

**NEOPLATONISM AS A WORLD PHILOSOPHY**

by

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The Fourteenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences  
Houston, Texas November 28-December 1, 1985

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The hope for the resolution of human conflict through the unification of thought is one of the oldest ideas in the history of civilization. Thinking people in all ages have seen that intellectual disagreements over religious, social, and economic matters have been one of the major causes of war and various other forms of human devastation, and have longed for the intellectual unification of all mankind. In virtually every culture some poet or philosopher has dreamed of a society in which men live together harmoniously because they have intellectual agreement, a society in which men "study war no more," and "the lion lies down with the lamb." This hope for an ideal human society, "a city not made with human hands," has often been merged with the idea of heaven, especially in the minds of those who have given up hope for the possibility of its actual realization on earth. For all who have not yet given up on mankind, it remains as the ideal that gives them the strength and courage to work for a better world. It is the reason why they seek to alleviate human suffering and to remove injustice, ignorance, and greed wherever they occur.

The necessity for consensus on the nature of the basic issues of life has been recognized as essential to harmonious living in society from the dawn of early civilized life. It has been one of the causes of totalitarianism in government, in marriage, in religion, and in various other areas of human life; and in some instances it even has been used as a justification for totalitarianism. It also has even been used as a justification for war.

Generally speaking, it may be said that throughout human history, societies that allow intellectual pluralism within them have been a rare occurrence, and only in very recent centuries and in relatively few countries has it been promoted as an ideal.

Besides war, another means for achieving intellectual agreement in society has been through the propagation of religion. Throughout history, a very great number of people have believed, and a large number of people still believe that religion is the only way to intellectual harmony. For them nothing less than a common religious experience and common religious commitments can cause people to agree on the basic intellectual issues. Having observed that when men have a religious experience and make their peace with God, they are no longer at war with themselves and with other men, they believe that religion is a necessary factor in getting men to resolve their intellectual conflicts. Their hope is that there will eventually be enough people with similar religious views to allow a unification of thought.

Yet another group of people have believed, and a few still believe that the only way to establish intellectual harmony among people is in the wider expansion of science and scientific knowledge. Their hope lies in the eventual widespread expansion of scientific knowledge and understanding to the vast majority of the people of the world. They believe that science alone is the key to a greater understanding of the major intellectual issues about which men disagree.

The main difficulty we see with both religion and science as candidates for bringing about universal intellectual harmony is that in their actual practice both are philosophically pluralistic. Although there are many common elements in religious experience as it has been interpreted in various religious traditions and also many common elements in science as it occurs in its many forms, neither religion nor science as such is internally philosophically unified. The philosophical unity that they have is not inherent in either of them. Both tend to become philosophically confused in their various expressions over the years. Religions, especially, tend to take on a variety of philosophical forms with the passing of time. They try out various philosophical formulations and some of them become very closely identified with particular philosophical schools of thought, so much so that some of their adherents give the same sacred character to their philosophical expression as they give to the original vision of their founder or founders. Sectarians do develop both in religion and science, but much less in science, and although they have the great advantage of presenting a much more highly unified expression, it eventually becomes clear that much of the unity they possess is founded upon the unity of the philosophy with which they have become identified.

To say that neither religion nor science has an inherent philosophical unity is not to deny that each has its own internal unity. We must make a further distinction between religious unity, scientific unity, and philosophical unity. Religion is a way of binding people together and any given religion is an expression of some form of religious unity. Science also is unified as science. Any given science is highly unified in its content,

scope, and methodology; and because of its extreme objectivity is highly universal in its practice. There is no real difference in Russian, French, and Hungarian biology. However, societies may have differing evaluations of the significance of biology and its relative importance in human life, and these evaluations are essentially philosophical evaluations. In its actual function in human life, any science will become involved in philosophical issues. Science may provide quite valuable information concerning the nature of the material world, but it leaves the spiritual world blank. Science qua science cannot handle values. There is no axiology in mathematics. In short, although both religion and science are worthy in themselves, and if properly developed have much to offer mankind, neither in themselves can deal with all the metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological issues that must be dealt with and show the relations that exist between them. Both must function within the framework of some philosophy.

Although we would not wish to overlook the fact that religion has been a significant factor in helping men to live harmoniously with each other, it is also the case that it has been a major factor in contributing to the various intellectual differences that divide mankind. Religions survive to the degree that the original unified vision of their founder or founders is capable of being reinterpreted in an intellectual expression that is meaningful to each new generation. The original vision of the founders may have had some specific philosophical assumptions that came with the vision, but in any case it is very likely that new philosophical notions will be added along the way in later expressions of it. This has been the case in Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. As a rule, new

philosophical expressions of the vision lead to the formation of various sects within the religion, and the leaders of the various sects begin to promote the views of their particular sect, sometimes at the expense and discredit of other sects. A basic question that usually arises among them is whether the believers should hold only to the the original views of their founder or founders in their original philosophical formulation or should go with some later or contemporary philosophical expression of them. The extremists among them often present their particular sectarian expression as if it were the only one that is correct and they often conflict with other extreme sectarians, religious or otherwise, who are also doing the same thing. All of this leads to greater conflict and greater religious pluralism.

