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Plotinus's Metaphysics of Love: A Reflection On *Ennead* III.5 (50)

Abstract: This article provides a philosophical commentary on Plotinus's *Ennead* III.5, examining the Neoplatonic transformation of the principle of Eros. Diverging from the Aristotelian view of desire as a mere "relation" or movement within a static substance, the authors argue that Plotinus radicalizes Eros into a unitive "substance". This use of substance must be understood henologically: the active soul generates its own degree of reality based on its orientation. Utilizing the analogy of a compass, the article delineates three metaphysical states of the soul determined by its trajectory: the "god", the "daemon", and the "pathological". Through an analysis of the mythic parentage of Love in Plenty (Poros) and Poverty (Penia), the article demonstrates how the soul's desire for the good, mixed form (participated beauty mixed with matter), or matter qua matter determines the soul's substantial actuality and moral condition.

Keywords: Plotinus, Eros, Emanation, Metaphysics of the Soul, Henology.

From Platonic Eros to Plotinian Emanation

Since ancient times, diverse cultures have celebrated love through artworks and literature. This comes as no surprise given that love is a fundamental value. In Western culture, the ancient Greeks have left a lasting impression about love's significance, regarding it as having divine association¹. Because love is so basic to the intimacies of human life, the Greeks eventually discriminated four kinds of love, expressed by the words *eros* (erotic love), *philia* (the love of friendship),

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¹ Consider that Love (*Eros*) was conceived on the day of Aphrodite's birth. For that reason, the Greeks believed that Aphrodite and Eros had a special connection.

agape (the love extolled in Christian sacrifice), and *storge* (parental affection)². Eros and *philia* circulated in popular culture. Over time, love captured the attention of philosophers. Both *philia* and *eros* became important themes in ancient philosophical writings. Aristotle and Cicero wrote classics on friendship. Eros is the focus of two enduring documents: Plato's *Symposium* and Plotinus's treatise on love, *Ennead* III, 5, the 50th treatise that Plotinus wrote. These philosophical works are connected since Plotinus's thought in all respects is a self-conscious and inimitable elaboration of Platonism, the result of which is Neoplatonism³. The present article is a summary and commentary on Plotinus's treatise on love, *Ennead* III, 5 (50)⁴. En route the article will show the extent and depth of Plato's influence. Further on, the article argues that Plotinus diverges fundamentally from the Aristotelian concept of desire as a relation or movement within a substance. Instead, Plotinus radicalizes Eros into a substance itself. Substance must not be understood here as an Aristotelian category, but henologically. For Plotinus, the soul's ontological reality, that is, its substantial reality, fluctuates based on its orientation of its love. The soul generates or degenerates its substantial actuality based on its metaphysical trajectory.

In Plotinus's philosophy, the above-mentioned four kinds of love have a curious standing. While Plotinus employs some variants of *agape*, his usage differs from the deep moral and divine significance it will later come to have in the New Testament and in other Christian sources. Nonetheless, his usage is moral and coheres with some aspects of Christian morality. The term *agape* is not used extensively in the *Enneads*, but there are some scattered instances. They basically consist of expressions of satisfaction. A representative word is *agapestos*, that with which one must be content⁵. As mentioned above, *philia* is a word Plotinus employs in a way that echoes the standard meaning found in the prominent Greek writers, such as Aristotle and the Stoics. *Philia* is the word primarily used to express friendship. Curiously, the expression *storge* appears nowhere in Plotinus's writings. Eros, however, dominates Plotinus's discourse on love, and the path to that discourse goes through Plato's *Symposium*, arguably the most poetic of Plato's dialogues. The *Symposium* presents six speeches on love, recited to congratulate Socrates's friend Agathon, who, in 416 B.C., had won first prize in a playwright competition at the Lenaian Festival in Athens. Each of the speeches is interesting, but Socrates's speech is most relevant because it contains anthropological and metaphysical elements that illuminate Plotinus's philosophy of love. The substance of Socrates's speech on eros is not Socrates's own. He credits his knowledge of love

² See C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960).

