

# ARTICLES

## PLOTINUS' VIEWS ON SOUL, SUICIDE AND INCARNATION

ANDRONIKI KALOGIRATOU

Olympic Centre of Philosophy and Culture, Athens

[andronikkie@yahoo.com](mailto:andronikkie@yahoo.com)

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ABSTRACT. There is a question to be answered if one is to grasp the function of suicide in the Plotinian universe and its connection to the subject matters of soul, incarnation, murder and killing living beings. How far does the body exist as a degenerative trait? Could the purpose of embodying a soul purify it and to what extent does the particular use of it by an individual soul point towards its ability to uncover hidden potentiality or simply makes it an instrument of self-destruction and self-alienation? Our view of Plotinus' philosophy and its significance depends upon how we chose to solve this puzzle. Although Plotinus ultimately changed his attitude on suicide in *Ennead* 1.4.46 as compared to *Ennead* 1.9.16, the concept appears under three basic guises in his philosophy. One is the more traditional notion that we have today, whether given a choice to remain or to leave the body, the soul should remain? Beyond that, Plotinus enriches our view of suicide with two further notions: One is the idea of soul's incarnation as committing suicide. It is highlighted by two myths – those of the baby Dionysus and Narcissus – with which Plotinus illustrates the embodiment of the soul as an involuntary suicide, committed in the rush to attain matter. Finally there is the notion of suicide in the form of murder or killing a living being or plant. Killing another living being would be like attempting suicide: killing a part of the one unified, single soul to which we also partake. The difference between Plotinus and later Neoplatonists, of which Damascius was one, is that the latter won't allow for the absolute detachment of the soul from the body, while the body is still alive. It thus becomes impossible for the soul of the prospective wise man, to venture completely into the positive nothingness of the Ineffable, because the soul is always bound to the body, and that results in its inability to escort its own self, so as to say, into that which is total nothingness and alien to the soul.

KEYWORDS. Human behavior, freedom, free choice and determinism, suicide, psychology

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### General Remarks on the Soul

Let us first turn to the more general framework of Plotinus' philosophy regarding the hypostasis of Soul. According to W. R. Inge (1948, 202), it stands midway between the phenomenal world, of which it is the principle, and the world of Intellect which is its principle. It is an intermediary between appearance and reality. It is the last *logos* of the spiritual world, and the first of the phenomenal world, and it thus provides a vital connection with both. To maintain this connection by constant movement is part of its nature (*Enn.4.7.7*). Plotinus compares Soul to a moving circle around the One, while Intellect remains an unmoving circle around the One (*Enn.4.4.16*).

A. H. Armstrong (1940, 101) argues that there is a difficulty in the Plotinian universe in reconciling the concept of the sensible world as a whole single organism (and a copy as it is of a higher organism) and the concept of it as a ladder leading down through successive steps of degeneration from the "light of soul" to the "darkness of matter". *Logos*, as we shall see, plays the instrumental role by which the order of the intelligible world (of *Nous*) is realized in the things of sense.

In this metaphysical system, one could object that partial souls are not needed. But how else would we account for individual differences and subjective experiences between different people who are said to 'have souls'? Plotinus himself recognized the difficulties inherent in his theory of multiple souls in the following passage (*Enn.4.9.8*):

"How, then, is there one substance in many souls? Either the one is present as a whole in them all, or the many come from the whole and one while it abides [unchanged]. That soul, then, is one, but the many [go back] to it as one which gives itself to multiplicity and does not give itself; for it is adequate to supply itself to all and to remain one; for it has power extending to all things, and is not at all cut off from each individual thing; it is the same, therefore in all. Certainly, no one should disbelieve this" (A. H. Armstrong's translation unless otherwise specified).

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<sup>1</sup> A part of this paper has been published in *Skepsis. A Journal for Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Research*, vol. XVII/1 (2006) 78–87 under the title "Plotinus' Bioethics: On Suicide, Incarnation and Killing Living Beings".

He would not allow however, with some of the Neopythagoreans, like Numenius, that individual souls are only the parts into which the *Anima Mundi* is divided (Inge 1948, 210). We cannot speak of souls being parts of other soul. Soul cannot be divided quantitatively, nor can it have heterogeneous parts or limbs, like a body (*Enn.*4.3.5). Individual souls are not functions of the World Soul perishing with their body. It might imply, for instance, that individual experiences are universally shared.