The real problem with the intellectual unification of mankind, as we see it, lies in the fact that intellectual unity is necessarily a philosophical issue, and there is no one philosophy that is now universally accepted throughout the world. Only philosophy deals with all of the intellectual concerns of mankind and shows how they may be related to each other. Only philosophy deals with every dimension of human intellectual interest metaphysically, epistemologically, and axiologically and relates every element to every other element; and even it must do so within very definite limits, namely the sort of unification that is possible in terms of the particular set of presuppositions inherent in that philosophy. Both science and religion deal with some of the same areas of reality as does philosophy, but neither of them deal with all aspects of reality and neither makes the effort to relate every aspect of human intellectual concern to every other aspect as philosophy does, and thus cannot make an adequate contribution to the

unification of human thought. They are able to contribute to the unification of thought only when they are enhanced with some philosophy, which, as a matter of fact is the way they are presented most of the time. Indeed, both do make a major contribution to the unification of thought. The problem is that they, by themselves, cannot make a sufficient contribution.

What we really have had throughout human history and still have in present world conflicts, as we see it, is a battle of philosophies. It is a fact of life that men do disagree philosophically with each other. They differ concerning the basic presuppositions on which a philosophy can be built and they differ concerning the methods that should be used in constructing one. Philosophers do not all philosophize alike. They seriously disagree with each other not only on how to philosophize but on which aspects of philosophy are most important and which elements of human life and human experience are philosophically significant. It is a fact of life that the philosophers are intellectually at war with each other, and the consequences of their warfare are felt in the lives of almost everyone. Philosophies and philosophers differ because people differ in their intellectual needs and interests. This is the way it is, the way it has been, and the way it will continue to be in any society that is able to allow its citizens the luxury of freedom of thought and freedom of dissent. Totalitarianism is not a situation in which there is the absence of philosophy. It is rather a situation in which only one philosophy is allowed. For better or for worse, philosophy cannot be ignored; it is entirely too significant in human history and in human life. The issues with which it deals are intensely human and cannot be avoided.

Religions qua religions, we think, do not conflict with each other as much as do the philosophies with which they have become identified. There is a remarkable similarity in the nature of the vision of the various founders of the major world religions, a similarity great enough to lead some thinkers such as Ramakrishnan to believe in the essential unity of all religions. Even though the initial religious vision of the founder may in itself be highly unified, and even though all of the visions of the various founders may have a remarkable degree of unity with each other, this unity does not remain for very long once the various later philosophical interpreters become involved with it. The pure theology of the vision becomes mixed with the philosophical theology of the its later interpreters.

Although philosophy has always been important in human life and history, its importance has increased even more so in recent centuries and in most recent times due to the changes brought about in the world as a result of modern technology. The modern technological miracles of rapid communication and rapid travel have succeeded in bringing societies and cultures that previously were unknown to each other into close contact with each other. The same miracles have also brought the various philosophies of the various cultures into a close confrontation with each other and the differences that have always existed between some of them have more serious practical consequences than they used to have. In past times when people seriously disagreed with the established authorities they simply moved on, if possible, to some other location and made a new life for themselves and were able to avoid meeting the challenge of the other conflicting philosophy. But such a luxury is now no longer possible for it is no longer



possible for societies to live in isolation from each other. Philosophies that have been incompatible with each other for centuries are now encountering each other in open warfare, and they are doing so with increasing intensity and effectiveness, aided by recent advances in the technology of modern communications. With the advent of international home television directly from satellites in only a few decades from now the same sort of confrontation of cultures and philosophies that is now occurring on a national level will occur on an international level and will cause even greater problems. Extreme sectarians do exist in philosophy just as they do in religions and they are equally as effective in working their mischief in society.

The present ideological difficulty in world affairs, as we see it, comes from the fact that we are now becoming a global society and thus are being forced to face on a global level the same sort of ideological self-definition problem that every society has to face. In some respects we are now facing on a global level a situation similar to what the various German States faced in the unification of the Germany or some Russian and Asian Republics faced in the union of the Soviet Socialist Republics. At issue is whose set of values, whose economic methods, whose view of life — in short, whose philosophy is to prevail. The real question is whether the various nations can settle their intellectual difficulties with each other through discussion and compromise or whether they can only be settled by war, as has been the case so many other times in history, and notably in the various dynasties of Egypt, Persia, India, and China and in the case of the Roman Empire, the rise of the European states, the development of the

Americas, and the recent imperialistic ambitions of a number of modern nations including England, Spain, France, Germany, Japan, the United States and Russia.

At face value it would appear that the solution would be for all the nations of the world to have the same philosophy. The probability of this ever happening, however, is not very high both because of the present political situation and the low probability of attaining any agreement on which philosophy would be acceptable. Most societies tend toward philosophical pluralism whenever they are free to do so; and if we look at history alone, the most likely situation that would allow one philosophy for the whole world would be when all the nations of the world are under the same totalitarian political authority, a situation which would mitigate against those benefits gained from having one. However, the concept "world philosophy" does not necessarily need to be taken to mean that it would be the only philosophy in the world. It may only mean a universal philosophy, a philosophy "for the whole world," one that could be applicable in a wide variety of cultural and intellectual traditions throughout the world, and this is the meaning that we prefer to give it. If we may settle on this meaning, we will be able to find a large number of philosophers who support the idea even though it will still be offensive to some others who are concerned only with truth for the sake of truth and hence do not wish to add any other qualifications to their search for it. For them, any attempt to consider the marketing potential of a philosophy would be the vulgarization of the truth.