³ Plotinus refers to Plato as a "godlike man" in the opening passage of his treatise on Love. This section of the article is based on A.H. Armstrong's translations of Plotinus. *The Enneads*, 1-7 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

⁴ This article observes the standard for citing Plotinus's writings. The convention is to identify the treatise, then the chronology of the treatise as specified in Porphyry's edition of the *Enneads*.

⁵ For such philological references and examples, see J.H. Sleeman and G. Pollett, *Lexicon Plotinianum* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980).

to a mystic, a woman named Diotima, supposedly a resident of Mantinea. There is no reference to her elsewhere in Plato's writings. She may be an invention for the ironic purpose of subjecting Socrates to dialectical examination⁶.

To address Socrates, Diotima first describes the nature of Eros, the personality, a figure in Greek myth. Eros is the offspring of Plenty (Poros) and Poverty (Penia) conceived on the day Aphrodite was born, which gave him a special connection with her and made him a lover of beauty since Aphrodite is very beautiful. This connection with the divine fostered the idea that Eros himself is a god, a view Socrates himself accepted. Diotima challenges this belief. Socrates is stunned. Diotima says that Socrates is in error. Once the error is corrected, she declares, one can see that Eros is not a god. People like Socrates are confused. The confusion consists in believing that in the lover-beloved relationship, the beloved has primacy. To give primacy to the beloved is understandable since the beloved gets attention when one first reflects on the issue of love. However, Diotima points out that such emphasis on the beloved misleads philosophers like Socrates. The key to understanding the nature of eros is to examine the subject from the vantage point of the lover rather than the beloved. Love as an active principle, which fact discloses what kind of being Eros is.

To correct his error—that Eros is a god—Diotima reminds Socrates of Eros's parentage. She addresses his puzzlement by reminding him that, like his mother, Eros is in perpetual need. While from his father (Poros), he inherits a capacity for resourcefulness and intelligence, these gifts don't completely compensate for the privations in his nature. The limits in the nature of Eros reveal that he cannot be a god. Gods are fulfilled, actualized, completed beings. Accordingly, Eros cannot be counted among the gods. Eros is unfulfilled, living in a state of desiring fulfillment. Eros is an aspirational being, desiring possession of beauty. Gods don't desire the beautiful. They already own it. Eros, then, is an intermediate kind of being. He is neither fulfilled nor unfulfilled, neither beautiful nor ugly, neither ignorant nor wise. Eros is less than a god but more than a mere mortal. As a being defined by desire or aspiration, Eros is a spirit (*Dæmon*). Moreover, Eros is neither wise nor ignorant. Only gods are wise because their intellect is perfectly formed by the idea of the beautiful, also called the Good. By aspiring to beauty, Eros aims for happiness. Beauty is another word for the Good, which pursuit is the pursuit of happiness. His nature is to desire beauty and to inspire souls to be attracted to Beauty. As a spirit, his mission is to inspire souls to pursue the Good. His life moves between privation and the aim of perfection.

⁶ There is a precedent in Plato to write a dialogue that in significant respects departs from historical fact. It is very unlikely that the young Socrates met and debated Zeno as narrated in the *Parmenides*. The fictional circumstance served Plato's dialectical purpose to subject Socrates to dialectical examination to expose *aporai* in Plato's Theory of Forms. Diotima may assume the role of authority in the *Symposium* that Zeno did earlier in the *Parmenides*. Plato depicts Diotima as a formidable dialectician, one who can match wits with Socrates.

In a famous passage of the *Symposium* (beginning at 209 e 5), Diotima teaches that love inspires the human soul to attain knowledge progressively. The foundation of knowledge is sense experience, whereby the knower is acquainted with bodily things. Diotima implies that this acquaintance is the starting point of knowledge. While there is a caricature of Plato's philosophy of knowledge as being defined from beginning to end as bundled in abstractions, truth be known, Plato is a realist, not a rationalist. The mind knows first by observation of physical things, such as beautiful bodies. Reflection on sensible bodies brings insight as our intellect achieves an ever more penetrating and yet universalized awareness of bodily natures. We grasp individual bodies, and by further exercise of our minds, we know collective bodies. Our minds can also apprehend things that are more abstract, like customs, habits, and institutions. There is a progressive insight into the behavior and appearance of sensible objects, physical things. True, Plato's philosophy evolves into having sophisticated and abstract elements—consider the doctrine of Forms and anamnesis—and he is rightly famous for these developments. Nonetheless, this ought not obscure the sense-realist origins of his thought. Truly, his philosophy begins with a homage to common sense, although his thought culminates in an uncommon common sense⁷.