On the other hand, if we said that souls which become incarnate are parts of the World Soul, this would imply that it is incarnated in this world. The case rather is that Soul directs the world without being involved in it. According to W. R. Inge (1948, 200), the World Soul is not incarnate in the world; rather the world is in it. It has self-consciousness (*συναίσθησις*), but is not conscious in its own creations. Creation is the result of ‘contemplation’. Soul, as an activity proceeding from Intellect, is in labor to create after the pattern which it saw in Intellect, and from this desire ‘the whole world that we know arose and took its shapes’ (*Enn.*4.7.13; 3.2.2). In the case of the universe (which is a self-sufficient entity and does not contain anything contrary to its proper nature (*Enn.*4.8.2.1.16-17), Soul can stay at a distance from that which it organizes and puts in order; acting upon it without any need to situate itself on the same level where the world is.

If the wholeness of Soul is denied, then the universe ceases to be unified and individual souls lose their mutual bond. For Plotinus stresses that:

“...we 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 ... 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” (*Enn.*4. 9.3.5-10).

### **Murder and Killing**

It follows from the premise that all souls partake to the one world soul. Then, killing another living being would be like attempting suicide: killing a part of the one unified, single soul to which we also partake. R. K. Sorabji (1993, 190-4) observes that, since reincarnation occurs in Plotinus’ universe, killing another living being (human or animal) would entail the possibility of killing a being enlivened by a dead relative’s soul. Animals as well as plants can receive the same kind of Soul that would animate a human being. In the tradition that preceded Plotinus, Plato thought of plants as sensitive and he spoke at one point as if it should be possible to give a single account for the good life of plants and animals. Aristotle agreed that plants were alive, and so had a Soul, but he didn’t think they are sensitive or have consciousness—the prerogative of animals (Plato, *Philebus* 22B). But plants lack *doxa*-belief, reasoning-*logismos*, intellectual insight-Intellect, self-consciousness and self-motion (Plato, *Timaeus* 77B-C).

After the Stoics, Plotinus and Origen both accepted the possibility of human souls being reincarnated as plants (*Enn.*3.4.2; Origen, *On First Principles* 1.8.4). They have

an echo of Soul,<sup>2</sup> which may only be a trace of earth Soul.<sup>3</sup> The idea of humans transmigrating into animals actually helps Plotinus to solve the problem of the apparent evil of animals eating each other; it is all right, because they are like actors who will change their clothes and reappear on the stage (*Enn.*3.2.15.16-33). They were fighting as men and they are fighting now as animals. They just changed appearance.<sup>4</sup>

The idea of soul transmigration can be found on the basis of Plotinus' and Porphyry's vegetarianism. Porphyry wrote a treatise on *Abstinence from Killing Animals*. When he was ill, Plotinus «refused to take medicines containing the flesh of wild beasts, giving as his reason that he did not approve of eating the flesh even of domestic animals» (*Vita Plotini*, 2.1-6). Even though he was willing to take medicine to prevent illness of his own body, he was not ready to do so at the expense of harming the life of another living being. Like suicide (except if under special circumstances, as we will see), murder of humans or animals is not to be tolerated in the Plotinian system.

### The Double Nature of Soul's Incarnation

Most souls don't manage to stay away from the body in a way that will allow them to consider the body as a mere instrument. Instead they linger inside it. There exists a hierarchy according to which all souls turn towards that from which they emanate, and put order in that which is inferior to them. In that hierarchy they dissociate themselves to a greater or lesser degree from eternal harmony, by isolation in their particular functions. In this context we can ask: why does a Soul become incarnate. There are two mainly different, almost opposing justifications of soul's descent. According to one, suicide should be acceptable, according to the other, it should not.

One position is that the Soul has committed a sin and it is being punished. In *Enn.*5.1.1 Plotinus expresses a negative view of soul's descent:

“The origin of evil for them is audacity (τὸ λ μ α), in the tendency toward temporal generation and otherness and in the desire to be on their own. Taking delight in this freedom of self-determination, they made great use of their movement: they ran along the wrong course and stood apart from the father at a great distance, forgetting that they had come from the divine place”.