There is a sense, however, in which all genuine philosophy is universal philosophy. All philosophers attempt to speak universally. They

attempt to present a unified expression of the truth as it applies universally and thus they automatically address what they have to say to the whole world. But, as a matter of fact, all of them are actually culturally orientated. They are products of particular intellectual and cultural traditions in a particular historical setting, and no matter how much they may try to transcend the presuppositions of their own culture, they never quite succeed in doing so. Pythagoras, Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus still remain ancient Greeks. Kant, Hegel, and Marx still remain Germans. Confucius and Lao Tze remain Chinese. Spinoza remains Jewish. Descartes remains French. Hume and Adam Smith remain British. Aurobindo remains Indian. They are still great philosophers, nevertheless, because their views do have some universal value. Some element of their thinking can be transferred into other cultural and historical contexts. The relevance of Marxism in modern China depends upon the extent to which Marx was able to transcend his Germanic perspective and the relevance of Confucianism in contemporary Western Europe depends upon the extent to which Confucius was able to be non-Chinese. However universal a philosopher may wish to be, he is still trapped in his own context.

It is also the case that no philosophy can ever be completely universal in its application. Most cultures prefer to have their philosophical notions expressed concretely rather than abstractly and in terms that have cultural meanings. Philosophers may be able to keep their ideas abstract when speaking only to other philosophers, but when their views are presented to the average citizen they must be expressed in more concrete cultural terms. There are also historical, economic and political factors involved in

the acceptance of a philosophy from another culture. It is no accident that the Germans are still mainly interested in German philosophers, the French in French philosophers, the Japanese in Japanese philosophers, and the Indians in Indian philosophers. Even within the philosophical profession itself, the study of the whole history of philosophy has been a secondary concern. However, some philosophies do succeed in being accepted in other cultures more than do others and we should consider what general characteristics these philosophies have if we are interested in discovering which features in a philosophy tend to make it more universal.

## II. SOME REQUIREMENTS OF A UNIVERSAL PHILOSOPHY

General. As we have already suggested, a universal philosophy will have to be a general philosophy. Not every philosophy is a general philosophy, although most are. By a general philosophy we mean one that focuses upon generalities and makes quite a number of general statements. For example, in its philosophy of man a general philosophy would make very general statements about mankind as a type as opposed to those that would apply to only certain races or cultural groups. In its philosophy of nature it would focus upon the general laws of physics, or chemistry, or biology, etc. rather than upon those that apply in some specific area. In like manner its basic concepts would be stated in their most generic formulation and attention would be given to relating them to each other in an abstract way. Science, religion, and art, for instance, are not abstract in their actual practice. They are not practiced in general, they become generalities only

when they are talked about. An ordinary description of a scientific experiment or a religious or artistic experience would likely not be a general one, since it would more likely be a concrete description of a concrete situation. A philosophical treatment of the same, however, would be a more general treatment. As a philosophical treatment it would be relatively general, since various philosophers may choose to deal with the same data in varying degrees of generality. A philosophy has a greater chance for universal acceptance if it is phrased in general statements and if the concepts it uses are presented in their most abstract formulation when they are related to each other in some generic way.

Comprehensive. A universal philosophy will also need to be comprehensive in scope. It must be humanistic in the sense that it deals with all aspects of human life and human experience. It must have a theory of the nature of reality and a theory of its organization, a statement about the nature and proper role of man, and some idea of God. It must also have a theory of knowledge and some suggestion about what can and cannot be known, along with a theory of value that accounts for art, reason, morality, religion, social life, etc. No aspect of human intellectual interest can be left out of it and all the various types of things must either be related to each other in the philosophy or have the potential for being so related on the basis of the principles and general assumptions of the philosophy. Quite obviously, not all philosophers agree to such a broad definition of philosophy and not all of them make any effort to deal with all aspects of human experience. It is our opinion, however, that those philosophies that do so are stronger candidates for being universal philosophies.

Rational. A universal philosophy must also have a definable and well-ordered logic embodied within it and make a strong appeal to reason. We must distinguish between those philosophies based upon reason and those that rely upon it in the development of their metaphysical systems. Those that are based upon reason alone, whose initial presuppositions are very rational ones, are relatively scarce in the history of philosophy; but some do exist. We may also distinguish between those that restrict their metaphysical speculation within the limits of reason and those that suggest the possibility that its presuppositions and basic principles may be extrapolated beyond the limits of logic, in which case the resulting product would be both trans-logical and trans-rational, and also, in the strictist sense, trans-philosophical. By a "rational philosophy" we mean one that appeals to reason in the inner structuring of its metaphysical system, one that moves logically from one assertion to another in the development of its system of thought, regardless of whether or not its basic presupposition or presuppositions are themselves reasonable. An "irrational philosophy" would be one in which there is no appeal to reason or logic in this movement, and, according to our understanding would be a contradiction in terms. But again, philosophers do vary in the degree in which they appeal to reason in the development of their systems, with Aristotle, Spinoza, Descartes and Kant being illustrations of extreme rationalists and Plato, Zen Buddhism, and Kierkegaard being illustrations of weaker rationalists. In our opinion, those philosophies that make a strong appeal to reason are stronger candidates for being universal philosophies than those which do not do so.

Religious. A universal philosophy will also need to be religious in some respect. It must deal with the phenomena of religion in the world, as any philosophy must do so in some way, but it must do more than this. It must take religious meanings seriously and integrate them with all the other meanings that it takes seriously. By a "religious philosophy" we mean one that does not take all religious experience to be an illusion or delusion or some aberrant form of human behaviour and allows a place for it either within or beyond its metaphysical system. More precisely, it is one that is able to deal with religion and religious meanings with the same degree of effectiveness as it does with all the other sorts of meanings with which it deals. We are not suggesting that a philosophy must be religious in order to be a philosophy but rather noting that some are and some are not and that those that are religious have a higher probability of being accepted as universal philosophies. Such acceptance is not necessarily based upon their greater worth as philosophies because they are religious, but is likely the result of a widespread world-wide interest in religion and religious phenomena. This requirement is mainly a practical one.