Diotima makes clear that the knower, inspired by Love to know and enjoin beautiful bodies, can discern not only beautiful bodies but the idea of bodies in general. Subsequent to admiring beautiful bodies, the mind can focus on beauty as a common trait among such bodies, Beauty in general. Our intellects can move from knowledge of particulars (this or that beautiful thing) to knowledge of a general nature itself, such as the idea of body or the idea of beauty. Here we are at the threshold of Plato's Theory of Forms. We observe a movement as Love urges a transcendent trajectory, progressively, in stages. Diotima shows Socrates that the mind can, as it were, climb a ladder of reality and value. Indeed, Diotima shows Socrates a way of knowing that obtains the metaphysical. When we know universals, we apprehend objects that transcend time and space. A beautiful individual is in time and space. But the idea of beauty is not limited by being in time and in space. In other words, it is changeless and non-physical. If it is not in space and time, it is immaterial and eternal⁸. So, Diotima's speech has profound significance

⁷ Mortimer J. Adler speaks of Aristotle's philosophy as common sense in this way, but the description "uncommon common sense" could similarly apply to Plato. See M.J. Adler, *Aristotle for Everybody* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), xiv.

⁸ This conclusion is summed up by Plato in the *Phaedo*: "The soul is most like that which is divine, immortal, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, and ever self-consistent and invariable, whereas body is most like that which is human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, dissoluble, and never self-consistent" (80 b). The *Phaedo* appears to have been written just before the *Symposium*. Like the *Symposium*, the *Phaedo* appears to belong to Plato's middle dialogues, along with the *Republic*, the *Meno*, and the *Gorgias*. The *Phaedo* does not celebrate the interests of the body. It has a tone of asceticism, leading one to speculate that the *Symposium*, given its affirmations of things bodily, may have been written as a corrective to the ascetic disposition of the *Phaedo*. H. Tredennick, H. Tarrant trans. in *The Last Days of Socrates* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 148-149.

in the development of Plato's thought. Diotima's view of the issue has changed Socrates from a Socratic thinker to a Platonic one. Plotinus will show how this Platonic philosophy of love is adopted by Neoplatonism. Clearly, Diotima's hierarchical vision of reality, her description of the mind's ascent to greater, ever greater universality, is a hierarchical vision of things that conforms to a Neoplatonic worldview. One might say that Neoplatonism is a refined and exquisite retelling and elaboration of Diotima's Ladder of Love. The best way to explore any subject in Plotinus's thought is by relating it and its many elements to the ultimate principles of Plotinus's philosophy. The first such principle is his affirmation of monism, according to which to be real is to be one; that is to say, reality is unity. The second principle is an assertion of value: to be one is to be good; in other words, unity is goodness. The third principle is an expression of the metaphysics of causal priority, a principle that captures a fundamental Neoplatonic intuition: that what is prior in the universe is superior to what exists subsequently.

These principles are best represented by Plotinus's account of the production of the universe, a teaching known as the doctrine of emanation. It is intentionally called production to avoid mistakenly thinking that emanation is a creation doctrine. Creation signifies bringing into existence something out of nothing. Like other ancient thinkers, Plotinus could not fathom existence *ex nihilo*. For these thinkers, something can come to exist only out of the reality of whatever already exists. One cannot give what one does not have. Moreover, the universe is produced out of necessity. This conviction is axiomatic for Plotinus. Accordingly, the production of the universe is an emergence, a projection of reality that exists in the One, the supreme reality and source of all things. Constrained by this description, Plotinus regards the One as divine. In short, The One is an alternative name for God. The above-mentioned three principles of Plotinus's philosophy converge to illuminate the nature and operation of emanation. The One is an eternal inexhaustible source of being⁹. Grounded in the principle *bonum diffusivum sui*, perfections, projections, emergent beings, emanation out of the One is inevitable. It is not by choice that the One emanates. Choice is a feature of genuine creation. The Christian God truly creates because he chooses. He does not make out of metaphysical necessity. Emanation is deterministic, for the One's absolute simplicity would be compromised if the One could choose. Choice implies intellect, and intellect implies multiplicity, the minimal duality of knower-known, subject-object. The One excludes all multiplicity, even the minimal duality of knower and known. This is so even if the subject and object exist in the same thing, the self-thinking thought of Aristotle's God. Hence, intellect cannot be the supreme reality. Plotinus's God is not Aristotle's *Nous*, whose reality is derivative. Plotinus embraces this conclusion, inferring that the One is the first tier of reality, whereas intellect and its relations, like Platonic

