

ARTICLE

An Ecological Reading of Plotinus

Richard Evanoff

青山国際政経論集

26号 抜刷

1992, 11

An Ecological Reading of Plotinus

Richard Evanoff

Introduction

Two fundamental principles of ecological thinking—the idea that nature has intrinsic value and the idea that the world is an organic whole—both have a long, but often overlooked history in Western thought. Recently these ideas have gained in importance as contemporary philosophers have attempted to construct a philosophy of ecology aimed not only at understanding the present ecological crisis, but also at providing the philosophical basis for ethical action—specifically a moral response to the social and environmental problems which have been created by excessive industrialism, consumerism, and a way of life increasingly out of sync with nature.

Both the Eastern and Western philosophical traditions have the possibility of making a significant contribution to contemporary ecological philosophy. In his brief survey, “Western Process Metaphysics,” George Sessions discusses the prospects for developing what he calls “an ecological metaphysics for the West.”¹⁾ He notes that the Presocratics, especially Heraclitus, Anaximander, Pythagoras, and Empedocles, have “. . . developed perennial philosophies which were pantheistic and surprisingly ecological, as they both engaged in theoretical scientific speculation and attempted to reconcile the emerging science with spiritual development and nature mysticism.”²⁾ He sees a parallel between their systems and Eastern philosophy and religion, and goes on to discuss the further contributions he believes Spinoza and Whitehead can make to ecological thinking.

1) George Sessions, “Western Process Metaphysics (Heraclitus, Whitehead, and Spinoza)” in Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985), p. 236.

2) *Ibid.*

The philosophy of Plotinus also has many features in common with the philosophical and religious traditions of the East,³⁾ and in this article I would like to explore some of the contributions I believe Plotinus can make to a philosophy of ecology. The philosophical system of Plotinus, as with that of Spinoza, is essentially monistic, and thus able to ultimately avoid the various dualistic splits between mind and body, spirit and flesh, God and nature, the divine and the human, and so on. While not pantheistic in the technical sense, Plotinus's outlook nonetheless sees the divine as immanent in all aspects of reality, including both the human self and nature. This conception leads to a positive evaluation of both the self and nature. Nature is thoroughly permeated with spirit, and thus of intrinsic value. Instead of regarding the divine as totally transcendent and the world of nature in purely mechanistic terms, Plotinus sees the world as an organic whole.

The Divine in Nature

Plotinus, as with Spinoza, bases his philosophical system on the monistic idea that there is one single metaphysical reality which constitutes the whole of existence. For Spinoza this reality was God (or God as Nature); for Plotinus it was the One. Plotinus took his conception of the One primarily from Plato's *Parmenides* and also particularly from Plato's myth of the sun in Book VI of the *Republic*. The One is immanent in the world since it is the source of everything that exists. At the same time, however, it is transcendent to the world since it is not itself a particular thing.

The immanence of One derives from the fact that the One erupts or overflows with creative energy, producing in addition to itself two further modes of being, or *hypóstases*: *noûs* (intellect) and *psyché* (soul). *Noûs* is the world of Platonic ideas containing the archetypes, or patterns, on which the physical world is modeled; the physical universe is an image, or reflection, of *noûs*. *Psyché* is the mediating principle which elevates matter by imprinting it with the archetypal forms, thus "creating" the physical universe as we

3) See, for example, *Neoplatonism and Indian Thought*, ed. R. Baine Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), especially C. L. Tripathi's article, "The Influence of Indian Philosophy on Neoplatonism," pp. 273-292.

know it. Matter, which stands furthest from the One in Plotinus's schema, is not a *hypóstasis* as such and does not, in a metaphysical sense, even exist. The One, *noûs*, and *psyché* alone are real; matter for Plotinus is pure negativity. By itself, as unshaped "stuff" devoid of form, matter is nothing, and therefore ultimately evil. It only acquires reality and goodness as it begins to take on the forms it receives from *psyché*.

This process of creative overflowing whereby the One produces (in a logical, not a temporal sense) *noûs* and *psyché* is called the process of emanation. Emanation accounts both for the multiplicity of the world and for its underlying unity. The emanation process is not the creation of the world in time—Plotinus held that the world was eternal and had always existed—but rather the infusing of all that exists with the divine presence. Since the One is omnipresent, it is present in everything that exists.

How then does multiplicity come from one? Because it is everywhere, for there is nowhere where it is not. Therefore it fills all things; so it is many, or rather it is already all. Now if it itself were only everywhere, it would itself be all things; but since it is also nowhere, all things come into being through him, because he is everywhere, but are other than him, because he is nowhere. Why, then, is he not only everywhere, and is also, besides being everywhere, nowhere? Because there must be one before all things. Therefore he must fill all things and make all things, not be all the things he makes.⁴

In this passage both the transcendent and the immanent characteristics of the One can be clearly seen. Plotinus safeguards the One's transcendence (and avoids pantheism) by refusing to equate the One with the things the One makes. If the One were a particular thing, it would then cease being the whole and become a mere part; it would no longer be a unity, but would become a multiplicity. Thus, the One is "beyond being"⁵, which is

4) Plotinus, *Enneads* III. 9. 4, trans. A. H. Armstrong, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966-1988).