This is also demonstrated in passages of *Enn.*4.8.4 where Plotinus talks in a very pessimistic tone about the ‘confinement’ of the embodied Soul down here. He mentions that “it has become a part and is isolated and weak and fusses and looks towards a part”, that “it is fallen, therefore, and is caught, and is engaged with its fetter, and acts by sense because its new beginning prevents it from acting by intellect”.

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<sup>2</sup> They do, however, have their own good, for example according to whether they bear fruit or not (*Enn.*1.4.1.16-17). See Sorabji 1993, 99.

<sup>3</sup> *Enn.*4.4.22; 4.4.27. The Earth Soul should not be confused with the World Soul.

<sup>4</sup> See also transmigration as a justification of our own killing of animals, or of animals presently suffering as expiation for our sins. Sorabji 1993,189.

A different position put forward in the following passage however points to a more deterministic view of the nature of incarnation. A soul is thus absolved of the total responsibility of committing the sin of plunging itself in the sensible world. “For everything which goes to the worse does so unwillingly, but since it [the Soul] goes by its own motion, when it experiences the worse it is said to be punished for what it did. But when it is eternally necessary by the law of nature that it should do and experience these things, and, descending from that which is above it, it meets the need of something else in its encounter with it, if anyone said that a god sent it down he would not be out of accord with the truth or with himself” (*Enn.4.8.5.8-16*).

This passage suggests a second strand of thought i.e. that it is in the nature of creative life itself to throw Soul into the lowest recess of the Plotinian universe. In the case of particular bodies, it is necessary that their souls immerse themselves deeply in them, in order to dominate or inhabit them (*Enn.4.8.2.9-10*).

“For there are two kinds of care of everything, the general, by the inactive command of one setting it in order with royal authority, and the particular, which involves actually doing something oneself and by contact with what is being done infects the doer with the nature of what is being done” (*Enn.4.8.2.27-31*).

According to W. R. Inge (1948, 214) every possible manifestation of divine energy is realized somewhere and somehow through Soul. The Soul would be false to the nature which it shares with the other hypostases, if it did not create a world which it could strive to fashion after the likeness of its own creator, Intellect. Ultimately, there is no necessary fall or humiliation in a Soul which has its temporary home in our world,

“especially as it is possible for it to emerge again having acquired the whole story of what it saw and experienced here and learnt what it is like to be There, and, by the comparison of things which are, in a way, opposite, learning, in a way more clearly, the better things. For the experience of evil is a clearer knowledge of the Good” (*Enn.4.8.5.15-20*).

Whether the Soul has one life to live on earth or more than one, its stay in the sensible world is a task committed to it by its very own eternal nature.

“Since it has this kind of nature, it is necessarily bound to be able to participate in the perceptible and it should not be annoyed with itself (οὐκ ἀγανακτητέον αὐτὴν ἑαυτῇ)” (*Enn.4.8.5.3-5*).

The reason why individual souls become incarnate is therefore twofold: on one side they seem destined to come into the world of matter. One could even stretch the point further and say that individual souls seem to be made solely for the purpose of enlivening the sensible world. In that case they benefit from their stay in the sensible universe, as they are given the opportunity to develop and better themselves through contact with the hardships of matter. Thus any attempt to commit suicide would curtail their development and would be inadvisable. On the other hand, if one takes into consideration the view put forward by Plotinus that the descent of souls in this world is an audacious mistake, a kind of spiritual suicide, then suicide in this world would be highly recommended, motivated by a desire to undo the harm made by the

individual, spontaneous, mistaken decision of descending in the world of matter. In this case souls perceive of the ugliness of the sensible world as a punishment.

The idea of soul's incarnation as committing an involuntary suicide is highlighted by two myths – those of the baby Dionysus (*Enn.*4.3.12.2) and Narcissus (*Enn.*1.6.8) – with which Plotinus illustrates the embodiment of the soul in the sensible world. Both involve an accidental death, concomitant to suicide, committed in the rush to attain matter.

The baby god Dionysus was lured away with the gift of a mirror by the demi-gods Titans. He was startled by the reflections on the mirror.<sup>5</sup> When they isolated the baby Dionysus far away from Olympus, the Titans ate him. When Zeus, the leader of the 12 Gods of Olympus found out, he burnt the Titans with lightning. From their ashes humans were born, who contain both the Titanic evil element of matter and the Dionysian divine element, which should be freed.