⁹ Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI 8 (30), trans. A.H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library, 7 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966-1988).

Forms, belong to a subsequent level of reality, its second tier. So, there is the Supreme One, whose necessitarian overflow or outpouring of perfection generates the next level of reality, which is Nous or intellect. The operation of Intellect does not exclude Love, which appears as a significant player in emanation. While freedom or choice is not a factor, love certainly is. Desire is fundamental. Desire (*epheis*) drives emanation, not on the part of the One but on the part of the One's effects. Mind emerges as the One emanates. Plotinus explains emanation in a structured way, and it is in this structure that Love appears as an active component of emanation. Plotinus argues that upon analysis, emanation takes place in stages. The first stage, of course, is the simple overflowing of the One's perfection. This stage of production Plotinus calls *prohodos*, an unformed procession of reality from the One. This first stage is driven by desire or love to reunite with the divine source, the One. This outflow of the One introduces a new stage of reality, in which out of loving admiration of its source, the first emanant turns back (*epistrophe*) to behold it. In doing so, its deficient perception fragments what it perceives into a plurality of countless *noeta*, which Plotinus interprets as the world of Platonic Forms. One might say that emanation generates ontology, for being refers to that which is knowable, implying the tandem of intellect and intelligible, which tandem describes comprehensively the life of the first emanant. So, while the One/Good is beyond being (*epekeina tes ousias* as Plato declares at *Republic* 503 b), what the One/Good produces is the universe of being, unity-in-diversity. So, Being is part of reality, but reality strictly speaking is not being since it precludes diversity and being is one-in-many. Being is concentrated in the life of Intellect, which itself overflows and produces the second emanate, the World Soul, another intellect "wondrous and great", but inferior to Nous. Its emanation also involves a stage of *prohodos* followed again by *epistrophe*, an event that forms the consciousness of World Soul, the second emanant or third hypostasis. These stages affect how emanation eventually manifests a *plenum* of being, the description of which is definitive of Neoplatonism, as everything unfolds in descending, diminishing hierarchies, terminating where perfection gives out in the sterility of prime matter.

On higher levels of emanation, matter emerges as a principle of receptivity in the formation of successively descending beings. This matter, of course, is intelligible matter, as distinct from the matter that constitutes things in the physical world, the realm where prime matter and sensate matter obtains. Nonetheless, ancients like the Neoplatonists, were habituated to think that the constitution of the intelligible world required a two-stage formation of receptivity (potency) and intelligible formation. Clearly, the influence of Aristotelian principle had been adapted analogically into the Neoplatonic worldview¹⁰.

¹⁰ See C.L. Hancock, *Plotinus' Adoption of Aristotle's Doctrine of Act (Energeia)*, "Studia Elckie" 14(2012), pp. 117-124. Hancock details how Plotinus adopted Aristotle's concept of *energeia* (act/actuality) as a core ontological principle describing all beings and hypostases (Nous and Soul), which gives form and determinateness to matter. Plotinus also uses the

Eros as Substance: The Foundation of the Metaphysical States of the Soul

While Plotinus incorporated Aristotelian principles into his metaphysical structure, particularly regarding the constitution of the intelligible world, he diverges sharply from Aristotle when analyzing the internal workings of the soul and the nature of desire. Upon examining how Plotinus applies these principles to faculty psychology, love is not merely a relationship but takes on a substantial reality that drives the soul's ascent. This difference is best illustrated through a new interpretation of direction and purpose. Plotinus's analogical use of Aristotle's Eros suggests that his view of love as a substance rather than a relation means one must be drawn upward by a subject (substance). The subject possesses by nature what the lover desires to have in order to surpass their current limitations. To understand Plotinus in this case, one must consider the difference between Aristotelian and Plotinian faculty psychology.

