

Binghamton University

The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB)

The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter

4-1990

Plotinus on Freedom, Creativity and the One

Laura Westra

Auburn University, lwestra@interlog.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp>



Part of the [Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons](#), [Ancient Philosophy Commons](#), and the [History of Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Westra, Laura, "Plotinus on Freedom, Creativity and the One" (1990). *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter*. 206.

<https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp/206>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter by an authorized administrator of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

Westra N.O. 90
CD

FREEDOM AND CREATIVITY IN PLOTINUS

Laura Westra
SAGP Central 1990

Introduction

In this paper I want to show the import and the centrality of Freedom as Creativity in the philosophy of Plotinus. I will only say a little about Freedom's cardinal role and centrality in his thought, as I defend that position at length in my forthcoming book on the topic (and on Enneads 6.8). Instead, I will show the link between Freedom and Creativity in Section 1, then speak of Creativity as a human good and ideal when understood in the Plotinian sense, touching also upon the light it sheds on general problem of philosophy (Section 2); and finally, of cosmic creativity and the parallels between Plotinus' thought on the topic and some areas of the new physics (Section 3).

Plotinus speaks of Freedom primarily in Enneads 6.8, the treatise on Free Will of the One. According to the Plotinian Concordance, there are only another few passages, throughout the Enneads, where Plotinus discusses "freedom" directly.¹⁾ None of these other instances contradicts the main doctrine outlined in 6.8, and the latter is perfectly consistent with the rest of the Enneads as a whole. It is clear that I can only affirm this at this time, and not defend my contention as I have done elsewhere, with copious textual evidence. At any rate, the importance of this treatise (i.e. Enneads 6.8.) cannot be overemphasized. I have also learned a great deal about Plotinus' thought in this regard from the late Fr. Vincenzo Cilento,²⁾ particularly from some of the articles in the collected papers, titled Saggi su Plotino.²⁾

Section 1 - Freedom and Contemplation as Creativity

Once again, I believe that the central notion of Plotinus' philosophy is "freedom," understood in his own unique, multifaceted way. Cilento also believed this, and he discovered no less than ten separate though interconnected senses of "freedom" in the Enneads.³⁾ It might be useful to state briefly what these are, so that "freedom as creativity" might be understood in context. They are, 1) Freedom as Contemplation, representing our upward path in its two converging aspects--the explanatory and the purifying power of freedom; these two paths will be present in 2) Freedom as Salvation, then as 3) Freedom: Genius, Ease of Life, or the essential component of man, perhaps this can be understood as "daimon"; 4) Freedom as explanatory principle (this time in a Universal sense), will lead to 5) Freedom as Conclusion/Culmination of the upward path. At that pinnacle, it is 6) Freedom as the Good, and 7) Freedom as the One's Nature and 8) Freedom as Unity. It is also 9) Freedom as Root of Existence and, finally, 10) Freedom as Creation. Here we come full circle, for it is both the end and the starting point, the alpha and the omega of the Plotinian cycle. It is mainly with the latter sense that I will be concerned in this paper.

Freedom as Creation is the highest meaning of freedom in its identification with the One, as He engenders the Universe in all its complexity. From our standpoint instead, keeping in mind Plotinus' advice, and the description of the highest goal of a human being, "alone to the Alone," Freedom as Absolute Solitude appears to be the most important aspect. The outcome of our journey of ascent is to proceed through virtue, to Oneness. Virtue, in turn, consists in progressively "freeing" oneself so that--at journey's end--solitude and freedom coincide.

The truly creative power of soul and--in general--of the three Primary Hypostases, their "dynamis", is willed (Enn. 5.1.2 and 5.3.16.2-3). Cilento terms contemplation, at one point, as "spontaneous creation." We must bear in mind the unavoidable identification of freedom and the will, as outlined by Plotinus in 6.8 (as applied to both

ourselves and--in another way--to the One). We must also bear in mind the further link between the will and intelligence in which alone, rather than in action or circumstances, our freedom manifests itself, --then we shall see that the activity of freedom is "contemplative intelligence."