Clear Terminology. A universal philosophy will need to have concepts that are capable of being understood by most educated people. They should have a certain stability in their meaning but also allow some degree of flexibility in their interpretation and understanding. Although words like "soul," "man," "nature," "good," and "God," are loaded concepts since they have been philosophically enhanced by so many thinkers down through the ages, they still communicate some common meanings to most people. To substitute highly technical definitions for them, as Heidegger and

Whitehead have done, may well serve a good purpose within the intentions of their philosophies, but their resulting philosophies are useful only to those who are willing to play their language games with them. The Classical German philosophers, for example, have a notable predilection for highly specified terminologies and rigidly controlled concepts that make their essays much less delightful to read than the essays of their French counterparts. Philosophers, like scientists, must define their terms and they have every right to do so, but they are not candidates for a more universal acceptance if their primary concepts are highly specialized notions that require stipulative definitions and do not allow some plurality of meaning in their interpretations. Philosophy, after all, is not a science; and it need not be overinfluenced by the methods of science any more than it should be influenced by those used in religion and in art. A universal philosophy, we think, needs to allow for the possibility of multi-dimensional levels of meaning of its basic concepts.

Modest. A universal philosophy should recognize its own limits. It should recognize the general limits of all philosophy and those limitations of thought and experience that are required on the basis of its own presuppositions and its own general principles. No matter how comprehensive it may be in its scope and concepts, it must in some way recognize the limits that must be put upon organized rational life. Even though it may have universal possibilities, it should not proclaim itself as universal, completely adequate, and final. In some way it must allow for myth and mystery in human experience, although this does not necessarily need to be done within its own metaphysics. While respecting logic and reason and seriously



involving them in its own formation and development, it must allow for the possibility of their transcendence — and even for the possibility for its own transcendence as a philosophy.

A universal philosophy should be so designed to allow for its future reformation. All philosophies are necessarily based upon dated concepts, but some concepts are more dated than others. All philosophies are also products of the logic of organization of their times. Thus they need to be continually revised and even reorganized and reformulated as logic and science and a larger compendium of knowledge develop. At issue is the requirement that the philosophy have built into it the possibility of its own reformation. It will soon join the fate of hundreds of other philosophies and be only an anachronism if it does not do so. Surely any philosophy that deifies reason or proclaims itself as a "final philosophy" is a joke.

### III. NEOPLATONISM AS A UNIVERSAL PHILOSOPHY

Neoplatonism is an eclectic form of Platonism that was developed in Rome in the Third Century A. D., some six centuries after the death of Plato. It first began in Egypt with the efforts of Ammonius Saccas and others to revive Platonism as a spiritual form of philosophy that could compete with Epicureanism and Skepticism and the extreme materialism of the Stoics. Its real founder, however, was Plotinus (205-270), one of Ammonius' students who eventually emigrated to Rome where he succeeded in founding both a school and a school of thought during his twenty six year stay from 244 to his death in 270. Neoplatonism is often identified with his

thought as expressed in his only book, the Enneads, but as a school of thought it also includes the views of his immediate associates, Amelius Gentilianus and Porphyry as well those of Proclus (c.409–c.485) and other later interpreters. As a school of thought it has had a direct influence on the development of philosophical theology in Early Christianity, Medieval Judaism, and in Islam, and through its Renaissance interpreters has also been a significant factor in the development of Modern Western European thought and culture. It would not be an overstatement to say that it has been one of the most influential philosophies in the history of the West.

Its significance as a universal philosophy lies in the fact that it was conceived as a universal philosophy, namely, as a form of Platonism that could be relevant to the diversified intellectual needs of the late Roman period. Rome was still a world power at that time but was experiencing considerable internal intellectual unrest as a result of the increasing conflict of the various cultures and philosophies within the empire, a situation very similar to what we are now experiencing in our world at this time. It occurred at the end of more than eight hundred years of intense philosophical speculation within the Classical Greek Philosophy tradition and as such it is both a revised version of Plato and to a lesser degree of that tradition. It is a form of Ancient Greek Philosophy and as such is outmoded in many of its elements, and especially those that relate to Greek Science, but it is also a general philosophy dealing with the larger relationships that hold between the various realms of human experience and the various ways that reality may be conceived, and in this function transcends its Greek origin. Its philosophy of science, philosophy of man, philosophy of God, logic,

ontology, and epistemology have not been outmoded by its Greek Science and are still able to be relevant in the modern world to those who are able to accept its presuppositions about the nature of reality and truth. As a general philosophy it still remains as one of the few major comprehensive philosophical options that have ever been devised.

Essentially, Neoplatonism is a form of Platonism, but it is a more universalized form. It is not the pure Platonism of Plato's Dialogues but a revised and enhanced version embodying some elements of later Pythagorean, Peripatetic, Stoic, and especially Aristotelian thought. Some observers also see elements of Egyptian, Persian, and Indian thought in it as well. Coming at the end of six centuries of criticism of Plato's thought, including the sophisticated criticisms of Plato made by Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Sceptics, Neoplatonism emerged as a corrected version, and one more capable of serving as a universal philosophy. It is hardly the reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle, as some of the early Islamic Neoplatonic Philosophers claimed, but it is at least a highly Aristotelianized Platonism, and is much stronger as a philosophy because of it.