5) The phrase "beyond being" [*epékeina ousías*] is referred to repeatedly by Plotinus and is also taken from Book VI of Plato's *Republic*: "... Goodness is not the same thing as being, but even beyond being, surpassing it in dignity and

another way of saying that it is not a *particular* being. Because it is beyond being, we can form no conceptions of it. It is ineffable and only capable of being discussed in negative terms: “We say what it is not, but we do not say what it is.”⁶⁾

Nonetheless, the One is not only transcendent, but also immanent. Since the One is everywhere, it is present in all things, filling them with divine life. *Psyché*, as the *hypóstasis* nearest matter, is the specific agent which creates life and infuses nature with a divine presence.

Let every soul, then, first consider this, that it made all living things itself, breathing life into them, those that the earth feeds and those that are nourished by the sea, and the divine stars in the sky; it made the sun itself, and this great heaven, and adorned it itself, and drives it round itself, in orderly movement”⁷⁾

Everything that exists is animated by soul. Nature is no longer “dead matter,” but has become alive through the creative energy of *psyché*—a principle which applies not only to organic matter such as humans, animals, and plants, but also to apparently lifeless beings, such as stars, stones, and air, since these also embody the divine.⁸⁾

It is important to remember that Plotinus does not equate *psyché* with the individual human soul. Instead he sees each particular soul, including the souls of humans, plants, and inanimate objects, as manifestations of the

power.” Trans. F. M. Cornford, in W. T. Jones, *The Classical Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969), p. 133.

6) *Enneads* V. 3. 14. This passage was used by early Christianity as a foundation for apophatic (or negative) theology. Apophatic theology attempted to describe God in purely negative terms, negating any positive assertions which were made about divinity. Cataphatic (or positive) theology permitted positive assertions, but regarded these as metaphorical. Apophatic theology was prominent in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite and continues to be influential in Eastern Orthodox theology.

7) *Enneads* V. 1. 2. In the same passage is a reference to the divinity of the world: “. . . our universe is a god by the agency of this soul.”

8) Compare this idea with Naess’s view that even landscapes and rivers are “living beings.” See my interview with Naess, “Ecosophy: Beyond East and West” in *Kyoto Journal* (Summer, 1989), p. 42.

single all-embracing *psyché*. A. H. Armstrong comments, "The physical universe as a whole is a single ensouled living being."⁹ The result is a radical animism in which everything is seen as being infused with soul. Plotinus speaks of soul as being "interwoven through the whole universe."¹⁰ Since soul is divine, all that it infuses is also divine. I would hold that this view is the logical equivalent of the contemporary notion that everything which exists, including nature, has "intrinsic value." If something is regarded as "divine," it is impossible to see it as having only instrumental value. While modern readers may have difficulties with the metaphysical language Plotinus uses to express this idea, they can still appreciate his attempt to assign supreme value to everything that is in the world and in nature.

While *psyché* is the specific agent which accomplishes this infusion of the divine into all that exists, Plotinus speaks of all three *hypóstases* as being present within nature and within humanity.¹¹ The relationship of these three *hypóstases* to each other, to human beings, and to nature is problematic, however, since as Thomas Michael Tomasic has noted, there are two distinct ways of representing them schematically:

. . . either 1) as a vertically descending order or ordination with the One positioned topmost, *Noûs* emanating downward from and subordinate to, the One, and *Psyché* emanating downward from, and subordinate to, *Noûs* or 2) horizontally, as a geometrically conceived out-

9) From Armstrong's introductory note to *Enneads* IV. 3-5, vol. IV, pp. 26-27.

10) *Enneads* II. 2. 3. Plotinus bases this view on *Timaeus* 36, where Plato speaks of the soul as being "interfused everywhere from the center to the circumference of heaven . . ." Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1949), p. 18.

11) *Enneads* V. 1. 10: ". . . [T]here is the One beyond being . . . and next in order there is Being and Intellect, and the nature of Soul in the third place. And just as in nature there are these three of which we have spoken, so we ought to think that they are present also in ourselves." Phillipus Villiers Pistorius stresses the continuity of the three *hypóstases* and warns against dividing them into three distinct metaphysical realities. Cf. *Plotinus and Neoplatonism* (Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1952), pp. 23-26.

ward expansion of concentric circles from a center.¹²⁾

Elsewhere¹³⁾ I have shown how a vertical representation yields a theistic interpretation of Plotinus, which ultimately sees the One as “outside” nature, whereas the horizontal interpretation yields a nontheistic interpretation which see the One as “inside” nature.