Likewise, in *Enn.*1.6.8, Narcissus was a young man who fell in love with his reflection one day, as he was looking at the surface of a lake. He ceased all his other activities and day and night was sitting at the shore of the lake, admiring the beautiful stranger, who was himself, hoping for some reciprocity. The nymph Echo was in love with him and she tried to lure him away with fragments of his own voice, but he wouldn't yield. Instead, one day he fell into the lake, unable to resist any longer the attraction he felt for the beautiful stranger. The gods took pity of him and transformed him into a flower, the Narcissus. Thus he perished, like the baby Dionysus, trying to pursue reflections of reality in a mirror.

Like the baby Dionysus, the individual soul can rush to pursue its own reflection in the mirror through an act of self-will.<sup>6</sup> Crossing the threshold from the One to the many, it finds itself dispersed and fragmented within the cosmos. Both the childish impatience of Dionysus and the narcissistic self-desire of Narcissus seem to indicate only one of the two ways that lie ahead: the soul may turn toward the reflection and fall into its own creation. It falls into the mirror like Narcissus and it is fragmented in it like Dionysus (Vernant 1990).

Reflecting itself in the mirror, the soul dedicates itself to multiplicity. It presides over the creation of the various and the changing, over the genesis of particulars. But at the same time, by virtue of its nature, miraculously preserved in the dismember-

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<sup>5</sup> Armstrong 1984, 72 – 73.

<sup>6</sup> For bibliographic references cf. Vernant (1990): “The Dionysian mirror has been studied and compared to the other mirrors of Antiquity, namely the mirrors of Narcissus and Medusa. On this question in general and on the relations between the three mirrors and the manner in which they lend themselves to a number of mythological and philosophical interpretations concerning the conception and articulation of subjectivity see, among others, J. Pépin, ‘Plotin et le miroir de Dionysos,’ *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, XXIV, 1970; P. Hadot, ‘Le mythe de Narcisse et son interprétation par Plotin,’ *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, 13, 1976; and J.-P. Vernant, *L'individu, la mort, l'amour et l'autre en Grèce ancienne* (Paris, 1989)”.

ment, the soul remains whole. Every particular being, aspires through the reflection of Dionysus refracted into multiplicity, to recover the unity from which it emanates.

In *Enn.5.1.10-11* Plotinus urges us to look within and concentrate our attention, so that we hear the voices from on high. By falling in the sensible, a soul loses its true self. In another passage, he stresses that the sort of spiritual beauty we should be seeking will come out after removing the accretions of matter on our soul:

“How then can you see the sort of beauty a good soul has? Go back into yourself and look; and if you do not yet see yourself beautiful, then, just as someone making a statue which has to be beautiful cuts away here and polishes there ... so you too must cut away excess and straighten the crooked and clear the dark and make it bright, and never stop “working on your statue” till the divine glory of virtue shines out on you ... you can trust yourself then; you have already ascended and need no one to show you; concentrate you gaze and see” (*Enn.1.6.9.7-25*).

In this passage as elsewhere, Plotinus points out the difference between the stages a soul is in - on its way of return to the Father - as that of lesser or greater degree of completeness. One has to remove the accretions of matter in order to expose what was already latent within and eventually remove himself or herself from the world of sense altogether. When one has reached the final stage of contemplation, then they are able to judge for themselves, under which circumstances it is wise to commit suicide.

When someone has not reached the status of a sage and they are still ascending on the pathway to the One, they are not advised by Plotinus to remove themselves from the sensible world with the aid of suicide. Irrespective of whether we accept the idea of a benign sensible universe – which is given to the soul as a stepping stone towards its development and further ascent towards the intelligible – or, whether we see the darkness of matter as an inescapable evil, whose negative influence can be so overwhelming, that one might imagine, a radical approach would be needed: the braveness to remove oneself altogether from it through suicide.

L. Gerson (2008) points out that, according to Plotinus, matter is to be identified with evil and privation of all form or intelligibility (cf. *Enn.2.4*). Plotinus holds this in conscious opposition to Aristotle, who distinguished matter from privation (cf. *Enn.2.4.16.3-8*). Matter is what accounts for the diminished reality of the sensible world, for all natural things are composed of forms in matter. The fact that matter is in principle deprived of all intelligibility and is still ultimately dependent on the One is an important clue as to how the causality of the latter operates.