In Aristotle's understanding, substance is a fundamental entity. For Aristotle, a human soul is a substance, and virtuous or vicious habits are accidental dispositions that do not alter the subject's fundamental entity. On the one hand, though Plotinus affirms in texts like *Ennead* IV.7 that the highest, undescended part of the soul is an immortal, simple substance, on the other hand the active individual soul in the realm of becoming possesses reality only in degrees. Therefore, the substantial reality of the soul is directly proportional to its unity and its orientation towards the Good. Again, for Plotinus, to be real is to be one. Therefore, when an active soul turns its Eros toward the indefinite emptiness of matter, the active soul does not acquire a bad accidental property, but instead degrades ontologically. The soul's orientation and desire cause a descent toward non-being, rendering its active identity less real and therefore less substantial.

To understand this distinction a bit better, let's consider a compass as an illustration and metaphor for the distinction between Plotinus and Aristotle's view of love. While Aristotle and Plotinus would not have been familiar with a compass as it wasn't invented yet, one can use a compass as a metaphor to understand their metaphysics. For Aristotle, the compass is a tool that helps a composite being achieve their desired destination, thus fulfilling their desire for perfection or completion. Imagine that a person's goal is to reach their home. Aristotle sees this desire as the lack or poverty that Plotinus talks about, which is not fulfilled until the person uses the compass to reach home. On the contrary, for Plotinus, the person is the compass needle, not the one holding the compass. Just as the needle exists within the whole compass, within the human person exists a desire for the Good because the individual person exists as an emanation of that same good. Thus, the needle's inherent desire to point toward the Good

Aristotelian distinction between prime matter (pure passive potency) and second matter (sensible matter) to structure his metaphysics of emanation, while explicitly rejecting Aristotle's related psychological term, *entelecheia*.

as True North, which is the point from which it came. However, there are mixed metals on earth that pull the compass needle in different directions as it tries to go toward the Good as True North. If the needle consents and does not fight the pull of these corporeal mixed things, the person ends up creating a kind of “highway” that leads the person away from the good. If the compass needle points at the form of beauty in these mixed corporeal things, that person creates a “daemon” where the person’s activity as a substance is generated according to the nature of the soul as participating in the Good, but not elevating the soul to be one with the Good as a soul who continues to focus and act journeying toward the Good (True North). However, the needle runs the risk of falling further from the good by ignoring the formal participatory beauty of mixed things (matter and form) and simply focusing on the material things as material, where such activity puts the person in a “pathological state”.

Plotinus describes three clear states of the soul. First, if a person fights the desire for mixed, corporeal things and stays focused on the higher goal, the person becomes “a god”. In this state, the individual achieves true fulfillment from the higher emanation, specifically Eros surrounding World Soul, and their activity acts as a pointer by substance to the Good, guiding others. Secondly, a person may point at the participatory beauty in these mixed substances while abstracting from the material aspect, which makes the person a “daemon”. Thirdly, if the person points simply at material things *qua* material things, the person is in a “pathological state”.

Plotinus’s study of the soul and its internal powers (faculty psychology) differs from Aristotle’s in several ways. First, eros, for Plotinus, is a substance, not a relation as it is for Aristotle. Secondly, the nature of the person changes based on a choice, unlike in Aristotle, where a person remains human despite being vicious or virtuous. For Plotinus, choosing the Good makes a person a “god”, choosing the beauty in things makes them a “daemon”, and choosing to focus on material things creates “a pathological state”. To be clear, natural mixed love as a “daemon” is directed toward nature and “is in the column of the good”. Moreover, the “daemon” acts as an intermediary. As Plato taught that we first see beauty in sensible things through sense experience, a person who directs their focus (love) toward the beauty in material things is operating according to their condition within a mixed composite (matter and form). They focus on the more complete and perfect (form of beauty) instead of the material thing simply as a material thing, which would result in a soul in a “pathological state”¹¹.