As a matter of fact Neoplatonism has already proved to be a universal philosophy in view of the fact that it already has been utilized in a number of differing cultures and historical settings. At a crucial time in the early development of Christian theology it came to the aid of Christianity by providing a more advanced philosophical analysis of the notion of deity and its necessary relation to the world than that available in Christian thought at the time. Although not Christian itself, its philosophical ruminations about the necessary non-material aspects of deity were not inconsistent with it and

were enthusiastically accepted by various Christian thinkers. It remained as a residual element in the philosophical parts of the thinking of such basic Christian theologians as St. Augustine, Origin, the Cappadocian Fathers, and even St. Thomas Aquinas. It may have had an even greater impact on Western Christianity if the Christians had been able to understand the Christian Neoplatonism of Eriugena. It had no small impact on England in the late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries thought through the writings of the Cambridge Platonists, who were in fact latter day Christian Neoplatonists. Neoplatonism was also a major factor in the development of Byzantine thought and culture and the entire Greek Catholic tradition has a strong affinity with it.

Neoplatonism also came to the aid of Islam, becoming the main tradition in Islamic philosophy through the work of Al-Farabi (c.870-950). His major efforts to adapt Neoplatonism and Islam to each other were preceded by Al-Kindi (c.866.d) who wrote a commentary on the anonymous Neoplatonic work called the Theologia Aristotelis, which was in fact a paraphrase of the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Enneads of Plotinus. The Muslim theologian Avicenna (980-1037) was strongly influenced by the Neoplatonism of Al-Farabi as was also the Spanish Arabic Islamic Philosopher, Averroes (1126-1198). Neoplatonism also has close ties with Islamic mysticism in various contexts, but especially in Sufism.

Neoplatonism has had a much lesser impact upon the development of Jewish thought, but it has had a role to play in it. Around 485 a Palestinian Jew named Marinus succeeded Proclus as the head of the Platonic Academy in Athens, which by this time had become Neoplatonic, and

is likely responsible for introducing the thought of Plotinus into the Medieval Jewish tradition. He may also have had something to do with the mysticism of The Book of Creation, the Sefer Yezirah. The Spanish Jewish philosopher Solomon ibn Gabirol (1020)-1070), also known as Avencebron, shows a heavy Neoplatonic influence in his chief work The Fountain of Life and a pantheistic variety of Jewish Neoplatonism was developed by Abraham ibn Ezra (c.1092-1167) in the early Twelfth Century. It would be fair to say that Neoplatonism has made a contribution to the development of the Jewish Mystical Tradition as expressed in the medieval document, the Kabbalah.

Neoplatonism, of course, has had no influence in the development of any form of Asian thought but it does, nevertheless, have some remarkable affinities with some traditions. Modern Indian scholars have noted similarities between Plotinus and certain Brahmanic and Buddhist thinkers and one Japanese scholar sees a similarity between his thinking and some elements of Japanese Neo-Confucianism and Shinto thought. No great effort has been made to find similarities between Neoplatonism and various other major cultural traditions, but we believe that the potential exists for doing so.

Why do we think this potential exists? It is because Neoplatonism has those characteristics that we judge to be necessary in a universal philosophy. We will now further consider some of them and how they are found in Neoplatonism.

(1) Neoplatonism is a General Philosophy. We have already suggested more than once that Neoplatonism is a general philosophy. It is a philosophy about things in general and how they can be said to be related to

each other. It suggests that most of the relations we make are scientific ones. They are lateral relations, relations in which we relate things of the same general type. Philosophy, however, requires that we do more than define and classify. It requires us to think vertically, to imagine what a thing must be in some higher order of its existence. To take anything seriously is to understand that it is more than it appears to be, to understand that it does belong to some higher order of things and is itself an exhibition of some principles that are greater than it is. It is to understand that a thing by its very existence is significant not only in its lateral relations, but because it also shares in some higher order of being and in a whole network of higher relationships. Thus a thing is not just a thing. It is a part of, and a lesser exhibition of something that is greater and more profound in its significance than it is.

Neoplatonism in its broadest possible conception is an effort to relate all things to all things by showing that each thing can simultaneously have different kinds of reality. That which may appear to be inert in its present observed state may actually be active in another higher or lower level of its being. Essentially, Neoplatonism suggests that all the objects we know are simultaneously bodies, souls, principles, and part of the Divine. To be at all is to be alive in some sense, and hence to be a soul. But souls, as living things, are not independent. They are in some way related to the higher laws of nature, to the larger principles of order that are in effect in the whole universe. Logic demands that even these principles are not independent and free in themselves, but are governed by their relationship to the highest order of reality, which must be independent, free, and possessing

the highest possible degree of internal unity. Neoplatonic metaphysics is all about the various levels of reality and the way things can be related to each other on the various levels. It allows a certain mystery about the being of anything, as Kant, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein do, for even to know a thing well on one level of its existence is not necessarily to know it well on another level.

The generic character of Neoplatonism is to be found in the way it deals with concepts in their more abstract formulation and considers the unseen and more general relations that things have with each other to be their more important ones. Thus, the resulting philosophy is not a careful analysis and description of individual things and their relation to other individual things in the world but is a general description of the general nature and relations of the types of things to which each individual thing belongs. In like manner the general philosophy that it develops is not an accurate and adequate description of reality in its existing state, but only a general statement of the general relations that hold between types of things in their highest generic orders, which Neoplatonism in true Platonic fashion takes to be their most real form of being. Its metaphysical system is not a correct description of nature, but only an architectonic formulation of the way that logic would demand that the various higher types of being must be related to each other. This is why Plotinus in spite of his numerous serious concessions to Aristotle still remains closer to Plato in the main thrust of his philosophy. He still remained a generalist and still held that the highest form of reality must be located in its most abstract form.