If matter or evil is ultimately caused by the One, then is not the One, as the Good, the cause of evil? In one sense, the answer is definitely yes. As Plotinus reasons, if anything besides the One is going to exist, then there must be a conclusion of the process of production from the One. The beginning of evil is the act of separation from the One by Intellect, an act which the One itself ultimately causes. The end of the process of production from the One defines a limit, like the end of a river going out from its sources. Beyond the limit is matter or evil.

L. Gerson (2008) argues that the very possibility of a sensible world, which is impressively confirmed by the fact that there is one, guarantees that the production from the One, which must include all that is possible (else the One would be self-limiting), also include the sensible world (see *Enn.*1.8.7). But the sensible world consists of images of the intelligible world and these images could not exist without matter.

Matter is only evil in other than a purely metaphysical sense when it becomes an impediment to return to the One. It is evil when considered as a goal or end that is a polar opposite to the Good. To deny the necessity of evil is to deny the necessity of the Good (*Enn.* 1 8.15). Matter is only evil for entities that can consider it as a goal of desire. These are, finally, only entities that can be self-conscious of their goals. Specifically, human beings, by opting for attachments to the bodily, orient themselves in the direction of evil. This is not because body itself is evil. The evil in bodies is the element in them that is not dominated by form. One may be desirous of that form, but in that case what one truly desires is that form's ultimate intelligible source in Intellect. More typically, attachment to the body represents a desire not for form but a corrupt desire for the non-intelligible or limitless.

According to A. H. Armstrong (1966, vii-xxxi), this movement of the soul towards the sensible is not easy to explain in the economy of the Plotinian thought. It is in doubt how much difference there is between Plotinus' earlier and later views on the descent of souls into bodies. It is possible that he later <sup>7</sup> renounced the "guilt" which he connected to the descent of the soul in his earlier writings with an acceptance of it as the unfolding of its potential nature and an illumination. If this is the case, then soul's envelopment in the senses is only a prerequisite for the realization of its true nature in the context of the hypostases.

### For Human Suicide

Plotinus' metaphysics and his thought on the subject of willful departure from mundane life seem to have been influenced by other strands of thought. One is the Pythagorean, to which Porphyry attributes four primary theses: a) the soul is immortal (the immortality thesis), b) the soul migrates into different kinds of animals or bodies (the metempsychosis thesis), c) at certain periods, whatever has happened happens again – nothing being absolutely new (the eternal-recurrence thesis) and d) all living things should be considered as belonging to the same kind (the unity-of-the-living-world thesis). None of these four theses, either when taken by itself or conjoined with some other in the set, straightforwardly implies the wrongness of terminating a life. Indeed, the metempsychosis and the immortality theses seem to imply that the end of ordinary life is of no consequence. Plotinus shares these Pythagorean views (Anagnostopoulos 2000, 262-3).

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<sup>7</sup> E. R. Dodds in *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* thinks that Plotinus changed his mind after discussion with the Gnostics.

Another thesis put forward by Plato and shared by Plotinus is that of the embodiment of the soul in any body as a kind of imprisonment (*Idem* 263). Liberation comes about by death, which is the freeing of the soul from the bonds of the body. Even when taken without the immortality of the soul thesis, the imprisonment thesis implies that prolonging life is prolonging evil. The imprisonment thesis argues clearly in favor of terminating life. Life has no redeeming features. Thus Socrates in the *Phaedo* is eager to depart from life and enjoy the benefits of the liberation of the soul from the body.

Plotinus did not reject human intervention in the course of nature, even though he assumed that salvation lies in preoccupation with the intellect, not the mundane realm. According to Porphyry, his disciple and editor of his works, when Plotinus was ill, he had a personal doctor but «refused to take medicines containing the flesh of wild beasts» (*Vita Plotini*, 2.1-30). Porphyry did not attend Plotinus' deathbed. In his last years Plotinus, whose health had never been very good, suffered from a painful and repulsive sickness that Porphyry describes so imprecisely that one modern scholar has identified it as tuberculosis and another as a form of leprosy. This made his friends, as he noticed, avoid his company, and he retired to a country estate belonging to one of them in Campania and within a year died there. The circle of friends had already broken up. Plotinus himself had sent Porphyry away to Sicily to recover from his depression. Amelius was in Syria. Only his physician Eustochius arrived in time to be with Plotinus at the end.<sup>8</sup>

One can wonder, if Plotinus committed indirect suicide? Did he stop caring for his body? When does inattention to the body amount to suicide? As we know he refused to take some drugs, on the other hand, he had medical care administered by a doctor, Eustochius, who was a very close friend. Today we often wonder, when someone is terminally ill, should we help him or her depart? When is care for the body too much or too little? We will never know whether Plotinus was helped by Eustochius to terminate his life sooner. According to his writings, Plotinus allowed for the wise man who has reached the good life, to judge by himself whether he will discontinue his life. Did he consider himself a sage? Probably he did, since he experienced contemplation of the One at least four times.

