

**CAN NEOPLATONISM ACHIEVE THE UNIFICATION WE SEEK?**

by

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**DISCUSSION PAPER**

on

R. Baine Harris's  
**NEOPLATONISM AS A WORLD PHILOSOPHY**

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No one who takes seriously the value of classical philosophies in the West would question the importance of that immensely influential system and derivative movements that we call Neoplatonism. It may be, however, that its historical importance as a stage in the evolution of the history of religion is even greater. Nevertheless and notwithstanding its notable influence on medieval Christian thought and its undoubted effect on the Italian umanisti in the Quattrocento and among later heirs of the Renaissance, it failed to establish itself as a viable alternative to religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

This failure is not unremarkable since at first blush it certainly looks as though <sup>Neoplatonism</sup> ~~it~~ has in it the very ingredients needed to construct a universal living religion in face of which all such rivals would fade into impotent obscurity. Had not it rescued a decadent Mediterranean world from philosophies of despair and introduced people to a new dimension of life? By its borrowing from the Stoics had not it shown its moral concern and established its respectability as an ethical force in society? True, others had spoken of the inner life; but they had seen gnosis of one sort or another as both its mainspring and its goal. Plotinus and his followers went beyond knowledge and introduced his followers to a specifically religious concern for salvation through the training of the soul. By ascesis people could eventually achieve even ecstatic union with the divine. Moreover, the Neoplatonists, in the intellectual terms of their day, housed these spiritual, not

to say mystical, preoccupations in the noble mansions of reason that the Greeks had made so fashionable for so long.

Why then did Neoplatonism fail (if indeed it ever sought) to become the universal religion of the known world? The reasons offered by Augustine, <sup>(1)</sup> plausible though they must have sounded, are not entirely convincing to us today. Having been personally much influenced by the Neoplatonism that was in vogue on the eve of his conversion to Christianity, he noted that it lacked the focus of a religious founder, that it did not provide, as did Christianity in its vision of heaven, a way for the inner bliss it cultivated to become permanent, and finally that while it purported by its ascetic methods to save people it could not attract, let alone save, those who lacked certain intellectual endowments that are comparatively unusual in humankind. Perhaps the last of these reasons comes nearest the mark: it could not expect to appeal to the masses, who are after all the mainstay of all living religions. It had to be so distilled that only traces could percolate to the minds of men. The motive power of living religions lay elsewhere.

I mention these points here because the Neoplatonic tradition happens to be one to which I am temperamentally much inclined, so that I am notably disposed to sympathy with the view that Dr Baine Harris so ably expounds. Yet I have misgivings. I doubt, for example, that many people really believe, as he suggests, that religion has as a primary function the attainment of intellectual harmony. Whatever a religion does it rarely if ever resolves intellectual conflicts. Its role is an even nobler and exciting one: it causes people to take

new stances. The religious imagination is of incalculable value in setting the stage for more creative intellectual discussion. As Professor Harris concedes, philosophy is by no means immune from the same criticism that he rightly levels at science and religion: it does not have the unification of knowledge as its basic function, if indeed it has it as a function at all. One cannot hope to purify a religion or make it more to one's liking by eliminating from it some element of which one disapproves. I recall that Professor Henry Joel Cadbury, one of the greatest of American biblical scholars and a Quaker, once gave as a reason for the lack of sacraments in the Society of Friends the observation that sacraments have been divisive in Christian history, not unifying, so by eliminating them one is on the road to unification. Would it might be so, but to a sacramentalist the suggestion is a little like proposing that since dietary laws and customs have been divisive one should give up eating and so solve the problem.

Professor Harris, in his paper, seems not to distinguish clearly between empirical sciences such as chemistry and physics, on the one hand and, on the other, mathematics. Still, it is true, if not a truism, that sciences such as physics and biology are not concerned with human values and that neither, of course, is mathematical science. But then it is a commonplace critique of much philosophy (for example Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics) that it is anthropocentric. Even so eminent a thinker in our own century as was Bertrand Russell seemed to assume that human values are the important ones for the entire universe. That would be the case if one could show conclusively

that we humans are the best the universe can do, which seems to me a pessimistic view of the universe.

The notion that religious visions conflict less with one another than do the philosophies with which they become identified or with which they have come to be encumbered is an intriguing one; but are not such philosophic stances to be found embryonically in the vision in the first place? For the unification we all seek, surely what is preëminently needed is a spirit of openness: rare indeed in popular religion and by no means to be taken for granted in the groves of Academe. The modesty that Dr Harris attributes to the Neoplatonic tradition is certainly laudable and an essential ingredient in the openness I have in mind. It pertains to the key admission: we do not know enough to talk as confidently as we too often do talk. In this we are not alone. The medical and legal professions are in the same condemnation; it is just that it is not unreasonable to suppose that we ought to be more ready to recognize more consistently the limits of our knowledge. The skeptical element in all profoundly religious attitudes is more likely to unify us than is any stance, philosophic or religious.

"Rationalism" is a notoriously ambiguous and misleading term in the history of Western thought; nevertheless, the suggestion Dr Harris makes is a valuable one: Neoplatonism was able to transcend a tendency in the ancient world to assume that reason is to be revered above all else. Neoplatonism is not alone, however, in protests of this kind: Nietzsche and Bergson, for instance, provide, mutatis mutandis, much

more recent examples of the same malaise of the human spirit with an excessive reliance on what happens to seem orderly and logical because it chances to fit neatly into the human mind. Yet we cannot help noticing that irrationalistic nostrums can be even more barren than the most parochial forms of rationalism.

