

## THE NOTION OF BEAUTY IN PLOTINUS AND HEGEL

This paper will examine the differences between Hegel and Plotinus on the notion of Beauty. Plotinus' notion of Beauty, however, is tied up with the One, and thus has a theistic character. This complicates the issue, for it involves an old problem: that of whether Plotinus' One refers to God<sup>1</sup>.

Though Hegel and Plotinus both use a method of dialectic, and Plotinus' thought has a mystical character, and although Hegel's ideas of beauty and of the beautiful were influenced by Plotinus, still one must be aware of the fact that each philosopher follows the ideas and religion of his times.

On the basis of the above, the present paper discusses the following contrasts: while for Plotinus the One is Beauty (*Enn.* VI.7.32), for Hegel the Absolute is beautiful, but is not identified with Beauty. If Hegel had identified Beauty with the Absolute, he would be holding that Beauty, which embraces the true, the good, and the beautiful, is identical with the Absolute. But as is known, Hegel's Absolute is not equal to anything. It is unique, transcendent, and therefore above anything and everything.

I shall discuss first the discrepancy of Plotinus' One with God. Then I will present his concept of God on the basis of clues provided by the *Enneads*. Section II will discuss Hegel's interpretation of the Greek gods through sculpture. This will lead to the difference between the notion of the Greek gods and Plotinus' One. Section III will deal with the distinction between Plotinus' One and Hegel's Christian concept of God. This distinction will result in pointing out, in section IV, the difference between Plotinus' notion of the One as Beauty and Hegel's Absolute.

### I

In a recent paper titled «Freedom and Creativity in Plotinus» by professor Laura Westra, the discussion is concentrated on the identification of freedom as creativity. The author agrees with the writings of the late Fr. V.

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1. See R. ARNOU, *La Desir de Dieu dans la Philosophie de Plotin*, Paris, Alcan Publ., 1921, and J. KATZ, *Plotinus' Search for the Good*, Columbia University, 1950. While Arnou holds that Plotinus' One is God, Katz denies it.





Cilento, and takes *freedom* to be «the central notion of Plotinus' philosophy<sup>2</sup>». She analyzes the various senses of *freedom*, some of which, such as *freedom as creation* and *freedom of the One's nature*, are of concern in this paper. According to this theory, *freedom as creation* is «the highest meaning of freedom in its identification with the One, as He engenders the Universe in all its complexity<sup>3</sup>». A reference to *Enn.* VI.8.18, brings out the notion of freedom as the source and power, the cause of the cause and the «root of existence». The One is «self springing» (*Enn.* VI.8.15). Hence freedom is regarded as the One, as «a continuously eternally springing source». This approach to Plotinus' theory does not favor the identification of the One with God because «if we understand freedom as creativity in a Christian sense, we need to position at least a partial identification of the One with the God of the great monotheistic religions<sup>4</sup>».

Without trying to oversimplify the issue, I think that it is possible to understand «creativity» and «freedom» in a non-Christian sense. It has already been established that the One is «self springing», and that «...it is like the principle and ground of some vast tree of rational life» (*Enn.* VI.8.15). In addition, the One is «absolute freedom and colitude, will and effortless creativity». After attributing all these unique properties to the One, it is difficult to dismiss Plotinus' One as being anything else than God. Although the One may not be identical with the Christian God, it may, however, refer to a monotheistic entity, a god who is «self springing» with «will and effortless creativity... an eternally springing source». It need not be our concern which monotheistic god Plotinus had in mind. But in order to understand the issue better, I will attempt to illustrate the difference of the nature of the One from the Christian God by contrasting it with that of the pagan Greek gods.

## II

On the basis of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, I will try to show that Plotinus' One does not refer to a being of the Greek gods' nature. The One, unlike the Greek gods, is not made «by human agency<sup>5</sup>». This clearly indicates that Plotinus' religion is not a «religion of humanity» as

2. V. CILENTO, *Saggi su Plotino*, Milano, U. Mursia and Co., 1973.

3. L. WESTRA, *Freedom and Creativity in Plotinus*. This paper was read at the SAGP Central, 1990.

4. *Ibid*, p. 4.

5. G. W. F. HEGEL, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Univ. of California Press, Ed. P. C. Hodgson, 1987, p. 462.





Greek religion is. The Greek «natural» gods, as Hegel calls them, have «a merely superficial personality, only a mask of spirituality<sup>6</sup>». «These gods' finitude», says Hegel, «consisted on the one hand in their naturalness, while on the other it lay in the fact that they are not yet thought, only pictured representationally, and are therefore not yet fused into a single god but are still many gods<sup>7</sup>».