To expand upon the distinction between the daemonic and pathological states of the soul, a helpful contrast between Aristotelian faculty psychology and Plotinus’s Neoplatonic metaphysics clarifies Plotinus’s position. The assertion that a focus on material things *qua* material things creates a “pathological state”

¹¹ See Plotinus, *The Enneads*, ed. L.P. Gerson, trans. L. Gerson, G. Boys-Stones, J.M. Dillon, R.A.H. King, A. Smith, J. Wilberding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), III.5.2, III.5.4, III.5.7.

represents the nadir of Plotinian metaphysics (and ethics), a collapse of the soul's internal hierarchy. This collapse can be understood by analyzing how Plotinus transforms Aristotelian principles of substance, matter, and desire (eros) into a metaphysics where the soul does not merely have a disposition but metaphysically becomes the object of its attention.

To understand how a soul enters a "pathological state", Plotinus shifts the application of the nature of Eros fundamentally. In Aristotle's framework, desire is a movement or a relation between a subject and an object. Aristotle categorizes "relative" terms "when it is said to be such as it is from its being *of* some other thing or, if not, from its being related to something in some other way"¹². For Aristotle, desire is a movement originating in the appetitive faculty of the soul directed toward an end. The soul possesses faculties such as the nutritive, sensitive, and appetitive, and these powers are distinct from the soul's essence, which is the form of the body.

Plotinus radicalizes this view. He posits that eros (desire) is not merely an affection or a relation but a substance. Drawing from the Platonic myth from the *Symposium*, Plotinus argues that Love is a real existent born from the soul's activity. This shifts the metaphysical landscape: the human person is not merely a composite substance engaging in relationships of desire, but instead the person *is* the desire. For Plotinus, the soul is a "compass needle" itself, a substance constituted by its orientation.

This distinction is crucial for understanding what Plotinus means by "pathological". In Aristotle, if a person acts viciously, their substance as a human remains intact; the person merely lacks the correlative virtue and therefore lacks a disposition of soul. However, because Plotinus views the individual *eros* as a substance that shares its being with the individual soul, the direction of that Love determines the substantial reality of the soul. If the soul directs its *eros* toward the Good, it aligns with its higher nature; if it directs it toward the indefinite emptiness, it fundamentally alters its internal reality. The soul generates its own reality based on its orientation: "the loves, then, which are natural and in accordance with nature are fine...but the loves of those who have fallen into ways contrary to nature are all pathological states and certainly not substances or real existents"¹³.

¹² Aristotle, *The Categories*, Chapter 7.6a36, trans. H.P. Cooke, H. Tredennick, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), p. 47.

¹³ Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, 5, §7. Gerson's translation of "pathological states" perfectly captures the manic and deranged soul, but the change comes from a henological unity with matter *qua* matter, not an accidental Aristotelian relation. In Aristotle, a pathology is an accident inhering in a primary substance. An Aristotelian categorical reading here might incorrectly assume that Plotinus's phrase "certainly not substances" proves that love cannot alter the soul's substance. However, in Plotinus's henological ontology, to be "fallen into ways contrary to nature" means a privation of form. When Plotinus says these unnatural loves are "not substances or real existents", he is not making an Aristotelian categorical distinction between substance and accident. Instead, he is making a henological judgment. Since the soul, in this case, has directed

The “pathological state” is rooted in the mixed parentage of Eros: Plenty (Poros) and Poverty (Penia). Plotinus interprets this myth to explain the faculty psychology of the soul. Plenty represents *logos* as an “expressed principle” derived from the Intellect (Nous)¹⁴. Poverty represents matter, which is “in need in every respect” and is associated with the indefinite as emptiness¹⁵.

In a “daemoniac” soul, the rational principle (Plenty) governs indefinite desire (Poverty). The soul recognizes that it is a mixture. It desires the Good because it lacks it (Poverty) but has the agency (Plenty) to pursue it. The “daemon” is the state of the soul where this mixture functions correctly. The soul looks at material objects, which are form and matter, and discerns beauty as participation within these objects. In other words, the person realizes that form actualizes the matter as definite to indefinite, and that form must exist in a perfectly simple state as Beauty.