The specific relevance of all this to the case for Neoplatonism as a universal philosophy rests upon our earlier suggestion that those philosophies that are only general philosophies are more likely to be acceptable in other cultural traditions. They are more dependent upon logic and less dependent upon science and a particular scientific view of the world and thus are less dated and less threatened by changes in scientific views. They are also less dependent upon the particular philosophical notions of the culture that produced them and are thus less likely to clash with those of other cultures. Furthermore, it is always easier for a specific formulation to adjust to a more general formulation than it is for it to adjust to another specific formulation.

(2) Neoplatonism is a Comprehensive Philosophy. We have already labeled Neoplatonism as an eclectic form of Platonism. As a Hellenistic philosophy in a Roman World it was forced to be eclectic to some extent as were all of the philosophies that were functioning there at the time. Coming at the end of the development of Greek Philosophy it was also forced to take into account all of the criticism that the various philosophers since Plato had hurled against him and also against each other. It was the nature of the case that a later Platonism had to be a broader and more eclectic form. One of the criticisms that had been made of Plato and the Academicians in general was that they were irrelevant. Their philosophies were seen as being too general, too abstract, and too abstruse to be understood by most people. A great interest in having a philosophy of life as opposed to having a general philosophy developed and gave rise to Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Scepticism as philosophies of life. Another factor



that also had to be dealt with was religion. Although both Plato and Aristotle philosophized about religion, they deal with it in a rather academic and even detached way and do not appear to take religious experience as such too seriously. It would probably not be correct to label either of them as religious philosophers. But by the time of Plotinus, religion and religions had become very important factors in human life. Various new religions had come to Rome and added their claims to those made by the old established Greek and Roman forms. The Mystery Religions, both Greek and Persian, had a large following and State Religion was also practiced. Even if he had wished to do so, Plotinus could not possibly have avoided dealing with religion in a more significant way in his new revised Platonism.

As it finally developed, Neoplatonism seems to have almost everything in it. It is a general philosophy in the standard sense. It does have a metaphysics, an epistemology, and an axiology and it relates them to each other. It is very logical and has a well-ordered and well-formed metaphysical system that is of an Aristotelian type even though it is Platonic in content. It does take the claims of both science and religion very seriously and it also has an essentially religious philosophy of life embodied with it. It does not ignore any really important areas of human life and human experience and succeeds in relating rational, scientific, social, artistic, and religious experience to each other in a way that allows each one to tolerate and even enhance the other. (Footnote: One possible important omission might be physical sensations, which are taken to be rather important by most people. Plotinus might have had an even stronger philosophy if he had been able to integrate some of the views of Epicurus

into his system.) Historians of philosophy agree that Neoplatonism is one of the most consistent and comprehensive forms of philosophy that has ever been devised in any historical setting in human history. Its possibility for universality would not be limited by its lack of scope.

(3) Neoplatonism is a Rational Philosophy. As we may have already intimated, the chief methodological difference between the Platonism of Plotinus and the Platonism of Plato is the way they use logic in devising their metaphysical systems. There is no radical difference in their epistemologies. Plotinus follows Plato's view that there are levels of reality and levels of being and that there are different types and levels of knowing corresponding to the levels of being. There is a significant difference in their metaphysics and especially in the way they proceed in devising them. When one reads Plato one comes to the conclusion that an artist is at work. When one reads Plotinus one soon concludes that there is a logician at work. Their difference, we think, is caused by Aristotelian Logic. Plotinus is a logician of an Aristotelian type and he actually uses Aristotelian Logic and some of Aristotle's categories in developing his metaphysical system. Plato's system may be described as a "loose system" based upon a loosely logical progression from general stage to general stage, whereas Plotinus' system may be described as a "tight system" based upon a strictly logical progression from each point to the the next, much in the same way as Spinoza and Descartes do. In short, he takes logical deduction very seriously in forming his metaphysical systems and constantly reasons from one position to another. This is one of the reasons why he is so difficult to read and is

much less entertaining than Plato. He is incorrect in his information sometimes and even inaccurate in his Greek grammar, but he is rarely incorrect in his reasoning. It is his view that philosophy qua philosophy necessarily entails the use of logic, that a metaphysical system as a system is the product of careful reasoning about a certain set of assumptions. He explains that dialectics is the heart of philosophy and its best part. He does take language very seriously but is suspicious of the capacity of specific logical terms to convey the concept they intend adequately. He constantly irritates his readers by using various terms to convey the same concept, and especially those who feel that there should be only one term per concept.

Although Plotinus takes reason very seriously and has produced one of the most closely reasoned metaphysical systems in history, he does not take reason, or at least logic, to be final. He is in the final analysis a mystic, not because he is a confused metaphysician or a confused thinker, as so many mystics are, but because he is able to see that logic and language, and even metaphysics itself has its limits. While pushing reason to its limits he would say that there is more to life than reason. It is not that we should ever elect to be unreasonable or irrational, but rather that there are some aspects of human experience that reason cannot possibly encompass.

