Plotinus’ triad as actual experience

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Plotinus is the founder of Neoplatonism. Through studying Plato’s works, he reinterpreted many aspects, such as seeing the Good as a One which is not further explainable and therefore the Good is God. Neoplatonism is often studied as a philosophy which is of course reasonable, since Neoplatonism is a philosophy which further developed the ideas of Middle Platonism in accordance with other philosophical schools. However, Neoplatonism also turned into a religious cult 1, since Plotinus’ triad was always understood as a way to make Plato’s Good (which is not graspable for human-beings under no means) suddenly graspable and as people sought for God, a way to unite with God was urgently requested. As such, Neoplatonism also influenced Oral Kabbalah and the Christian Church Fathers who saw it as a way to mediate with God.

The Highest Principle is the Good and it is what everyone desires, since everything we want to do is for good. Therefore, everything turns around the Good and is for good. 2 It is at the top of everything, followed by intelligence (which is being or mentality) and the soul, and the soul and body make up a human-being who lives and it is life that unifies. 3 So the One (to hen) or the Good (agathon) is a basic principle to make the spirited reason (nous) possible, which is the basic principle to make any kind of soul (psyche) possible, as soul is the pre-condition for life. The body is just the material, but it needs soul to live. The world is moving but that which it moves is soul – and when soul influences material, it leads to creation or “becoming”. This triad is known as hypostasis and seemingly has an influx on Christianity in the trinity through the One as father of everything, the spirit as reason (nous) and the son as corporal Being which was sent by the Divine. 4 However, it is noteworthy that Paul Aubin rejects this idea and emphasizes that the triad is not really a continuation and all tree things therefore exist for themselves which makes it impossible to compare it with the trinity. 5 However, traditionally, the

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1 See also Smith (1989) for further reasons
2 Kalligas, 2014:219, the Good appears also as main principle in Plato’s Republic 6.508d – John Adams (1902) mentions on this passage that light has been interpreted as symbol for the Idea of Good by Plotinus. Adams proposes however that in 508d Plato means that light which comes from the Sun makes it possible for us to see the Truth which comes from the Good. Through light the ideas can be known, and thus that which comes by reason might be grasped. For the importance of reason to make things come into existence, see Timaeus. The theme that the One/ God is good and that from Him all goodness derives is also asserted in NT 1 John 1:5. Here again, the metaphor of light represents goodness. See also James 1:17, 1 John 4:7-9 and AT Psalm 18:30; 50:6;116:5, Numbers 23:19 but in contrast also see Exodus 34:5-7, Isaiah 45:7 and the Book of Job.
3 Grimes, 1995
4 De Halleux, 1994: 239
5 Ibid.
triad has been regarded a continuation which works like a pyramid in which the One is beyond everything and creates the reason or intelligence. The intelligence however lives beyond time and is not attributed to it, thus is on a higher stage than the souls. The souls are living within time and when the body and soul separates a ‘person’ dies, but not the soul as the soul is immortal. And while the corporal body is a thing, everything which is beyond is no-thing and thus to find answers to the thing beyond, we need the ‘what’. What is the soul? What is intelligence? What is the One? – We do not want to know primarily where it is located or why it is like it is, but we want to understand what it is that it is.\(^6\) At first, intelligence always ‘is’, because if something needs no time then it is always there and will always be there since it is not limited. The souls exist for themselves, they are in plurality. There is not just one soul, but many souls that then can be summed up to the very one soul, the world soul which is the sum of every single logistikou. As such, the individual soul is just broken off the world soul and will unite with it after death.\(^7\) The idea of a triad between the One, the nous and the soul is a further development of Middle Platonism. Middle Platonists believed that the soul derives from the nous, however, there are powers which make it possible to work on the matter: thus nous affects psyche, psyche affects soma.\(^8\) Furthermore, in Jewish traditions, the term psyche was understood with the term nefesh which is the breath used in Genesis 2:7 to make man alive and thus there is a fluid image of the soul.\(^9\) To understand this discourse, one has to be aware that it has been a big question in Plato’s tripartite soul what actually ‘is’ a soul part. It is mentioned that the parts shall be distinguished and their function are clarified, but the question “what is it?” remains open.\(^10\)