As in all other such cases, we need to understand "intelligence" in a different way when it refers to the One. In the case of His Contemplation, we can say that it is the source of the latter's creative, tireless power: Cilento calls it "infaticabile potenza," Armstrong, "overwhelming power."⁴⁾ It is also the source of intelligence at the level of Nous, and below it. Nous possesses all life and intelligence, virtue of its participation in the power of the One. In his discussion of intellect, Plotinus says, "...he is not satisfied with the contemplation of his father, but aspires to--we might say--the active power with which his grandfather establishes reality in being" (Enn. 5.5.3.23-25).

Thus "contemplation" which is free, that is, not according to form plan or design at the level of the One, encompasses creative, active power, manifesting the link with will/freedom, on one hand, and on the other hand, the "procession" metaphor of the King and the "lesser rulers going before it," which occurs in the chapter already cited (5.5.3.9-12). It is here that the connection between contemplation and freedom is to be found. At the apex of the Plotinian metaphysical universe, is the One, Absolute Freedom and Solitude, Will and effortless creativity: these are all simply ways of attempting to understand his total and unique oneness. Our journey of ascent and highest destiny, is that of progressive unification, yet all of the above concepts acquire different meanings when applied to us.

Our freedom is by no means absolute; it is the carefully cultivated and deliberately fought for understanding that for "us" (our upper soul), there is but "One" choice. Our solitude is won through the effort to learn to recognize the folly of easy involvement in our own fortunes, good or bad, or in those of anyone else: in this way, freedom and solitude grow apiece. They coincide as we free ourselves "from lure" (2.3.9.27); Cilento says, the soul becomes "libera dall'inganno." It is only at that stage that we can invoke the One, "not by words," but by leaning toward Him, "alone to the Alone" (5.1.6.11). Solitude, like freedom, has many faces: only in the One, are the two uniquely one. In Him, solitude implies no lack, it is only the manifestation of a multifaceted simplicity.

In us, the liberating journey of increased true self-awareness in regard to our Source gradually removes the hard shell of self-willing, isolating individuality. The paradox then is that a true understanding of "along to the Alone" discloses our intimate kinship with our world. Armstrong says: "...we may....begin to feel again the need for some sense of unity with our world and not be content to stand apart from it, isolated and superior thinking beings over against a mass of brute matter in which there is no living thought..."⁵⁾ Our understanding then, does not lead to what would amount to human arrogance in a self-conscious stance of inappropriate self-sufficiency, but rather a true grasp of cosmic holiness and wholeness, the precursor to the kind of participation in Being that will allow Aquinas to posit an intimate link between human nature and the "actus purus." Therefore, although freedom as the One is not the same thing as freedom, progressively actualized in the self, we can still say that freedom as unity indicates the oneness we always possessed, but only understood as we became truly free. Freedom is thus the beginning and the end. It is what the One is, and therefore

it is the root of existence as well as the culmination of our re-ascent. Every paradoxical aspect of the thinking of Plotinus is essentially clarified and incorporated in yet another metaphysical cornerstone of the philosophical edifice he has erected.

Freedom has now been viewed essentially as culmination, final goal, good and unity. Yet it would be a mistake to regard it as final in the sense of static. Perhaps the most important aspect of freedom becomes manifest when we reach its utmost limit, namely that the "limit" imposes no limitation on something that is essentially outflowing: "No more than in the circle are the lines or circumference to be identified with that centre which is the source of both: radii and circle are images given forth by indwelling power and as products of a certain vigour, not cut off from it" (6.8.18). Freedom is the source and the power: "...it generates Intellectual Principle by its sheer wealth" (6.8.18). It is the cause of the cause and the "root of existence." In yet another paradox, the One is the ultimate in development, even though its power reveals "the development of the undeveloped" (6.8.18). As a "self-presence, issuing from Himself," the One is in a sense, its own first creation: it is "self-springing" (6.8.15). Plotinus explains: "...it is like the principle and ground of some vast tree of rational life" (6.8.15).

We need to regard freedom as the One, as a continuously eternally springing source. The outer limit of being is not nothing: there is no end, no final point. What we see in Plotinus is an eternally flowing circle. The last and first meaning of freedom, then, is "creative power," both the root and the final aim of existence. The One's "deliberation (boulesis) is his ousia. McKenna translates: "...God and will were primarily identical" (6.8.21). And, as the highest activity is not practical, for Plotinus, but contemplative, not chance, but the One's creative contemplation constitute the Source.