I now come to a point that must seem obvious yet, I believe, must be made, since even the most vigilant among us may overlook it. What we call Neoplatonism has its roots in the thought of Plotinus, who mentions Ammonius Saccas (of whom we know almost nothing) as an influence upon him;<sup>(2)</sup> but of course the Neoplatonic tradition is a centuries-long outgrowth and (more importantly) development of the Plotinian system. So in pleading for Neoplatonism as a possible means for the unification of thought in our time we face a serious problem. If by it we mean the system expounded by Plotinus in the Enneads with perhaps the interpretations of his immediate successors, then we shall be rightly charged with anachronism, for no doubt Plotinus, were he miraculously to appear before us, would be as reluctant to talk to us today in his third-century terms as would an Aquinas <sup>be</sup> redivivus with the narrow petrifications of early twentieth-century Neo-Thomism and as impatient as would have been a returning Calvin to the ambiance of seventeenth-century Dutch divinity. If, however, we mean the Neoplatonic tradition that spans everything from Porphyry to Pico della Mirandola and into which even an Emerson or a Tennyson might be somehow squeezed, then we shall be no less rightly charged with an ambiguity as great as if we were to talk of humanism as encompassing everything from Socrates to Bronowski.

From the horns of this dilemma escape seems unlikely.

On the heels of these reflections, might not one plausibly propose Spinozism as having a better case for the purpose in hand? For it has in a preëminent degree the virtues Dr Harris so reasonably claims for Neoplatonism, yet <sup>it</sup> cannot be said to be a tradition or movement as diverse as the latter. It is, however, a "general" philosophy and is such <sup>a</sup> good ~~an~~ example of what metaphysics ought to do (if it be warranted at all) that even those contemporaries of ours who have little use for metaphysics recognize its worth and that it has perfection of its kind. Stuart Hampshire, for instance, might be cited here. True, it may seem to offend against certain battle cries of the monotheistic religions, perhaps most notably against those of Islam, which to some of us seems to be still waging a war on the corpses in a polytheistic cemetery. Nor can <sup>one</sup> forget, of course, that Spinoza was cast out of the synagogue in his own day. But then almost every profoundly religious thinker has been cast out of whatever happened to be the organized religious institution in which he found himself or even the one that, perhaps in a fit of optimism, he chose. The Church's debt to heretics is incalculably great and churches are naturally disinclined to embark upon such calculations in any case, since their very existence depends so fundamentally upon a widespread persistence of non-think.

Professor Harris duly notes that the style of Plotinus is much less felicitous, to say the least, than is that of Plato. This in itself might not matter much to many, although I happen to suspect writers who do not take the trouble to learn the art in which they engage.

(Could one admire a composer who had not troubled to learn the elements of harmony and counterpoint?) Still, gold has been found in murky places and some of the greatest insights in the history of philosophy have to be dug out of longueurs such as Kant's. What is striking in the case of Plotinus is that not only was his first treatise a discourse on the Beautiful; that thesis permeates almost everything else that followed. He is not the only philosopher to have come to philosophy by way of reflection on that puzzling topic. Croce, for instance, <sup>almost</sup> within the living memory of some of us, certainly did so too; but then Croce's style (one would have thought predictably) was limpid and a model of clarity and charm. Plotinus concludes his sixth treatise of the first Ennead by insisting that "in the sum of the Intelligibles, the first is the Beautiful" and that whatever "intelligible" we encounter "Beauty's seat is always there." If Plato could have said that, how much more beautifully and therefore convincingly would he have said it!

The significance of the point I have just made should not be underestimated. Dr Harris claims that the content of Plotinus's thought is "very rich, like Swiss chocolate," but some of us have not acquired a taste for even that gustatory delight, while others may find it nauseatingly rich. Is not the same likely to be true of the Neoplatonic tradition, which is rich through accretions and interpretations that have multiplied because of the difficulties, not to say ambiguities, <sup>the</sup> ~~in his~~ style <sup>of Plotinus,</sup> causing some, for instance, to see him (if one is to stress such distinctions) as leaning toward pantheism while others find him veering toward theism. In any case he could not but share an inevitable shortcoming (as did even



the Italian humanists and other participants in the Neoplatonic tradition) : the lack of an evolutionary understanding of the nature of all things. Of course some of the thinkers in antiquity understood this dimly in terms of their day; but <sup>none</sup> they could ~~not~~ possibly have understood as we must today the implications of what we now know. Biological evolution is but one aspect of that understanding, which applies to everything other than God. (For those who in the manner of Alexander and Wieman include even God, of course even that exception is eliminated.) So whether Neoplatonism has within it the capacity to function today as a force for the unification of thought is by no means beyond question.

Yet when all that is said, Professor Harris pleads his case well. One wonders only whether any one system in antiquity or any one tradition in the world, oriental or occidental, can really in itself provide the main basis for that most laudable of enterprises under whose banner we are so happily convened.

- (1) Augustine, Confessions, 7, 18-21.
- (2) Plotinus is said to have remarked, on hearing a discourse by Ammonius Saccas: "There is the man I have been looking for" (touton ezētoun).