This act of discernment is Aristotelian in its method but Neoplatonic in its aim. Plotinus acknowledges these details of composite substances. The Plotinian “daemon” looks at a beautiful material body and separates the form of Beauty as participated in the thing from the material substrate. The “daemoniac” soul uses the beautiful material body as a launching point image to the real Beauty that is the archetype of all beauty. While this “mixed” love remains self-controlled, it still sees the definite fulfillment of desire in the participating beauty, not Beauty itself.

Ascent and Descent: The Soul’s Three Possible Metaphysical Orientations

For Plotinus, the “pathological” soul arises when the soul fails to perform this act of abstraction. Instead of seeing the form *in* matter as a mixed substrate (the daemoniac view), the pathological soul focuses on the material thing *qua* material thing. Why is this “pathological” for Plotinus? To address this point, one must first look at the nature of matter in both Aristotle and Plotinus. For Aristotle, matter in itself is unknowable as it is “neither a particular thing nor a quantity nor designated by any of the categories which define Being”¹⁶. Matter is pure potentiality, which has the *capacity* for determination but is of itself not determined.

Plotinus adopts this view and expands on it. He identifies the “indefinite” aspect of the soul’s desire (Poverty) with matter. When the soul seeks its fulfillment in matter, the soul is turning to absolute lack, which is Poverty. The “pathological” soul commits a metaphysical error that logic helps us see: it seeks extension without intension. The pathological soul desires the “stuff” of the world

its Eros toward non-being (matter), that active love is deprived of ontological reality. Hence, the soul has lost its substantive actuality by turning away from the One.

¹⁴ Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, 5, §9.

¹⁵ Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, 5, §9.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 7.3.1029a20, trans. H. Tredennick, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), p. 317.

(matter) while rejecting the “definition” that makes it real (form). Since matter has zero intension (no positive determination), the soul finds nothing to grasp. It falls into the “indefinite”, which is a state of pure potentiality that is, by definition, absolute Poverty.

We see how this logical analysis uncovers Plotinus's metaphysics. The tragedy of the “pathological” soul is a case of mistaken identity. The soul rightly desires the infinite (Intelligible Matter as Plenty), which is the fullness of Being found in the Nous, where all intension is united. Instead, the soul turns downward and chases the indefinite (Sensible Matter as Poverty), which is the indefinite emptiness of non-being. The soul has confused indefinite plenty with indefinite poverty. Instead of seeing the fullness of all forms as indefinite capacity in the Nous, the soul sees indefiniteness in matter as fullness rather than emptiness.

To visualize this confusion between “indefinite poverty” and “indefinite plenty”, let's return to the article's metaphor of the compass. The soul (the needle) has a natural magnetic attraction toward the Good (True North). In the ‘mixed’ or ‘daemonic’ state, the needle might point toward “mixed metals” (sensible objects), but it does so only because it recognizes the beauty/goodness as participated *within them*. It sees the form (intension) within the matter. In the pathological state, however, the needle ignores the magnetic trace entirely and fixates on the gross material of the interfering object. It desires the casing, not the pull.

By focusing on the material thing *qua* material, the soul denies its own nature as an offspring of Plenty (Reason). It suppresses the “expressed principle” (logos) within itself and surrenders entirely to indefinite emptiness. This creates a feedback loop of degradation. Because indefinite matter is poverty, the soul that loves matter becomes increasingly needy. It cannot be fulfilled because “what is a mixture cannot be fulfilled; for only that can be fulfilled which is fulfilled in its own nature”¹⁷.

To understand how a human soul can become a “god”, we must look to Aristotle's teaching on the intellect (nous). Aristotle argues that for the mind to know reality, it must not be restricted by a specific material nature of its own; the intellect in its highest function operates without a specific material nature. When the individual contemplates immaterial realities, a profound metaphysical shift occurs: “For in the case of things without matter that which thinks and that which is thought are the same”¹⁸.