The vertical interpretation finds support in the Platonic tendency to speak of an ideal world “beyond” the imperfect world of ordinary experience. Plotinus, as a Neoplatonist, repeatedly uses the word “there” (*ekeî*) to refer to the transcendental world of Platonic forms in which everything is perfect. Moreover, as has already been noted, matter—as unshaped “stuff” devoid of form—was, for Plotinus, the fundamental principle of evil. *Psyché* “elevates” matter by imprinting it with the eternal forms, but matter constantly tries to pull the objects of existence back down into formlessness. Things become good to the extent they are able to “rise” above matter and fully participate in the world of the forms. The vertical interpretation, then, seems to lead inexorably to a position in which there is a dualistic split between form and matter, spirit and flesh. The divine is alienated from nature and placed in a separate world which is “beyond” the world of ordinary experience. All that is good, true, and beautiful is no longer “in” the world, but “above” it. Human attention, then, is focused away from the divine in nature towards a transcendental God who becomes an object of worship and devotion.

However, while Plotinus often expresses himself in the dualistic language of Platonism, he nevertheless develops an original position which is essentially monistic and better served, I would argue, by the horizontal, rather than the vertical, view of the relationship between the *hypóstases*. The

12) Thomas Michael Tomasic, “Neoplatonism and the Mysticism of William of St.-Thierry” in *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, ed. Paul Szarmach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), p. 54.

13) Cf. Richard Evanoff, “Plotinus and the Intuitive Tradition of the West,” in two parts, *Aoyama Gakuin University Ronshu*, No. 31 and No. 32 (Tokyo: Aoyama Gakuin University, 1990 and 1991). The present discussion in part duplicates the interpretations of these papers.

image of the One as a center around which all existence revolves occurs repeatedly in the *Enneads*.

For there is a kind of centre, and around this a circle shining out from it, and beyond these another, light from light: but outside these there is no longer another circle of light but this next circle through lack of its own light needs illumination from another source.¹⁴⁾

Here, we see the One as the center, with *noûs* and *psyché* as two concentric circles surrounding it. The final circle is matter—since it is pure negativity it “needs illumination from another source,” i.e., *psyché*.

Tomasic shows the connection between the horizontal representation and Neoplatonic mysticism:

In the realm of metaphorical space, all centers must coincide since there can be no spatial distance or qualitative distinction. It follows, therefore, that the center of our own self-identity coincides with the One, occupying the same “place” and would have the same characteristic and function. One’s own self-identity, one’s own center, must be construed as “transcendent” and “immanent” and be undifferentiated from the One¹⁵⁾

In this view the doctrine of the immanence of the One is not swallowed up by an overemphasis on the One’s transcendence, as is the case with the vertical interpretation. If the One is at the center of all that exists, then the One is also at the center of nature and at the center of ourselves. In another passage which echoes the circle imagery but reverses the ordering, Plotinus speaks of the universe as being in soul, soul as being in intellect, and intellect as being in the One.¹⁶⁾ In the horizontal interpretation transcendence is not the view that the One is a separate supernatural entity above and beyond ordinary reality, but rather the view that the part is incapable

14) *Enneads* IV. 3. 17. Other passages which refer to the circle imagery include I. 7. 1, II. 2. 1, III. 2. 3, IV. 1. 1, IV. 2. 1, IV. 7. 6, V. 1. 11, VI. 5. 5, VI. 8. 18, and VI. 9. 8.

15) Tomasic, p. 56.

16) *Enneads* V. 5. 9.

of containing the whole. Transcendence means that the individual can never see itself in isolation, as an end in itself, because there is a larger world outside the individual of which the individual is only a part. It is in this sense that we can properly speak of a “divine” universe which “transcends” the individual.

The presence of the One within the self provides the basis for an intuitive understanding of the universe, since metaphysical reality and inner psychological experience coincide. Intuitive understanding is primarily achieved through contemplation (*theoría*).¹⁷⁾ Contemplation is the reverse of the emanation process, representing the ascent, or the return, of that which has been emanated to the source from which it emanated. The ascent moves through progressively higher forms of understanding, beginning with the “faith” (*pístis*) of *psyché*, through the “knowledge” (*gnósis*) of *noús*, to the ultimate vision of the One, i.e., the inner vision of an individual’s own participation in divinity.

In the treatise “On Nature and Contemplation and the One,” Plotinus shows that contemplation is not merely a passive intellectual apprehension of the divine in nature on the part of humans, but rather the active participation of nature itself in the divine life. Everything contemplates, including plants and the earth itself.¹⁸⁾ Contemplation is the aspiration of all things

17) The word *theoría* was used by Aristotle to describe the self-contemplation of the Unmoved Mover, a view Plotinus rejects because it involves splitting the first principle into that which contemplates and that which is contemplated. Metaphysically Plotinus’s view eliminates all dualisms between thinker and thought; psychologically it sharply distinguishes between egoistic pseudo-contemplation of the self and a supreme form of “un-self-consciousness” which is not directed towards anything in particular—the “letting go” which precedes all mystical experience. This form of contemplation compares favorably with the meditation practices of Zen Buddhism and also with the Christian concept of “infused contemplation,” i.e., contemplation which comes as a gift from God, rather than through human efforts.