Section Two - Freedom as Creativity: a Human Ideal

It is not difficult to appeal to any number of sources and argue for freedom's role as divine (in a non-metaphorical, literal sense). This is the way Plotinus is read by a number of commentators, who view him as a precursor of Christianity, and value him accordingly. But if we understand freedom as creativity in a Christian sense, we need to position at least a partial identification of the One with God of the great monotheistic religions.

In a recent paper read at a symposium on Creativity, William Desmond terms this reading of creativity the "monarchical view," which he ascribes primarily to Aquinas. This view entails "creation ex nihilo": "...creativity names an unconditional origination, the real origination of the essentially other or new; to God alone belongs this radical act."⁶⁾ He contrasts this view with the "aristocratic view of creativity" proposed by Nietzsche, engendered by his hatred of the "flattening effect of modern democracy." Yet--he adds--his emphasis has been taken up, not by the few, but by the many." If the "creator was to be, not mean," if creativity as an ideal implies that everyone has to be "creative, absolutely original, unique," then everyone is "absolutely the same." Trivial forms of so-called creativity reign ("creative life-styles," "creative budgeting" and the like), but genuine creativity vanishes precisely in this common, relentless pursuit.⁷⁾

In the next section, we will see that for Plotinus creativity could be said to exist throughout the universe, in various degrees, and that this accords with recent discoveries in both physics and biology. For now, I would like to consider two

questions. First, whether creativity can be understood in a non-religious sense, and still retain his primacy as an ideal in a human sense, while fitting to some extent within Plotinus' own views. Second, I will argue that human creativity shows the key to solving the conflict between viewing only certain aspects of human knowledge as real and respectable (those connected with the sciences), and others as "soft," not quite knowledge in its proper sense (e.g. philosophy, religion, the arts).

On the first point, it seems clear that while Free Creativity might conceivably define the divine, it can also characterize the highest capacity we find in a human being, and it is one of the very few human activities that is universally admired and approved of. Here I am not expressing a value judgment which is solely tied to an Aristotelian understanding of contemplation, or rather, of contemplative reason in human beings. Nor am I only referring to the popular admiration for the "new" which is often inappropriate, as Desmond suggest, but also to the fact that in art, music, literature, indeed, in all fields of cultural endeavour, along with the originality requirement applied to doctoral dissertations and scholarly publications, the admiration and prizes showered upon new discoveries--all of this seems to indicate that free creativity is indeed taken to be a great value.

At this point I pause to raise the question how freedom and creativity can be joined. Hausman, for instance, speaks of "spontaneity" rather than "freedom." There are good reasons for regarding the two as closely related. Hausman's procedure is to examine instances of "radical novelty" in order to discover their nature. Among the characteristics of such novelty is a lack of conscious direction on the part of the would-be creator. The creative act is usually preceded by a long period of preparation; then the task at hand is forgotten; finally there is a "sudden illumination."⁸⁾ Hausman appeals to Darwin and suggest that "creative achievement" entails "Novelty Proper," although he also throws in "value" as a requirement: "In short, Novelty Proper implies spontaneity and, if value is present, creativity."⁹⁾

In art, literature and the sciences, the combination of Novelty Proper with spontaneity (I would prefer to call it freedom) may manifest a leap ahead of the tradition or may even "initiate" a new tradition that is discontinuous with the time, place and background from which the novelty has arisen. "Creativity includes an element of discovery and an element of control. Thus it is neither the production of what was familiar, nor simply the discovery of what was unfamiliar."¹⁰⁾ Does the "control" aspect eliminate the possibility of equating spontaneity with freedom? I think this not the case. The creative struggle is not limited to any specifics to which it must conform: "...an artist struggles to effect something the exact character of which he does not envisage." Yet he does know when he has reached his goal -- or some satisfactory approximation of it. Hence the only criterion which might exert "control" over both creative process and the final created effect would appear to be the value that is sought, achieved and recognized.¹¹⁾ Hausman adds that many of the difficult questions that arise in this context "can only be answered in the context of a comprehensive theory, an ontology and a value theory that does justice to radical creativity."¹²⁾ It seems to me that Plotinus' doctrine even with its total lack of concern for human creativity (at least in its artistic and scientific aspects) is just such a "comprehensive theory."