Grimes goes further and equals the self with experience and makes clear that it is even important for phantasy life, ass one has to identify oneself with the figure in the fantasy to accept it as one’s own fantasy. Only through mind contrast, one sees that ‘that is not me’ and thus realizes that it is not real. One only realizes fantasy as fantasy when one realizes that it is not really oneself, while one sees fantasy as a truth when one thinks that it is oneself and must be through oneself. But how about the self itself? The self cannot be put into an image – therefore no fantasy. \(^{11}\) Neoplatonism has not only

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\(^6\) Grimes, 1995
\(^7\) Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, 1985: 1343, entry: psyche
\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^9\) A similar idea is also proposed in ibid.
\(^10\) See also Kamtekar who tries to find an answer to this. Kamtekar shows that such questions include: “(1) are these parts themselves simple? (2) is the Principle of Opposites the only way to determine parts? (3) what is there to being a soul-part other than being distinguished by the Principle of Opposites — is it to desire and pursue [...]?”
\(^11\) Grimes, 1995 – there is no idea of the self, the thought on how we see ourselves, does it have part of an idea? Seemingly, the self is identification and as such is part within the body that cannot exist outside and therefore cannot become an image of itself [Annotation by the author]
been a philosophy but also served for a long time as a religious practice – like Buddhism or Daoism – in which people sought the unity with the One. Therefore, the self does not only exist as a state of mind, but the goal is to unite the soul through reason with the One. For this, we have to understand experience as a part of the eternal, as the possibility to experience the One cannot be limited to a certain time, same than any other experience that can be repeated and repeated. Even substances might experience unity or devastation when concepts such as time are not existent anymore. Experience as a Neoplatonic key also plays a large importance in Ibn Tufayl’s Hayy Ibn Yaqzan, in which experience is shown as a kind of return through imitation. At first, one must imitate the animals, as man includes animalistic needs which have to be satisfied in the first place. Next, one must imitate the heaven by reflecting on the heaven’s function of heating and cooling, on reflecting on the pure circular motions, and reflecting and on the heaven’s witnessing of God as we can find the source of the divine in the heaven. Finally, the last imitation is the imitatio dei – the reflection on the nature of God himself. As such, imitation leads to the return to God which is conducted as an experience. The goal of reflection is understanding and thus, through going step by step Hayy understands the complex things more and more and with this understanding, he can gain new experiences. For Grimes, understanding shall lead to a luminosity which makes it possible to realize the Beauty. Of course, “the Beauty” here is not understood in a way in which we understand beauty nowadays. According to Plato’s Symposium, the Beauty is a kind of immortal knowledge which is everything as it includes all forms and beauty can be found in all bodies which are beautiful – i.e. knowledgeable and able to gain profound wisdom – and the beauty in them must be the same.

Therefore, the lover who sees the beauty from outside has to gain the wisdom to see the inner beauty which is within the body. But, the quality of beauty remains the same, not only within the body but also among the bodies.

And therefore, it is necessarily a sadness if one suffers of beauty, especially after once gaining it. The theory of beauty sees three steps of love. The first is perfection, the second the ascension of the soul and the third is love according to the idea, where the idea itself is detached. In other words: it starts