18) This view is also supported by the idea that all souls are one, regardless of whether they are “rational” (human), “irrational” (animal), or a “mere principle of growth” (plants and inanimate objects). Cf. *Enneads* IV.9.3. It is the soul within humans, animals, plants, and inanimate objects which contemplates, even though each of these specific life forms may have different levels of consciousness. A hierarchy of consciousness in no way implies a metaphysical hierarchy of being.

to return to their source.

For when living things, too, produce, it is the rational principles [*lógoi*] within which move them, and this is an activity of contemplation, the birthpain of creating many forms and many things to contemplate and filling all things with rational principles, and a kind of endless contemplation, for creating is bringing a form into being and this is filling all things with contemplation.¹⁹⁾

All things aspire to the archetypal forms which *psyché* has given them, which is why it is possible for even inanimate objects to “contemplate.” The specific physical manifestations of trees, animals, and stones, are always changing and subject to death and decay, but the creative unfolding of form into matter is eternal. What is impressive about nature are not the material objects it contains, but its regenerative power—the power to bring life, meaning, and purpose to otherwise dead matter. Without this animating power the universe is a dead corpse.

The end of the contemplative process is not knowledge, but experience, specifically the experience of the One. The experience of the One is ineffable and beyond all knowledge, even intuitive knowledge. It is not the extraordinary experience of a supernatural being, but rather the (potentially ordinary) experience of the divine in the self, of center coinciding with center. Plotinus shunned the more unusual and ecstatic forms of mystical experience, and regarded the ascent of the soul not as a journey to an exotic metaphysical realm, but rather as a journey back to one’s own familiar self. In the final treatise of the *Enneads* Plotinus writes, “When the soul begins again to mount, it comes not to something alien but to its very self.”²⁰⁾ The easiest way to discover the divine is not to look for it outside the self, but to look for it within; as with Buddhism, self-knowledge is the prere-

19) *Enneads* III. 8. 7.

20) *Enneads* VI. 9. 11, trans. Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page (Chicago: William Benton, 1952). In IV. 3. 3 Plotinus also speaks of the part being the *same* as the whole, not part of the whole. Individual soul and universal soul are both rational, and ultimately there is only one *psyché*. This is the metaphysical foundation for the view that those who know themselves know the all.

quisite for enlightenment.

The self which is discovered here is not the separated, egoistical self striving for self-glory, but rather the true or deeper self which is grounded in the One. As the individual moves closer to the One, it moves from evil to good, from error to truth, from ugliness to beauty, from potentiality to actuality. To realize the One is to realize oneself.²¹⁾ The self-realization process is not a striving after perfection, i.e., trying to *attain* the One, but rather a stripping away of all external accretions so that the One within may become manifest. The soul must be purified of all selfish thoughts and desires, of anything that isolates the individual in the world of multiplicity and prevents it from realizing itself as part of a larger whole. The soul itself cannot sin—while the soul may “fall” away from the One towards matter, there is no doctrine of original sin in Plotinus. The soul itself is pure and eternal. When Plotinus speaks of the “immortality of the soul” he is not referring to the perpetual existence of individual souls in time. Rather he is suggesting that it is possible for individual souls to participate here and now in the divine life which the one immortal soul makes possible. *Psyché* exists before individuals are born and continues to exist after they die. Immortality is impersonal rather than personal; the soul is immortal even though individuals are not.

Thus, the attempt to realize oneself is not a narrow quest for personal salvation. Rather it is the means by which the individual is relinked to others in the larger cosmos. Everything that exists is attempting to realize itself, to become what it was intended to be. The ethical implication of this view, which will be developed in the next section, is that everything must be permitted to realize its inner potential—including humans, animals, plants, and rocks—since everything is suffused with divinity.