Plotinus' originality lies in the way he combines various philosophical outlooks to give his own solution to the problems created by human suffering and the inescapability of human fate. He allows for the possibility of suicide if one is not to live well (εὐδαιμονεῖν). He holds in this passage that a soul has the right to choose whether or not to remain in the body. For example, if one were to become a war-slave, if s/he found the burden too heavy, s/he should depart.

It is rather peculiar of Plotinus to regard madness or incurable illness as insufficient grounds for suicide, while he allows the status of war slave to be regarded as a more severe ailment and thus a sufficient reason for willful departure from this life (*Enn.*1.4.7.33). As John Dillon (1994, 236) points out, this may have been a personal

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<sup>8</sup> Plotinus 2009.

nightmare of Plotinus. In this context one cannot but remember that when he was in his 30s he did participate in an ill fated military campaign to India. He joined the expedition of the Roman emperor Gordian III against Persia (242-243 AD), with the intention of trying to learn something at first hand about the philosophies of the Persians and Indians. The expedition came to a disastrous end in Mesopotamia, when Gordian was murdered by the soldiers and Philip the Arabian was proclaimed emperor. Plotinus escaped with difficulty and made his way back to Antioch.<sup>9</sup>

In the case of the wise man, Plotinus assumes that he is not to be compared with common people. "His light burns within, like the light in a lantern when it is blowing hard outside" (*Enn.*1.4.8.5). If his pain becomes too deep and yet does not kill him, he should consider his options, since "the pain has not taken away his power of self-disposal". Because the wise man's experiences do not penetrate his core self, he remains impassive within, regardless of the storms raging without. Therefore he can choose whether to commit suicide, taking his decisions in a dispassionate state. "He must give to this bodily life as much as it needs and he can, but he is himself other than it and free to abandon it, and he will abandon it in nature's good time", and, "besides, has the right to decide about this for himself" (*Enn.*1.4.16.10-20).

This idea is further consolidated in a passage (*Enn.*1.4.16.18ff) where Plotinus remarks the following:<sup>10</sup>

"So some of his activities will tend towards well-being (εὐδαιμονία); others will not be directed to the goal and will really not belong to him but to that which is joined to him,<sup>11</sup> which he will care for and bear with as long as he can, like a musician with his lyre, as long as he can use it; if he cannot use it he will change to another, or give up using the lyre and abandon the activities directed to it. Then he will have something else to do which does not need the lyre, and will let it lie unregarded beside him while he sings without an instrument. Yet the instrument was not given him at the beginning without good reason. He has used it often up till now".

According to W. R. Inge (1948, 174), "The desire to be invulnerable is natural to most men, and it has been the avowed or unavowed motive of most practical philosophy. To the public eye, the Greek philosopher was a rather fortunate person who could do without a great many things, which other people need and have to work for". Those philosophers who rejected pleasure as an end, made freedom from bodily and mental disturbance the test of proficiency and the reward of discipline. The Stoics held that the philosopher who finds life unbearable can commit suicide after a reasoned consideration of the particular circumstances (Rist 1967, 174-7). As long as

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<sup>9</sup> Plotinus 2009.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed analysis of this passage as an argument in favor of the position that Plotinus did indeed endorse suicide under certain circumstances, even though "it was not a decision that he ever felt called upon to take himself" see Dillon (1994).

<sup>11</sup> "Τό προσεξευγμένον", that is, the animate body, or "composite" (elsewhere termed by Plotinus τὸ συναμφοτέρον) of lower soul (which is not really soul, but a sort of illumination from it) and body" Dillon (1994, ft.19).

the decision was taken calmly and rationally (εὐλογος ἐξαγωγή) and does not involve the subjection of reason to the passions, it is to be allowed to the wise man.