(4) Neoplatonism is a Religious Philosophy. Although it would be correct to call Neoplatonism religious, it is only religious in some senses and not in others. The word "religious" has numerous connotations, so many that it would not be possible to be religious in all its senses, and to be religious in some senses rules out being religious in some other senses. Plotinus, himself, was not a formally religious person and would have likely not been

labeled as "religious" by his friends. He did not attend the public sacrifices to the gods, celebrate religious holidays, or participate in the state religious exercises as some of the other professors in his school did. Porphyry reports that he said "The gods must come to me, not I to them." However, he had a religious philosophy of life and was benevolent in his concern for his friends. (Footnote: He managed the estates of a number of orphans, but it is presumed that he got a fee for doing so.) The important point for our concern, however, is that his philosophy is religious in the sense that it takes religious experience seriously as a legitimate form of human experience and accounts for it in his scheme of things. Not only does he have a philosophy of religion, as does any general philosophy, he has one that gives religion and religious experience an important role in human life.

In the strictest sense, his metaphysics is not a religious metaphysics. It is not a metaphysics based upon an ontology that has religious meaning as its basic meaning, as would be the case in the metaphysics of Spinoza and to a lesser degree in the metaphysics of Descartes. He does include religious meaning in his ontology but it is only one among many other types of meaning included. For him, metaphysics is a logical and not a religious operation, as we have suggested earlier. He is a true mystic in that he accounts for religious experience as a trans-metaphysical and supra-rational function. He would have found it to be incongruous and even offensive to involve mysticism in metaphysics. For him there is a legitimate place in life for myth and mystery, but it is not within metaphysics. (Footnote: An interesting point of contrast between Plato and Plotinus is the different role and function they assign to the use of myth.)

It would be correct, however, to say that the epistemology of Plotinus, and of all the Neoplatonists is religious. Plotinus and the other Neoplatonists are all in the tradition of Plato in their epistemologies. They, like Plato, believe that there are higher and lower ways of knowing to correspond to the higher and lower orders of reality. That which is of a higher order of being must be known in a different and higher way of knowing. One knows truths differently from the way one knows bricks and one knows God differently from the way one knows truths. A brick mason may know his bricks very well and still not know the truths about bricks. He may not know how to make bricks or what would make a brick a better brick. It would take a chemist or a physicist or a physical chemist to know such truths and he would have to know bricks in a way of knowing that is different to the way a brick mason knows bricks. The same analogy applies in knowing God. Knowing truths is not knowing God and knowing the truths about God is not knowing God. Plotinus and the Neoplatonists recognized that a change in the knower must occur before he is capable of knowing that which is next higher in the order of being.

It would also be correct to say that the axiology of Plotinus and the Neoplatonists is religious due to the way in which they establish it on the basis of their epistemology. The gist of the matter is that in art, language, morality, and the practice of religion the real quality of the accomplishment depends upon the level of knowing and understanding of the individual involved. Great art require higher awareness of the unity of truth, and logically and ultimately requires an awareness of God. The same applies

in logic, in language, in dialectics, in morality, and in the practice of religion.

Plotinus' notion of "The One," or the ultimate real, that which has no necessary dependence upon anything else for its essential character, is the ultimate object of religious experience in his epistemology. The concept itself, we think, is essentially a necessary logical production in the tradition of Aristotle's "Unmoved Mover," but draws upon the Platonic tradition for its content of meaning. It is a Platonic notion with an Aristotelian twist, as are, indeed, so many important elements of Plotinus' philosophy. In short, Plotinus uses the reality of "The One" as a necessary logical extension of both his epistemology and metaphysics, as the unseen reality that must be the foundation for all phenomena, just as Aristotle's Unmoved Mover is, but he seems to think that the latter concept is not rich enough and enriches it with a merger of the Pythagorean "One" and Plato's "The Good." The resulting notion is thus much richer than the notion of ultimate being or reality in either Plato or Aristotle. (Footnote: His notion of "The One" should be understood in the Pythagorean sense of the base unity of all multiplicities, the one "principle" that contains all principles as inherent within it, — except that it is really is not a principle — and not in the Parmenidean sense of "barrenness of being" or "absolute nothingness." It is no one thing only because it is super-rich — it is in a sense everything.)

Neoplatonism should qualify religiously as a universal philosophy on the grounds that the particular teachings it has about religion and religious experience would not be contradictory to the conception of religious experience found in a large number of religious traditions. As we

have suggested earlier, a philosophy is not likely to have universal acceptance unless it does treat the phenomenon of religion in some serious way. Regardless of whether or not most philosophers take religious experience seriously, most people do; and on pragmatic grounds a philosophy will not be very widely accepted unless it also does so.

Neoplatonism has Clear Terminology. To anyone familiar with the Enneads of Plotinus the idea that Neoplatonism has clear terminology may cause some amusement. In dramatic contrast to the Dialogues of Plato, the book itself is not very easy to read. It is very poorly constructed, contains misspelled words and numerous instances of bad Greek grammar, and does not develop its ideas in an orderly progression. No college composition teacher would give any one of the six enneads or essays a passing grade. Yet the content of what is being said is very rich, like Swiss chocolate, and quite profound. Reading the Enneads requires both patience and endurance. We maintain, however, that Plotinus is clear in the central notions that he uses, not that the notions themselves are clear, but that he eventually succeeds in making them clear by expressing and explaining them in a variety of ways. Plotinus did not believe in the actual univocity of terms, and the concepts he uses, although common ones, are so rich and provocative that it is not easy to settle on just one clear meaning of them. He uses the Greek equivalent terms for "matter," "body," "soul," "mind," "principle," and "spirit," terms that most people know and commonly use, but terms that are capable of quite elaborate philosophical meaning. His concepts are clearer than his terms and he feels free to use a variety of terms to describe the same concept. He uses at various other terms, for example, to refer to "The One,"

terms such as "The Father," "The Good," "The Infinite," "The First," "The Simple," "The Unconditioned," etc. Any philosopher has the problem of making his concepts philosophically clear and cannot risk using ordinary terms in the common usages since they will have already been contaminated with the philosophical meanings of some other philosophy. He has no choice but to redefine his own terms. Some elect to abandon all ordinary philosophical terms and invent entirely new ones of their own in order to insure the purity and consistency of their meaning. Others, including Plotinus, choose to stick with routine terms but provide them with a new and enriched meaning. The terms Plotinus uses are philosophically complex and even difficult, but he does eventually succeed in making them clear through his various ways of explaining them. Anyone who can finish reading all of the Ennead, and very few people have, will have a reasonably clear understanding of Plotinus' concepts.