21) Cf. *Enneads* III. 8. 10 (trans. Armstrong): “Therefore, too, we go back everywhere to one. And in each and every thing there is some one to which you will trace it back, and this in every case to the one before it, which is not simply one, until we come to the simply one, but this cannot be traced back to something else. But if we take the one of the plant—this is its abiding origin—and the one of the animal and the one of the soul and the one of the universe, we are taking in each case what is most powerful and really valuable in it”

The World as an Organic Whole

The notion that everything is suffused with divinity leads Plotinus to speak explicitly of the earth as a “god”:

One might conjecture from the things which grow out of it that the earth has a growth-soul; but if many animals are visibly produced by the earth, why should one not say also that it is an animal? But since it is so large an animal, and no small part of the All, why should not one say that it has intelligence also, and so is a god? For if each of the stars is a living thing, why should not the earth also be a living thing, since it is part of the universal living thing? For one must certainly not say that it is held together from outside by a soul which does not belong to it, but has no soul within it, as if it was not able to have a soul of its own as well as the stars.²²⁾

Not only is the planet earth a living being imbued with soul, but Plotinus elsewhere describes the entire cosmos as a “single living being which encompasses all the living beings that are within it”; it has one soul which extends to all its parts.”²³⁾

The notion of the universe as a “single living being” is taken directly from *Timaeus* 30, but the idea is also closely related to the Stoic view that the universe constitutes a single organic whole. Plotinus rejected the Stoic tendency to see the universe and God as material, but retained, in a more idealistic form, the concept that each part of the whole is interrelated. The natural world is patterned after the ideal world of the forms, which Plotinus evocatively describes as “boiling with life.”²⁴⁾ The world of the forms is not (if we continue to follow a horizontal, nondualistic interpretation of Plotinus) a separate realm above and beyond the realm of ordinary experience. Rather, it is the ideal to which nature aspires and the underlying value which prevents nature from being seen in purely mechanistic terms.

22) *Enneads* IV. 4. 22. Compare this with Lovelock’s Gaia Hypothesis.

23) *Enneads* IV. 4. 32. Cf. *Enneads* V. 1. 2, cited above, which also refers to the entire cosmos as a diety: “. . . our universe is a god by the agency of this soul.”

24) *Enneads* VI. 7. 12.

Maximum diversity is seen as desirable in itself. “The All is full of the richest variety,” Plotinus writes, “. . . [I]t did not have to come to be an ordered universe like a soulless house”²⁵⁾ Order alone is worthless; what is ordered must also be animated by soul.

The notion of the universe as a unity in diversity is a recurring theme in the *Enneads*.

One principle must make the universe a single complex living creature, one from all; and just as in individual organisms each member undertakes its own particular task, so the members of the All, each individual one of them, have their individual work to do Each one goes forth from one single principle and does its own work, but they also co-operate one with another; for they are not cut off from the whole. They act on and are affected by others, one comes up to another, bringing it pain or pleasure.²⁶⁾

Plotinus uses the word “sympathy” (*sympatheia*) to describe the interconnectedness of everything that exists. Sympathy is, in part, what makes perception possible, since an image could not be conveyed from an object to an eye if there were no correspondence between the two. Plotinus believes that sympathy also explains how magical spells work.²⁷⁾ On a profounder level, however, the fact that all souls are derived from the universal soul accounts for the “community of feeling” which exists between different things. The desire of one thing in the universe is naturally directed towards other things in the universe.²⁸⁾ But sympathy is not mere ego-gratification; it is also the basis of the feeling of empathy things have for

25) *Enneads* IV. 4. 36.

26) *Enneads* II. 3. 7. One might say that the spirit of cooperation written of here is more in keeping with Kropotkin’s notion of “mutual aid” than with Darwin’s idea of the “survival of the fittest.”

27) *Enneads* IV. 3. 8. Sense perception is discussed in IV. 6, “On Sense-Perception and Memory.” The relationship between sympathy and magic is discussed in IV. 4. 40. James Frazer used the term “sympathetic magic” to describe ritual acts which symbolically anticipate a desired goal, eg., beating drums to imitate thunder as part of a rain dance.

28) *Enneads* IV. 4. 35.

each other. Things are able to empathize with each other on the basis of their “shared experiences.”²⁹⁾

Sympathy is thus the basis for love and compassion:

. . . [W]e do share each other’s experiences when we suffer with others from seeing their pain and feel happy and relaxed [in their company] and are naturally drawn to love them; for without a sharing of experience there could not be love for this reason. And if spells and magical acts in general draw men together and make them share experiences at a distance, this must be altogether due to the one soul. And a word spoken quietly acts on what is far off, and makes something separated by an enormous distance listen; from this one can learn the unity of all because their soul is one.³⁰⁾

Plotinus defines sin as the desire to be independent from other things and to exist in a state of isolation from the whole. Isolation increases the farther something moves away from the One. As an individual’s attention is directed away from the One towards matter and egoistic gain, it is also directed away from other individuals, and ultimately away from one’s own self, i.e., the indwelling soul. The result is contempt for the One, for others, and for oneself.³¹⁾

Sin is thus pure negativity. It is the failure of individuals to realize their higher potential. Rather than be attracted to the “higher” world of the One (manifest in the deeper self), the individual is drawn towards matter, which is ultimately a state of nonexistence, of nonbeing. It is important to remind ourselves, however, that Plotinus’s depreciation of matter does not necessarily imply otherworldliness, even though many interpreters both ancient and modern have read his work in this way.³²⁾ The “higher

29) *Enneads* IV. 4. 32: “. . . [N]othing is so distant in space that it is not close enough to the nature of the one living thing to share experience.”