Unlike the Greek gods, Plotinus' One cannot be pictured representationally; it can only be reached by contemplation and love, dialectically.

According to Hegel, the principle of Greek religion (the religion of beauty), is rather the subjective freedom of the spiritual: «the natural is no longer worthy to constitute by itself the inner quality or content of any such god. But this free subjectivity is not yet absolutely free. It is not yet the idea that has genuinely realized itself inwardly as spirit<sup>8</sup>». The reason is, Hegel says, that although the content is free subjectivity, it «exists as particular content» in the form of various gods, which «particularity has at the same time a natural side<sup>9</sup>». This naturalness which exists in the Greek gods, even though they include a spiritual side as well, prevents the idea from realizing itself as a spiritual subjectivity. Thus the content (Greek gods) is both spiritual and natural.

This, however, is not the case with Plotinus' One. The One is a «free subjectivity» and does not exist as a particular content (Greek gods). There is no naturalness present in the One; there is inwardness: this is the moment when the concept (thought of God) of religion reaches the level of being one with religious consciousness. At that point, the concept is realized perfectly and is free spirit. There is no natural (sensuous) consciousness at this level. It is an inward consciousness elevated above nature. It is spirit and its content truth, knowledge<sup>10</sup>. This is what Plotinus' One is: God.

Plotinus' One is not a multiplicity (*Enn.* V.3.12.). It is not a *being* (οὐσία or ὄν), «...for being and intellect involve multiplicity. ...Thus, the source of all unity —the One: beyond all being (*Enn.* V.4) and thinking ...unlimited and unknowable<sup>11</sup>». If the One were known, «he would not be God» (*Enn.* V.3.16, 17). The One is the One-in-Many, for «the universe is included potentially in

6. *Ibid.*

7. HEGEL, *o.c.*, p. 755.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 462.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, p. 514.

11. J. D. JONES, *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite. The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, Marquette Univ. Press, 1980, p. 31, n. 62.



it ...the temporal is immanent in the eternal<sup>12</sup>». It is the Ultimate reality in which «the multiversal universe finds essential unity<sup>13</sup>». There is no clear distinction between the universal and the particular. God and the universe. God and his creation, are one and «cannot be thought separately». As V. P. Pistorius holds, there is a clear resemblance between Plotinus and Hegel<sup>14</sup>. In paraphrasing Plotinus, Hegel says that the One «is the basis and the cause of all Being that appears whose potentiality is not apart from its actuality, but is absolute actuality in itself. It is the unity which is likewise essence, or unity as the essence of all essence<sup>15</sup>». The One is the cause of existence.

All these characteristics of the One make it stand apart and above the concept of the Greek gods. The Greek gods were not raised to absolute infinitude. They were finite spirits<sup>16</sup>. On the contrary, Plotinus' One is self springing, absolute freedom, the source of rational life, of creativity, of will.

Hegel does not seem to disagree, and does not make any negative comments on Plotinus' notion of the One as being God, when he paraphrases him: «That Being is and remains God and is not outside of Him, but is his very self<sup>17</sup>».

### III

Both Hegel and Plotinus seek the Absolute. However, each one's Absolute is different. For Plotinus, the One, Absolute, cannot be defined. He names it alternatively, Father, Logos, Theos, Beauty of Beauty, and he says what the One is not. But there is no definition, for the One is beyond any definition. Hegel's Absolute is «the endlessly self-determining Universal<sup>18</sup>». Similarly, Plotinus' One is «self-springing», the source of life.

As mentioned earlier, Plotinus' One is «beyond being» and thinking (*Enn.* V.5.6.);<sup>19</sup> it is unlimited and unknowable. Hegel's Christian God, like

12. P. V. PISTORIUS, *Plotinus and Neoplatonism*, Cambridge, 1952, p. 26.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. G. W. F. HEGEL, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955, v. 2, p. 413.

16. HEGEL, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 753.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 415. He adds: «As the Christians said that He was once present to sensuous perception at a certain time and in a certain place —but also that He ever dwells in His people and is their Spirit— so Plotinus said that absolute essence is present in the self-consciousness that thinks, and exists in it as essence, or Thought itself is the Divine» (v. 2, p. 411) 18.

18. *Ibid.*, v. 1, p. 102.