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12 Human-beings function in a tripartite way as of Hannah Arendt. The basis is the animal who works for his survival. For the animal laborans, see Schmitz, 2017: 2
13 Pessin, 2014: 551
14 Ibid.
15 So imitation leads to experience – thus: imitation is experiencing part of the One
16 Grimes, 1995
17 Schmitz, 2016/2017
18 Ibid.
19 Grimes, 1995
20 Schmitz, 2016
with an attraction which is appreciated through the soul and then the Beauty is searched in itself. The Beauty was later identified with the Good which Plato already calls God in Book 2 of the Politeia and keeps it up as God in the Timaeus. Philo later identified it with the logos, which is no wonder, since it was a Jewish concept in the 1st century AD that God equals the word, and the word for ‘word’ and ‘reason’ are one and therefore God is the reason which communicates through His forces. Like other Middle Platonists God is the founder of the nous – the intellect – through which the soul can be created in ‘this’ world. Plotinus identifies the Good as The One and the One as Highest. While for Plato, the Good resides in its own realm and thus, in the perceivable world one only finds the Idea of the Good, so does also Philo keep up a strict border between God and the perceivable world. However, through Plotinus’ triad, it seemed that through intellect one can reach a state of oneness and borders would be overcome.\textsuperscript{21} However, if there is still an ‘it’ we have not reached the One, since the One has no more discrimination and at this point, it is still not clarified what the One makes the One as One, especially if it is not something in another realm that is unreachable for us, but a luminous radiant experience. This is one of the main questions of Jewish Kabbalah. In Ezekiel 1:1-4, Ezekiel encountered god, something which according to Philo would be impossible, since God lives in a mental realm while humans live in a sensorial realm and both are completely incompatible. So if Ezekiel managed to make God appear, then what did he do to be worthy enough to get to this realm? It was this fascinating question – that the impossible became possible – that made Kabbalah so attractive to people. So it means to understand ‘it’ by itself! Because every ‘it’ is part of the One. Therefore, the key is to renounce everything just to rest in the ‘it’.\textsuperscript{22} In us is a certain inner power that wants to resolve this mystery and wants to go back to the One.\textsuperscript{23} This inner power is also known to us from certain religions. In Buddhism, the buddhanature (bodhicitta) is often understood as an inner power to develop ourselves on higher stages and in Hinduism, the soul is longing to connect to the higher soul (paratman).\textsuperscript{24} These tendencies also exist in Daoism where one wants to unite with the Dao and many other religions, so it seem to be essential for human-beings. To be able to do so, there must be a subject which sees itself as an “I” and there must be an “it” which is identified with the One, and Plotinus makes clear that the I is an image of the One\textsuperscript{25} though it seems to be no coincidence that this idea was modeled after Genesis 1:27 in which God created man in his likeness (tselem), as well as in

\textsuperscript{21} Grimes (1995) emphasizes that this Neoplatonist idea exists, but he also makes clear that a oneness presupposes a one (which is only an idea) – unity, union, communion.

\textsuperscript{22} Grimes, 1995

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{25} Grimes, 1995
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Plato’s Timaeus, where God has the desire that everything is Him alike and since for Plato God is the Good and thee Good can always be only Good, everything which God creates must be good as well.\textsuperscript{26} Therefore, according to Jewish mysticism, the soul of man equals the soul of God as man is created in His likeness and there must be a connection between both that never broke, and as such, there must be a way to reach Him. Plotinus postulates that we are always surrounded by the One as without the One’s presence we would cease to exist.\textsuperscript{27} However, the Divine is inexpressible and we cannot put it in words, especially, when it is that-which-includes-everything. Same as Plato makes clear in the Symposium that human-beings were separated and everyone searches for one’s other half, for Plotinus it is clear that human-beings (and everything else) was just separated from the One and therefore the man who saw is identical to what he saw and everything is just a piece of the oneness. For this reason, it seems that the both realms – the mental realm and the sensational realm – are not strictly separated such as Plato and Middle Platonists regarded it, but instead the borders are overcome and one can get there if one is willing to develop oneself and is prepared to realize the oneness. As such, Plato who was a seeker of reason and wisdom – the rational philosopher – is turned into a mystical experience, his findings are seen as a kind of revelation and some prepared it as a counterstance to Christianity, others saw a use in it to explain mystical experiences within Christianity. Still, no matter whether one sees Plotinus’ teaching as a threefold path, an existence in trinity, or whether one does not see it as an actual triad but all concepts for themselves, Plotinus’ triad is still fascinating today, since his Neoplatonism left a lot of traces in regards to “how to find God” and therefore for reflections and experiences on God many people advised Plotinus and nowadays, we unfold these traces which makes it easier for us to understand certain worldviews as we can see their backgrounds.

\textbf{Literature:}


\textsuperscript{26} Schmitz, 2018
\textsuperscript{27} Grimes, 1995
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