### Against Human Suicide

On the other hand, when Porphyry was suffering from depression, Plotinus averted him from committing suicide and advised him to travel to Sicily to recondition his thoughts (*Vita Plotini*, 11.10-20). This course of action was based on the belief that – even though one should not focus on material concerns in order to assist or attain happiness – they should not necessarily reduce mental suffering by curtailing their physical life or that of other living beings.

According to Porphyry, Plotinus advised him against committing suicide because the decision was taken under the pressure of passions. J. Rist (1967, 174-7) remarks that even though this sound like a purely Stoic argument, Plotinus demonstrates in the *Enneads* that given a choice to remain or to leave the body, a soul should in fact always chose to remain. Flight to the beyond (*Enn.*1.8.6) does not mean leaving this life, but rather living in accordance with the principles of holiness and justice.

According to Elias, Plotinus does not accept any of the five ways of reasonable departure put forward by the Stoics.<sup>12</sup> He likens the human soul's relationship to the body to that of the sun in the solar system. It has a providential function; it gives life and purpose to the body. In the fragment preserved by Elias,

“the philosopher must imitate god and the sun and not neglect his body altogether in caring for his soul, but take thought for it in the appropriate way till it becomes unfit and separates itself from its community with the soul” (*In Elias, Prolegomena* 6.15.23-16.2).

Furthermore it would be a curious thing if man decided to separate soul from body, since it was not s/he who bound them together in the first place (cf. *Phaedo* 62c).

John Dillon (1994, 233) speculates that the provenance of this *monobiblon* to which Elias refers is quite mysterious. Its contents are plainly divergent from what is contained in the note published by Porphyry. It may emanate from the lost edition of Plotinus' personal doctor Eustochius, as was originally suggested by Creuzer. But in this case are we to assume that Eustochius is presenting another, fuller version of the same document that Porphyry is presenting?

As Armstrong (1966, 324-5) points out, Plotinus in two passages (*Enn.*1.4.7-8 and 1.9) dismisses three of the five Stoic reasons<sup>13</sup> as justification for taking one's own life: long and extremely painful illness, madness and probably coercion to immoral behavior (*Enn.*1.4.7.43-45). Were one to commit suicide simply in order to avoid misfortunes, s/he would be unwise, because the nature of this universe is of a

<sup>12</sup> *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* III.768.

<sup>13</sup> According to Paul Carrick (2001,164) ancient sources, just five cases were admitted by the Stoics to warrant suicide: a) if one's death could render a real service to others, b) if by suicide one could avoid being forced to commit an unlawful deed, c) if one were impoverished, d) chronically ill, e) no longer in possession of a sound mind.

kind to bring these sorts of misfortunes, and we must follow it obediently” (*Enn.*1.4.7.42).

Other passages point towards the view that Plotinus was ultimately opposed to suicide.<sup>14</sup> In *Ennead* 1.9, which is a short treatise dealing with suicide, Plotinus holds that the soul cannot detach itself from the body by suicide without becoming prey to the passions of grief or anger and letting something evil come with it. One must wait until the soul leaves the body by natural death. One must therefore not go out of the body by suicide except in the case of desperate necessity (Armstrong 1966, 320). Even taking drugs to let the soul come out is not admissible (*Enn.*1.9.15).<sup>15</sup> Let us see the contents of *Enn.*1.9 in Plotinus’ own words:

“You shall not take out your soul... for if it goes thus, it will go taking something with it... But how does the body depart? When nothing of soul is any longer bound up with it, because the body is unable to bind it any more, since its harmony is gone; as long as it has this it holds the soul. But suppose someone contrives the dissolution of his body? He has used violence and gone away himself, not let his body go; and in dissolving it he is not without passion; there is disgust or grief or anger; one must not act like this. But suppose he is aware that he is beginning to go mad? This is not likely to happen to a really good man; but if it does happen, he will consider it as one of the inevitable things, to be accepted because of the circumstances, though not in themselves acceptable. And after all, taking drugs to give the soul a way out is not likely to be good for the soul. And if each man has a destined time allotted to him, it is not a good thing to go out before it, unless, as we maintain, it is necessary. And if each man’s rank in the other world depends on his state when he goes out, one must not take out the soul as long as there is any possibility of progress”.