Plotinus radicalizes this Aristotelian principle. When a soul's eros is directed entirely toward the Good (True North), the separation between the lover and the beloved dissolves into identity. The soul does not merely observe the divine from a distance. Instead, by ascending through intellection, the soul

¹⁷ Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, 5.7.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 3.4.430a3, trans. W.S. Hett, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 169.

prepares for a union that is supraintellectual, that is, transcending all thought¹⁹. In this state, the soul acts not as a potentiality striving for determination (form), but as actuality, that is “prior in substantiality” to all potential things²⁰. Just as Aristotle asserts that the First Mover must be “not divisible, has no parts, and is not dimensional”, the soul that aligns with True North sheds the divisibility of the material world to participate in the indivisible simplicity of the divine²¹.

Plotinus distinguishes this state of godhood using the myth of Aphrodite. The “daemonic” soul corresponds to the “mixed” Aphrodite (associated with the universe), who partakes of both poverty and plenty. Again, this soul is a “daemon” because it is an intermediate being as a mixture of plenty (reason) and poverty (desire/matter as indefiniteness). The “daemonic” soul is still bound to the realm of “becoming”.

However, the soul pointed at True North identifies with the “Heavenly Aphrodite”, who is “motherless” and “unmixed”. This soul “does not come into this world...nor is she able to”, because she is a “separate real existent and a Substance”²². In this state, the person is no longer a composite being struggling with the “indefinite desire” of Poverty; they have severed the link to the indefinite. The individual has become “a god” because the individual is now “self-sufficient in beauty”²³. Unlike the pathological lover who needs matter to fill a void, or the daemonic lover who needs to generate beauty in the physical world to achieve immortality, the “god-like” soul is “filled with the vision” and possesses the Good by nature, not merely by participation²⁴.

In this final state, the soul recovers its status as a “kind of principle”²⁵. Aristotle teaches that “God is one of the causes of all things and...a kind of principle”²⁶. When the soul rejects the pathological fixation on the “accidental” and

¹⁹ Intellection is a stage on the way towards mystical union with the One, but it is the penultimate stage. The One transcends the Nous, and therefore, union with the One must come through some other mode than intellection. While Aristotle’s principle that actual knowledge is identical with its object describes the soul’s ascent to the level of Nous, Plotinus makes clear that the final step from the Nous to the One requires abandoning subject-object duality altogether. As Plotinus argues in *Ennead* VI.9.4 (Gerson), awareness of the One comes “neither by scientific understanding nor by intellection, as it is in the case of other intelligibles. It corresponds rather to a presence which is better than scientific understanding”. Therefore, the soul does not achieve union with the One by thinking about the Good, as that is still multiplicity: “For scientific understanding involves an account, and an account is multiple”. Instead, when intellection reaches its limit, Eros becomes the unitive substance. The soul aligns with “True North” through a suprarational presence where Eros provides the final step to elevate the soul’s substantial reality into simple union.

²⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 9.8.1050a4, p. 457.

²¹ Aristotle, *Physics*, 8.10.267b25, trans. P.H. Wicksteed, F.M. Cornford, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), p. 425.

²² Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, 5.2.

²³ Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, 5.1.

²⁴ Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, 5.2.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1.2.983a8, p. 15.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1.2.983a8, p. 15.

aligns with the necessary and eternal, it steps out of the realm of “becoming” and enters the realm of “being”. It is no longer an “affection” or a “pathology” of the universe; it is a co-ruler with the divine, fixed in the “garden of Zeus”, drunk not with wine (sensible beauty) but with nectar (intelligible beauty)²⁷.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that for Plotinus the metaphysical and moral destiny of the soul is strictly tied to its metaphysical orientation. Unlike the Aristotelian framework where the soul retains its static substance regardless of vicious habits, the active Plotinian soul generates its own degree of henological reality based on where it directs its Eros. If the soul aligns with “True North” (the Good), it ascends beyond mere intellection; through unitive Eros, it becomes a “god” and a “separate real existent”, effectively uniting with the object of its desire. However, if the soul fixates on material things *qua* material things, it ignores the participatory beauty within them and enters a “pathological state”. This state is defined by the indefinite and empty nature of matter (Poverty), resulting in a collapse of the soul’s internal hierarchy where the soul now binds itself to indefinite emptiness as absolute lack and non-being.

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²⁷ Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, 5.9; III, 5.7.