30) *Enneads* IV. 9. 3. Cf. also IV. 4. 32.

31) *Enneads* V. 1. 1.

32) Despite the otherworldliness of later medieval Christianity, primitive Christianity was in fact a corrective to otherworldly tendencies in Gnosticism. Christianity believed that God had created the universe and had declared his creation

world” is not only transcendent, but also immanent in nature. Plotinus clearly argued against an otherworldly interpretation of his views in the treatise “Against the Gnostics,” which speaks eloquently of the beauties of nature and the “godlike” beauty of souls.³³⁾ Gnosticism generally agreed with Plotinus that matter is evil, but, unlike Plotinus, it also tended to identify matter with the physical universe. In the Gnostic view, the soul is imprisoned in a material body and forced to live in an unjust and horrifying universe which has been created by an evil God. Eventually the soul must free itself by leaving the material world and entering into the realm of pure spirit. Plotinus rejected the Gnostic outlook, insisting that while matter itself may be evil, the physical universe is good because it embodies divine forms.

It is possible to perceive beauty in nature because nature contains the divine forms within itself. This idea is the cornerstone of Plotinus’s aesthetics. Beauty does not reside in the external features of objects, but in their inner forms. A tree is not merely a material object, but the embodiment of a form. Trees, no less than humans, are made in the “divine image.” The Platonic prejudice against art is retained in Plotinus’s idea that an artistic image can never be more than a lifeless imitation of a living reality.³⁴⁾ Unlike nature, which is constantly recreating itself, works of art are incapable of further creation; they are merely the passive material

to be “good.” Thus it shared with Neoplatonism a positive evaluation of the physical universe (against the Gnostics), but went even further by refusing to identify matter itself with evil. Christ, as God-man, represents the complete fusion of spirit and matter. Redemption is not only of spirit, but also of matter—thus the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body as opposed to the more typically Greek idea of the immortality of the soul. In the 9th century John Scotus Erigena worked out an essentially Neoplatonic Christian philosophy which avoided identifying matter with evil. The created universe is pantheistically conceived as a theophany of God, and God is thus revealed in nature. Evil is a motion of the will away from that which is to that which is not.

33) See especially *Enneads* II. 9. 17.

34) Cf. *Enneads* IV. 3. 10: “For art is later than soul, and imitates it, making dim and weak imitations, toys not worth much, bringing in many devices to help it in producing an image of nature.”

receptacles of form. Plotinus is consistently critical of the idea that true beauty can be crafted or manufactured in a mechanical way, since the creative activity of *psyché* is always unplanned and spontaneous. Intuitive insight takes precedent over rational contrivance. Nonetheless, artists who are able to utilize the unplanned and spontaneous creativity of *psyché* within them, are able to bring the archetypal forms to matter.

This passage from the treatise “On Providence” summarizes Plotinus’s basic position on the intrinsic worth and beauty of nature:

. . . [I]t is not proper for anyone to speak ill of even this universe as not being beautiful or the best of all things which have body; nor to blame the cause of its existence when, first of all, it exists of necessity and not as the result of any process of reasoning, but of a better nature naturally producing a likeness of itself, then, even if it had been a process of reasoning which had produced it, there will be nothing to be ashamed of in its product; for it produced a whole, all beautiful and self-sufficient and friends with itself and with its parts, both the more important and the less, which are all equally well adapted to it. So he who blamed the whole because of the parts would be quite unreasonable in his blame; one must consider the parts in relation to the whole, to see if they are harmonious and in concord with it; and when one considers the whole one must not look at a few little parts.³⁵⁾

Plotinus must still deal with the problem that even though the universe is the “best of all possible worlds,” pain and suffering continue to exist. He does this by suggesting that the All is not only one, but also many. Seen from the perspective of the whole, each individual has its part to play and its place in the overall scheme of things. But because the universe is also many, individuals inevitably come into conflict with each other, injuring each other to supply one’s own needs and even using each other for food.

This All is visibly not only one living creature, but many, so that in so far as it is one, each individual part is preserved by the whole, but in

35) *Enneads* III. 2. 3.

so far as it is many, when the many encounter each other they often injure each other because they are different, and one injures another to supply its own need, and even makes a meal of another which is at the same time related to and different from it³⁶⁾

This view forms the basis of Plotinus's theodicy. Pain and suffering which occur as a result of natural processes are not evils in themselves, but are rather unavoidable aspects of the whole. From the perspective of the whole the world is as perfect as it could possibly be. Genuine evil is the pain and suffering which results when one part of the whole attempts to appropriate to itself more than it is naturally entitled to, substituting self-aggrandizement and egoistic gain for authentic selfhood and empathy with others. Thus Plotinus would have us not only "think globally," but also cosmically. Thought should not be aimed solely at the particular, i.e., the isolated "self-sufficient" fragment, but at the integrated whole. This "ecological" view of knowledge replaces analytical thinking (dividing the universe into mechanical parts) with wholistic thinking (seeing everything as organically interrelated).³⁷⁾