19. Pistorius holds that Plotinus' One is God, «but not the whole Godhead» (p. 11).



Plotinus' One, «is freed from all multiplicity and diversity», but contrary to Plotinus, in Christianity God is an infinite ocean of being (*Exod.* 3:14) «...God is the being whose essence is simply to be. Thus God is the highest being and the most real or most actual<sup>20</sup>». Contrary to Plotinus' «incommunicable» One, the Christian God, Absolute, is no longer incommunicable «for the various stages of the progression from Him are verily His manifestation, and the Trinity is thus revealed<sup>21</sup>». It is interesting to note that for both Hegel and Plotinus God and His creation cannot be thought separately<sup>22</sup>.

For both Hegel and Plotinus the Absolute is beautiful. Both philosophers accept material and incorporeal beauty. For Hegel, beauty is produced by the fusion of form and content. This kind of beauty is reflected in works of art. Classical Greek sculpture is the best representative of this kind of beauty. Classical sculpture is beautiful because «it matches perfectly the concept of free spirituality<sup>23</sup>». Thus, Hegel sees a special connection between freedom and beauty. But as shown earlier, this is a Plotinian idea. According to Plotinus, beauty is imprisoned in things, and it is man's duty to liberate it. The artist's freedom of mind transforms a stone into a beautiful sculpture. He makes it look lively and capable of reflecting and communicating a feeling. Similarly, a work of art for Hegel is beautiful when it reveals «life, feeling, soul, import and mind<sup>24</sup>». This kind of beauty, however, as an aesthetic concept does not endure. It dies with the «dissolution» of the Classical Ideal. The other kind of beauty is of the Absolute. But this beauty is not a distinct concept from Hegel's Absolute. It is a quality which the Absolute possesses, and is limited and dependent on the Absolute<sup>25</sup>.

Plotinus distinguishes three kinds of beauty. Like Hegel, he appreciates the beauty produced by works of art. But there is another kind of beauty which is on a higher level: the beauty of virtue or of the soul. The idea of beauty is the good, «...and for those who are advancing upwards from sense perception there is the beauty of virtue<sup>26</sup>». But what is the source of this beauty? The One is «the eternal source of virtue and the origin of divine love,

20. JONES, *o.c.*, p. 31, n. 62.

21. HEGEL, *History of Philosophy*, v. 3, p. 85. Hegel here suggests his acceptance of Plotinus' One as God.

22. PISTORIUS, *Plotinus and Neoplatonism*, *loc. cit.*, p. 26.

23. HEGEL, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, *loc. cit.*, p. 753.

24. G. W. F. GRAY, *Hegel on Art, Religion, Philosophy*, Harper Torchobooks, 1970, p. 44.

25. A. ALEXANDRAKIS, *A Comparison of Plato, Plotinus and Hegel on Aesthetics and the Concept of Beauty*, Univ. of Miami, 1986, p. 134.

26. *Enn.* I.6.1.



around which all moves, by which everything directs its course, in which nous and self-consciousness ever have their beginning and their end<sup>27</sup>».

There is a third kind of Beauty for Plotinus, with capital B. The One is not simply beautiful. The One is Beauty. The One is Beauty beyond Beauty (κάλλος ὑπὲρ κάλλος)<sup>28</sup>. The One is «better than the best (ἐπέκεινα τῶν ἀρίστων), exercising royal rights in Thought (βασιλεύων ἐν τῷ νοητῷ). In order to discover this invisible, eternal Beauty, God, says Plotinus, you have to look inside you. As P. V. Pistorius points out, for Plotinus «our awareness of Beauty is nothing else than a recognition of the presence of God<sup>29</sup>».

#### IV

If Plotinus' One is taken to be God, as suggested by some scholars, and since he names the One *Beauty*, then another name for Plotinus' God would be *Beauty*. This, naturally, follows the Platonic tradition of identifying beauty with morality. For, as mentioned earlier, the One is the true, the good, and the beautiful. This idea, however, is far removed from the Christian God or Hegel's Absolute. The Christian God is frequently called Father, Logos, Absolute in Hegel. These are adjectives often used by Plotinus, for naming the One. But Hegel never names the Absolute *Beauty* and does not identify Beauty with the Absolute as Plotinus seems to be doing. This important distinction between Hegel's Absolute and Plotinus' One sets apart two different Gods: A Christian God and another whose identity is unknown, but who however is only One.