Another factor in Neoplatonic terminology is that the same concept may have a somewhat different meaning on a different epistemic level. For example, Plotinus maintains a basic distinction between the concepts "body," "matter," "soul," and "nous." The term "body" has a perfectly clear common sense meaning in its normal practical and scientific usage but if the concept is to be given some philosophical meaning it must be tied into something else that has a still higher meaning. Plotinus suggests that a body is really a lower form of a soul, that a body as a body has some life principle or life force within it sustaining and maintaining it as a body, so that in his philosophy it is necessary to understand what a soul is in order



to understand a body. The same situation applies on up the line, so that it is necessary to understand "nous" in order to understand "soul," etc.

Concerning the case that can be made for the clarity of the terminology of Neoplatonism as a contributing factor aiding in its more widespread acceptance as a general philosophy, the point is that Plotinus and the Neoplatonists do succeed in making their complex philosophical terms clear. They do so through a persistent and tedious, and even irritable process of redefinition of concepts at all levels and stages of the development of their system. This, we feel, is a superior procedure to the invention of all new terms that entail highly stipulated definitions and even a new language system. It is one that is much more likely to be accepted by most people.

Neoplatonism is a Modest Philosophy. Although Neoplatonism presents itself as a complete philosophy, it does not claim to be a final one. Neither Plotinus nor any other Neoplatonic philosopher we have read presents his own system as a final one that is adequate to all intellectual needs. Quite the contrary, Plotinus presents his own thought as an effort to be philosophical rather than as philosophy itself and thus remains true to the Platonic tradition of anti-Sophistry. Neoplatonism was born and developed in an intellectual setting that was permeated with higher criticism and debate. The spirit of criticism prevailed in the whole of Later Greek Philosophy and there was no exception to it in Plotinus' Roman philosophical academy. Porphyry tells us that the professors there were not mere sniveling assistants to Plotinus but freely and openly disagreed with him on vital points. Although Porphyry was Plotinus' chief editor, promoter, and biographer he

was also one of his critics. In his own writings he clearly disagreed with Plotinus on a number of crucial points, including even abandoning all of Plotinus' categories and substituting those of Aristotle for them instead, an act that was to create another whole type of Neoplatonism that continued in its ripple effect on through the Middle Ages and to and through St. Thomas. Another senior professor of the school, Amelius Gentelanus, was constantly showing the differences between the views of Plotinus and those of Numenius of Apamea, another late Platonist or semi-Neoplatonist whom he greatly admired. Iamblichus, a student of Porphyry's, returned to his native Syria and founded another school of Neoplatonism that was notably deviant from the views of Plotinus and Porphyry. A hundred years later Proclus made an even more logically rigid reformulation of Neoplatonic metaphysics, one that Hegel greatly admired and judged to be much superior to the metaphysics of Plotinus. Generally speaking, it may be said that all the later Neoplatonists deviated from Plotinus and that all the Neoplatonists are really Neo-Neoplatonists. Plotinus himself could be labeled a "Revisionist Platonist" since his own philosophy is a variation on a theme by Plato.

Perhaps the revisionist mentality which we find in the Neoplatonists is endemic to Neoplatonism itself and can be found in its rather "low" conception of the nature and role of philosophy in life. Contrary to the Christians, who have always been willing to make as much use as possible of philosophy without actually doing it themselves, the Neoplatonists do make philosophy essential to salvation. It is one of the steps through which one must go on the upward path toward the attainment of personal salvation. But the important point is that they see it as only one of

the steps, one among others, and not as enlightenment itself. They see coming up with a viable metaphysics and a settled philosophy to be a most worthwhile and even most necessary thing to do, but they do not see philosophy as the end of human life and human meaning. Like the Christians, they see it is only a means to accomplishing something more important.

To be a bit more specific, Plotinus saw the production of a philosophy to be the result of the practice of dialectics, namely, the use of logic to show how the various necessary categories of thought might be related to each other. A philosophy is a proposal of how being may be seen to be unified. It is a very important human activity and among the most noble functions of mankind, but in any given case it is still only a proposal and nothing more. It would be ludicrous to propose that any given finished proposal would be final, and suitable for all people in all times. No matter how complete and adequate it may be for those for whom it was produced, that particular proposal will be dated and another proposal will have to be made again to take into consideration all the new knowledge that has become available in the meanwhile and all the newer ways of viewing things. Hopefully, the new proposal may need to be only a revision since not everything will need to be changed, only that which can not be held any longer in view of an increase in our knowledge and understanding of the world. In short, Plotinus' view is that philosophy is an ongoing human enterprise and not a finished product that can be marketed forever as finished. He would have agreed with Tennyson that "our little systems have their day."

It would appear to us that this non-final character of Neoplatonic Philosophy would make it easier to be accepted by persons in a variety of cultures. It is an optimistic and constructive way of thinking that does allow the possibility of philosophy. After all, it developed as an alternative to hedonism and skepticism. It is only skeptical about the finality of philosophy.

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