Knowledge of the whole is the basis of Plotinus's ethics. Plotinus shares the contemporary ecological notion that each thing in the universe should be permitted to "realize itself"—or, in Plotinian language, the highest good is for something, whether plant, animal, or human, to contemplate and actualize the divine form within itself. While organisms will inevitably need to reciprocally use each other for food, Plotinus would clearly oppose the excessive destruction of life forms purely for the purpose of making life more pleasurable for oneself. Suffering is unavoidable in the realm of nature and must be endured, but suffering should not be wantonly multiplied merely to satisfy material desires. Plotinus's "otherworldliness" is not a flight from the world or an inability to find delight in the natural pleasures the world offers, but rather a critique of excessive consumption and materialism. Plotinus, much as some contemporary ecologists (and sages

36) *Enneads* IV. 4. 32.

37) *Cf. Enneads* III. 9. 2.

throughout history), advocated a lifestyle which is simple in means and rich in ends. In his introduction to the treatise "On Well-Being" Armstrong gives a succinct summary of Plotinus's attitude: "Outward circumstances and bodily goods will add nothing to [one's] well-being, and if he has too much of them may even detract from it, but he will recognise a responsibility to his body and give it what it really needs."³⁸ This is the middle way of Buddhism, avoiding the extremes of both asceticism and overindulgence.

The Relevance of Plotinus to the Philosophy of Ecology

There are probably few, if any, modern philosophers who would be willing to accept Plotinus's metaphysics *in toto* as the basis for a philosophy of ecology. Nonetheless his concept of the divine in nature provides an alternative to the traditional separation of value from nature, and his view of the world as an organic whole clearly supports the idea that all life forms are interrelated. These two positions are essentially in agreement with the two ultimate norms of deep ecology: 1) self-realization—"the actualization of 'self-in-Self' where 'Self' stands for organic wholeness," and 2) biocentric equality—the idea that all life forms are "equal in intrinsic worth," even though "mutual predation is a biological fact of life."³⁹ Plotinus's philosophy stands opposed both to the dualism which has been characteristic of much Western thought and to the tendency to look at nature in a highly mechanistic way. Briefly, let us examine some of the main problems in Western thought which Plotinus's philosophy, as outlined above, addresses.

The history of Western thought, particularly of Western religious thought, is the history of the progressive alienation of value from nature. Primitive religious consciousness located the divine within nature, seeing nature as permeated with meaning and value (even if these were not always positively conceived). But with the development of a theistic worldview, meaning

38) From Armstrong's introductory note to *Enneads* I. 4, vol. I, p. 169.

39) Devall and Sessions, pp. 66-69.

and value increasingly came to be seen as transcendent to, rather than immanent in, the world. Peter L. Berger traces modern secularization to the tendency to dualistically divide the world into sacred and profane spheres. He writes that “. . . the transcendentalization of God and the concomitant ‘disenchantment of the world’ opened up a ‘space’ for history as the area of both divine and human actions.”⁴⁰⁾

The process of alienating values from nature by “transcendentalizing” them was perhaps necessary in that human culture was allowed to develop its own sphere of operation apart from religious influences. But this process also had the effect of relocating value outside of, rather than maintaining it within, nature and human consciousness. If all value is invested in a transcendent God, then nature itself is seen as “valueless.” And if nature has no intrinsic worth, then the exploitation of nature for human purposes becomes morally defensible. By relegating God metaphysically to a purely transcendental realm—that is, by locating the source of our values outside the natural process—ultimate value is seen as no longer being an integral part of the world of human consciousness.

The main problem in contemporary Western thought is not, however, the dualistic split between nature and value, but rather the materialistic monism which results when a transcendent God and the values he is presumably the source of can no longer be believed in. The dualisms of Aquinas (between faith and reason), Descartes (between mind and body), Kant (between pure and practical reason) were intended to preserve a “higher” realm of ultimate value, but once the contents of this higher realm are no longer seen as being intrinsically part of nature and human experience, they quickly lose their force and validity. The result is a monism which accepts only half of the original dualism and deprives nature of any deeper spiritual value. Matter is ultimately real and spirit is ultimately unreal. Eventually God, and the values he is presumably the source of, are transcended out of existence. The logical extension of this idea is Nietzsche’s proclamation

40) Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 118.

that God is dead. We are left with a purely "objective" science, concerned only with the mechanistic workings of nature, in which there is no ultimate value or purpose either for nature or for ourselves. Nihilism and despair are indeed appropriate responses.

