, since the survival of the earth as we know it is in question, could the rigorous technical precision of modern science and the vision of Being brought by religion and traditional philosophy come together to form this new paradigm based on a recognition and respect for the sacred quality of nature? If they can, could one of the primary catalysts in this synthesis be the Platonism of Plotinus? After all, this teaching is scientific in nature, providing guidance in rigorous inquiry into the nature of things (a propensity intrinsic to the rational Western mind). In addition, it also communicates, via great ideas and dialectic, a way to the Intellect, the spiritual ‘organ’ capable, according to Plotinus, of actually perceiving the laws of nature that science is dedicated to uncovering. It is no coincidence that both Plotinian metaphysics and the notion of the sacredness of nature have been misplaced; perhaps they can be rediscovered within a new ‘intellectual landscape’ of ‘rapprochement’.

To move toward this, more practical and interesting work could be done to bring some of the more dynamic ecological paradigms such as the ‘Gaia hypothesis’ into ‘logical confrontation’ with Plotinus’ metaphysics of nature and with, as previously mentioned, a

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., page 287.

rigorous, objective appraisal of the Traditionalists' *philosophia perennis*. The research endeavors of contemporary ethnobotanical science could also attempt to take into account traditional metaphysics, especially that implied in the stories, ceremonies and art of the world's indigenous peoples, whose medicinals ethobotanists are studying. Although indigenous peoples are increasingly recognized by this very same science as repositories of medicinal knowledge, these peoples are equally, along with Plotinus, custodians of an understanding concerning the sacred reciprocity of man and the natural world. For example, what influences, if any, do these peoples' worldviews, and the beliefs and the behaviors arising from them, have on the efficacy of their medicines?

The Platonism of Plotinus could mediate informed dialogues between religion and science (especially modern physics). However, in order for this to occur, would philosophy have to be resuscitated as a way of life by a critical mass of people, scientists and laypersons alike, who are to take part in these kinds of dialogues? Is this even possible? Even if it were, would it have a practical effect on a magnitude necessary to shift attitudes toward an appreciation of the necessity of a metaphysical context for scientific research and applications of technology? Perhaps science has a (largely unperceived) need for a 'new way of seeing', as Plotinus has said; and perhaps its 'rapprochement' with an exploration of the metaphysics of nature could inaugurate both a new science and new solutions for problems that may always remain insoluble via the old ways.

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