Plotinus' One is different from Hegel's Absolute. Had Hegel identified the Absolute with Beauty, as Plotinus does, then Beauty would have taken the first and equal place in his dialectic. But the abstract notion of Plotinus' Beauty is contrary to the Hegelian Christian God's concrete subjectivity. In addition, his dialectic would have taken on an aesthetic dimension as it does in Plotinus' theory<sup>30</sup>.

Plotinus' identification of the One with Beauty should not be confused with Hegel's saying that Greek religion is the religion of beauty. For the Greeks, the term beauty refers to the sensual and spiritual qualities which an art work might have. But Plotinus' theory goes far beyond the free spiritua-

27. *Enn.* VI.1.9, 1-9.

28. *Enn.* VI.7.32.

29. PISTORIUS, *Plotinus and Neoplatonism*, loc. cit., p. 148.

30. A. ALEXANDRAKIS, Plotinus Aesthetic Approach to the One (Submitted for publication), *Ancient Philosophy*.





lity of the artistic process. His notion of freedom has a divine character. The One is unlimited Beauty; it is unlimited freedom, a Beauty which is achieved by the process of the soul's elevation through contemplation. It is a Divine, Eternal Beauty. This Beauty is not achieved by participation. It is reached dialectically through the three steps: sensual world-soul-nous. Each one of these levels is achieved by thinking of and contemplating Beauty, the One. Plotinus' mystico-dialectical approach to God is rational, as is Hegel's. It is through reason that God is reached. However, «in Christianity God becomes man which implies an exaltation of man inadmissible in Plotinus' system<sup>31</sup>».

To recapitulate, Plotinus' One (Beauty), attracts the soul's return by contemplating Beauty, the One, the Absolute, which concentrates the highest moral and aesthetic qualities. When the Absolute, Eternal Beauty is God, for Hegel Eternal Beauty is found *in* God. On the other hand, Hegel's Absolute, the Christian God, could not have been named *Beauty*. The term *Beauty*, for Hegel, designates an abstract concept; it is a quality that things have. The Absolute is beautiful, but is not Beauty itself. Hegel's Absolute is a concrete universal, a concrete subjectivity.

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## Η ΕΝΝΟΙΑ ΤΟΥ ΚΑΛΟΥΣ ΣΤΗ ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΙΑ ΤΟΥ ΠΛΩΤΙΝΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΤΟΥ HEGEL

### Περίληψη

Ἡ διαφορὰ μεταξὺ Πλωτίνου καὶ Hegel ὡς πρὸς τὴν ἔννοια τοῦ κάλλους εἶναι ἡ διαφορὰ μεταξὺ ἑνὸς χριστιανοῦ καὶ ἑνὸς ἀρχαίου (μὴ-χριστιανοῦ) φιλοσόφου. Παρ' ὅλον ὅτι ἡ διαλεκτικὴ καὶ τῶν δύο αὐτῶν φιλοσόφων ἔχει μυστικιστικὸ χαρακτήρα καὶ παρὰ τὸ γεγονὸς ὅτι ὁ Hegel στὴ θεωρία του γιὰ τὸ ὠραῖο καὶ τὸ καλὸ ἐπηρεάστηκε ἀπὸ τὸν Πλωτῖνο, ὁ καθένας τους ἀκολουθεῖ τὶς ιδέες καὶ τὴ θρησκεία τῆς ἐποχῆς του. Ἡ παρούσα μελέτη ἔχει στόχο νὰ διερευνήσῃ καὶ νὰ ἀναλύσῃ ἀκριβῶς αὐτὴ τὴ διάκριση: συγκεκριμένα, ἐνῶ γιὰ τὸν Πλωτῖνο τὸ ἐν εἶναι κάλλος ('Ενν. I. 6.8, III. 8.8), γιὰ τὸν Hegel τὸ ἀπόλυτο (τέλειο) εἶναι ὠραῖο ἀλλὰ δὲν ταυτί-

31. J. KATZ, *Plotinus Search for the Good*, p. 88, n. 60.

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ζεται με τὸ κάλλος. Ἐὰν ὁ Hegel εἶχε ταυτίσει τὸ κάλλος με τὸ ἀπόλυτο, τότε θὰ κατέληγε νὰ ὑποστηρίξει ὅτι τὸ κάλλος (τὸ ὁποῖο περιλαμβάνει τὸ ἀληθές, τὸ καλὸ καὶ τὸ ὡραῖο) εἶναι τόσο σημαντικὸ καὶ ὑπερέχον, ὅσο καὶ τὸ ἀπόλυτο, καὶ ἄρα τὸ ἴδιο με αὐτό.

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