

# THE TEMENOS ACADEMY

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"Two Platonist Notes"

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Source: Temenos Academy Review 18 (2015)

pp. 30-33

Published by The Temenos Academy

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## Two Platonist Notes\*

HILARY ARMSTRONG

*'When you think of Him as Mind or God, He is more.'*  
(Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.9.6)

The Platonist search for God, the origin of all that is and goal of our desires, was never a search for a final abstraction or a negative void. But very early in that search, perhaps with Plato himself, there began to be a suspicion that even the best names we could think of for that beginning and end of things would not quite do. Since the Platonists were Greek philosophers, the best names they could think of for their Source and Origin were Intellect or Mind and the supreme reality, the first Substance or Being. We should not suppose that their use of Intellect for the Divine was like anything we should probably mean when we said that God was Pure Reason. The Divine Intellect does not form or use concepts as we do, or reason from premises to conclusions. But even so there were growing suspicions in the first two centuries of our era that even Intellect or Mind, which for most Platonists seemed the most acceptable name for the supreme divinity, was not adequate. In the third century of our era Plotinus the Platonist philosopher thought through again all that had gone before and produced his own conclusions. He fully formulated, in accordance with his own experience, the 'negative theology' which has haunted the minds and imaginations of those who think seriously about God ever since, and does not seem likely ever to be driven out of our theology by any force, though often approved or attacked for the wrong reasons.

Plotinus thought that even the names which he and all his successors whom we call 'Neoplatonists' preferred and continually used

\* These brief essays were contributed to a project, initially proposed by the late Ramchandra Gandhi, to compile an anthology of writings on the sacred words of the world's spiritual traditions. The project never reached completion, but it has been decided to publish some of the individual pieces in *TAR*; in the present case, the editors are grateful to Christopher Armstrong for permission to make these essays available to our readers. Contributions by H. H. the Dalai Lama and by John Michell have already appeared in *TAR* 16 and 17.

for God, 'One' or 'Good' would not do as adequate descriptions. They point us on to the awareness that, beyond the highest level to which the philosophic mind can attain, the realm of divine being which is divine intellect, there lies something beyond even divine thought, and so beyond any thought, which is incomparably more than can be thought or imaged or spoken, though thoughts and words and images can lead us towards it. Plotinus was aware of the final mystery which is in one sense totally hidden because it is totally undiscoverable by any mind human or divine. But in another sense this Unknowable is not hidden at all and does not hide itself. There is no need for special ceremonies or privileged experiences to protect the Inviolable. The Hidden stands absolutely open, and is none the less absolutely hidden. One seeks to the end of one's capacities, and then there is more, even if one has to call it 'nothing' because one has no name for it. And one is aware that this is true, even if one has heard it at second hand, and recognises what one hears.

There are many ways of becoming aware of this mystery. Plotinus followed the way of later Platonic philosophy as he knew it with great originality and power, and became aware that there is incomparably more beyond the end of that way which he followed to the end. And because it was the way of Platonic philosophy, which has great breadth and plenty of room for imagination and symbol, he has always from that time to this had followers, of the most varied and sometimes by no means obviously philosophical kinds. There have been those faithful to the old Hellenic tradition. There have been many Jews, Christians, and Muslims. There have been very many who have followed the ways of the imagination, as he followed his way to the end. And to all of them, it seems, he would give much the same advice: 'Follow your chosen way to the end, and follow it as well as possible, without any claim that it is the only or the superior way. Then, when you have come to the end of all your capacities, look to the giver of all love, goodness and beauty and be lifted to such worship as you can of the Nothing which lies over all the frontiers and is present and imagined within them. When you think of Him as Mind or God, He is more.'

*Aiōn*

The Greek words *aiōn* and its adjective *aiōnios*, which have been variously and incompatibly translated into all later European languages, meant, to the end of their usage, a period of time, generally a long one. Plato and his followers needed a word to describe the state of the changeless and immortal entities, the Forms or Ideas, on which they had come to think that all else, ourselves and our world, depended, and began to use *aiōn* and *aiōnios* for the Forms or Ideas. And as these are the source of all later and lesser divinity, *aiōn* and *aiōnios*, which had always, perhaps, been rather solemn words, became sacred words to all influenced by Plato's thought. And then another distinction arose. Change and passing away were utterly excluded from the World of Forms. All these lasted for ever. So it came to be thought that with change and passing away time itself was excluded. The Forms or Ideas are not in time at all. This distinction corresponds to the distinction in English between two translations 'everlasting' and 'eternal', the meaning of which is often confused by intelligent people. How far back this distinction goes is not certain. It may be very early. But this depends on the outcome of vigorously proceeding discussions, often of very difficult texts. At any rate the distinction is perfectly clear in Plotinus, the great Platonist philosopher some five hundred years after Plato, and in all those very many of his successors who are affected by his form of Platonic thought.

A further complication arises from the fact that Plato and his followers, above all Plotinus, wanted to talk about not just 'eternity', but 'eternal life'. But if one tries to talk about life in timeless language, excluding all change and passing away, though not intelligible diversity (one excludes passage from one intelligible entity to another: in eternity one has the whole), one may give a very misleading impression. Plato did not really mean that his divine intelligible world, his World of Forms, should be anything but a world of the most intense, richest and most perfect life, in which those who had a vision of it might share. But the impression given down the centuries to those who have not deeply felt the influence of Plato and great Platonists has been rather that of a world of absolutely static entities in which all goods are everlastingly conserved as in a museum. This of course is a world described in rather unattractive negative time-concepts, not in

concepts suitable to eternity. There are no concepts suitable to eternity. For it is the accepted teaching of Plotinus and the great Platonists who followed him that the eternal is outside the range of defining, conceptual reason. God, of course, the One or Good, the giver of eternity and all else, is not eternal but beyond or before eternity to Plotinus, because beyond the World of Forms or Divine Intellect. Plotinus has so deep a sense of the abounding life of the eternal that he certainly does not exclude all time-images and time-language from his great visionary descriptions of the eternal world. Perhaps we shall do better if, instead of the static images which we (and Plato and the Platonists) usually employ we associate eternity in our minds with surprise, the season of Spring, a beginning which immediately contains all completion: that is, if we really want to understand why to Platonists and those influenced by them *aiōn*, *aiōnios*, and some of their translations, are really sacred words.