### Conclusions

The idea of suicide appears under many guises in Plotinus’ philosophy. One is the more traditional notion that we have today, whether one should kill himself or, according to Plotinian lingo, whether given a choice to remain or to leave the body, the soul should remain? Beyond that, Plotinus enriches our view of suicide with two further notions: One is the idea of soul’s incarnation as committing suicide. It is highlighted by two myths – those of the baby Dionysus and Narcissus – with which Plotinus illustrates the embodiment of the soul in the sensible world as something ultimately painful and negative; an involuntary suicide, committed in the rush to attain matter. Finally there is the notion of suicide in the form of murder or killing a living being or plant. In this case empathy is needed. Killing another living being would be like attempting suicide: killing a part of the one unified, single soul to which we also partake. Also, since reincarnation occurs, killing another living being

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<sup>14</sup> *Ennead* 1.9 and a fragment of Plotinus’ teaching preserved by the Aristotelian commentator Elias. See Rist 1967, 174-7.

<sup>15</sup> Fritz Heinemann (*Plotin*, Leipzig: Meiner, 1921) disagrees, arguing that 1.9 is not an authentic *Ennead*.

(human or animal) would entail the possibility of killing a being enlivened by a dead relative's soul.

In fact, as we noted above, there is disagreement between different passages in the *Enneads* about Plotinus' stance towards suicide. This is reflected in the diverging scholarly interpretations of Plotinian texts on the same subject matter. According to Kieran McGroarty (Dufour, 2008) Plotinus changes his attitude on suicide in *Ennead* 1.4.46 compared to *Ennead* 1.9.16. At the time he wrote *Enn.*1.9, Plotinus was opposing the Stoic teaching which advocated a fairly free exit from the body. He wanted to deter Porphyry from his melancholic inclination towards suicide. But in his old age, more concerned with his own poor health, Plotinus thought suicide legitimate for the sage who could not progress anymore towards *eudaimonia*. This is reflected in *Ennead* 1.4 where he argues as follows:

“But if our argument made well being (*to eudaemonein*) consist in freedom from pain and sickness and ill-luck and falling into great misfortunes, it would be impossible for anyone to be well off when any of these circumstances opposed to well-being was present” (*Enn.*1.4.6.1-5). “Why then does the man who is in a state of well-being want these necessities to be there and reject their opposites? We shall answer that it is not because they make any contribution to his well-being, but rather, to his existence” (*Enn.*1.4.7.1-5).

Plotinus thinks that the wise man can come in contact with the One or the Good:

“So we must ascend again to the good, which every soul desires ...and the attainment of it is for those who go up to the higher world and are converted and strip off what we put on in our descent; (just as for those who go up to the celebrations of sacred rites there are purification, and stripping off of the clothes they wore before, and going up naked) until, passing in the ascent all that is alien to the God, one sees with one's self alone. That alone, simple, single and pure, from which all depends and to which all look and are and live and think: for it is cause of life and mind and being” (*Enn.*1.6.7.1-12).

Plotinus suggests a way of finding a soul's true self:

“Our country from which we came is there our father is there. How shall we travel to it, where is our way of escape? We cannot get there on foot; for our feet only carry us everywhere in this world, from one country to another. You must not get ready a carriage, either, or a boat. Let all these things go, and do not look. Shut your eyes, and change to and wake another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use (*Enn.* 1.6.8.22-8).

Plotinus explains that

“It is not in the soul's nature to touch utter nothingness; the lowest descent is into evil and, so far, into non-being: but to utter nothing, never. When the soul begins again to mount, it comes not to something alien but to its very self; thus detached, it is in nothing but itself; self-gathered it is no longer in the order of being; it is in the Supreme” (*Enn.*6.9.11).

The difference between Plotinus and later Neoplatonists, of which Damascius was one, is that the latter won't allow for the absolute detachment of the soul from the body, while the body is still alive. It thus becomes impossible for the soul of the prospective wise man, to venture completely into the positive nothingness of the Ineffable,

because the soul is always bound to the body, and that results in its inability to escort its own self, so as to say, into that which is total nothingness and alien to the soul.

So even though Plotinus does not give a clear answer, regarding modern deliberations about the pros and cons of curtailing one's life, he does make us aware of the larger and wider significance of the hypostasis of soul, the consequences of suicide, death and most importantly, the significance of life.

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