The solution to the problem of the alienation of value from nature cannot be resolved, however, by simply returning to neolithic spirituality. We cannot, in a psychological sense, reenter the Garden of Eden once our spiritual innocence has been lost. We can, however, begin to recover an understanding of the deep connection between nature and spiritual meaning, as well as a renewed appreciation for the elemental feelings of awe and oneness this understanding makes possible. Eric Fromm sees in the development of the idea of God a progressive moving away from animistic and anthropomorphic conceptions to a God ". . . of whom no essential attributes can be predicated,"⁴¹ i.e., the God-beyond-being of mysticism and apophatic theology. For Fromm spiritual maturity is only possible when we have broken free from the "incestuous ties" which bind us to an image of God as father-figure. The adolescent rebellion against God is a necessary first step towards achieving spiritual maturity. Values no longer need to be enforced by an all-powerful father-figure. They are internalized, and we are thus obliged to accept full responsibility ourselves for the world we live in.

Fromm labels this basic point of view "nontheism." Nontheism should be distinguished from 1) the *theism* of both traditional Western religious thought and recent Goddess worship, which ultimately sees value as being transcendent to nature, 2) the *atheism* which is the end result of the Western enlightenment tradition and which denies the ultimate validity of value either within or outside of nature, and 3) the *agnosticism* of those for whom spirituality and values are irrelevant, even if they are not entirely disprovable. The German philosopher Fritz Mauthner has used the phrase *gottlose Mystik*—godless mysticism—to describe the nontheistic reuniting of spirit and

41) Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be As Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1966), p. 177.

matter. The description is especially apt in reference to Zen Buddhism, but it can also be applied to various pantheistic formulations in Western thought. The mysticism being spoken of here is of an immanent, rather than a transcendental, kind—not the kind of mysticism which sees the human soul as being united with a transcendental God, but the kind which sees individuals as already possessing “divinity” (or “Buddha-nature” or “the image of God” or “Christ”) within themselves. Nontheistic mysticism is a spiritual alternative which avoids the pitfalls of both transcendental theism and materialistic atheism, and which can provide the basis for a philosophy of nature which sees both nature and humankind not in purely materialistic terms, but as wholly permeated and suffused with value and meaning.

The problem with the West’s traditional religious consciousness is its dependency on an authoritarian principle conceived as being outside the self and outside of nature, rather than the realization of a spiritual principle within the self and within nature. If theism encourages spiritual dependence, then the rejection of theism is a precondition for spiritual independence. Yet, while an immanent sense of the “divine” must indeed be reintegrated into a fully developed personality, a immanentistic approach alone is insufficient, since it can easily lead to mere subjectivism and solipsism. The transcendental principle itself, understood in a metaphorical rather than a metaphysical sense, still has value as a check on that type of misguided egoism and spiritual pride which sees the self as already fully developed, as “fully God.” Transcendence in this sense means that the individual realization process is limitless and that the present stage of development can never be self-righteously regarded as the highest possible.

Once the spiritual principle is relocated within the self and within nature, spiritual knowledge is no longer conceived as being mediated to the individual through external forms of revelation (scripture, dogmas, hierarchical institutions). Rather, as with Plotinus, it comes directly from the contemplation of both the self and nature, and is immediately accessible to all. Spiritual practice is no longer devotional, but experiential, not concerned with the worship of God but with the full realization of the self—and by

An Ecological Reading of Plotinus

extension, with the revitalization of society and the renewal of nature. Nontheistic spirituality does not create hierarchical relationships between persons but is totally egalitarian in that it sees all people as possessing the spiritual principle within themselves. It does not result in a quietistic search for personal salvation, but rather empowers people to take responsibility for their society and their world by seeing that only they have the ability to work for meaningful change, and that the power to make these changes rests entirely within themselves. When spirituality loses its outward focus, it can indeed disintegrate into a self-indulgent thirst for a spiritual fix. But when the gaze is equally inward and outward, the individual is able to develop empathetic relationships both with others and with the earth.

To question whether such an immanent spiritual principle *actually exists* is to miss the point, simply because it is indeed not an empirical component of reality but rather an intuitive way of seeing the world. The source of this insight is, from the very start, not located in something "out there," but rather within human consciousness. It is the reappropriation of humanity's inherent capacity to create values and spiritual meaning. For Plotinus the question could not arise as to whether such values are "merely" the subjective creations of the human mind or shadows of objectively "real" ideal forms since the dualism on which this question is premised has already been rejected. In the highest forms of mystical experience the contents of human consciousness are identical with the contents of divine consciousness. To quote more fully a passage cited earlier: "When the soul begins again to mount, it comes not to something alien but to its very self, thus detached it is not in nothingness but in itself, self-gathered it is no longer in the order of being, it is in the Supreme."⁴²⁾

42) *Enneads* VI. 9. 11, trans. MacKenna and Page.