If it is granted that creativity is indeed a great, or even the greatest human value, especially if it is understood, as Plotinus would, as essentially "good," we can view it as separate from the religious understanding of the concept, without thereby seeing a conflict between the two. Further, turning now to the second point intended to explore, the notion of creativity so understood, helps reconcile the alleged difference between the so-called "soft" disciplines, such as philosophy and religious thought, and the "hard" disciplines, such as the sciences. It is undeniable that the current cultural and social climate showers scientific work and research with an unprecedented awe and respect. Such attitudes no doubt originated in a healthy respect for the dignity of unaided human reason and a recognition for the value of objectivity and experimentation. But it has since "progressed" to the point where Objectivity and Experimentation have replaced the unquestionable and unquestioned idols they were originally intended to refute.

This prevailing "scientific model" or measure of all things, in fact tries to reduce philosophy to what is logically or empirically provable: but this criterion or standard of philosophical legitimacy is not internally required. Instead, we should note that not all sciences are alike in method, procedures and aims. Neither is there anything intrinsically better or superior about any specific "hard science," e.g. physics, according to some. As we shall see in the next section, even this claim is now severely disputed by many, as indeterminacy and unpredictability are present in quantum physics, for instance. The most serious question raised in connection with philosophical argumentation (and with religious one as well) is that of verifiability. All philosophical argumentation proceeds according to logic, but both principles and conclusions sometimes turn out to be unverifiable in the ordinary sense of the term, and also unverifiable within the limits proposed by other sciences. And while sciences recognize that logical principles cannot be verified by experiment or observation, the same license is not extended to either conclusions or first principles, for the status claimed for them is more than merely logical.

It is my contention that creative liberty in its human instantiations—as it manifests itself through totally original scientific discoveries or through artistic, literary, musical, or philosophical work that deserve to be called great—bridges the perceived gulf between: (a) scientifically verifiable conclusions, and (b) conclusions that are not scientifically verifiable, together with the principles by which they unfold or come to be. Those who regard the notion of creative freedom as interchangeable with that of divine existence posit it as signifying absolute power and goodness—something ultimately ineffable and beyond human comprehension. No one regards human creativity as either omnipotent or totally good. (Later I will return to the question of creativity in relation to this issue.) The intractability of the concept (and fact) of human free, creative originality applies to work in all the sciences, arts and disciplines, as does the fact that each occurrence of creativity gives rise to wonder and awe within us. The marvelous achievements of a Mozart, a Leonardo, an Einstein, or a Plato are all equally incomprehensible to us, since they are different in kind from even the most praiseworthy activity of people who are limited to understanding, following and perhaps duplicating some or all of the steps involved in these exceptional achievements.

What should give rise to even greater amazement, perhaps, is the fact that even the thinkers and artists themselves are baffled by the gratuitous final act of intuition or imagination that guarantees them a place apart from the general run of humanity. In a

letter, Mozart tells us how ideas for his musical compositions came to him: "...waking after a good meal, or during the night when I cannot sleep, it is on such occasions that my ideas flow best and most abundantly. Whence and how they come, I know not, nor can I force them." Mozart also writes: "...provided I am not disturbed, my subject enlarges itself, becomes methodized and defined, and the whole, though it be long, stands almost complete in my mind so that I can survey it...at a glance."¹³⁾

The conditions that precede a discovery or a freely creative act include knowledge or preparation that does not differ from the sort of preparation we all undergo in order to master a subject. But from that point on, the creative individual is no longer bound to previously mastered specifics or to any methodology whatever. The description of free creation we find in Mozart's letter does not really differ from a similar occasion described by Poincare, who tells us how he arrived at final, original mathematical insights. After working for a long time to reach a conclusion about a specific mathematical question, an idea came to him under unexpected circumstances. At the time he was taking a trip connected with a geological expedition: "The changes of travel made me forget my mathematical work. Having reached Coutances, we entered an omnibus to go someplace or other. At the moment when I put my foot on the step the idea came to me, without having anything in my former thoughts seeming to have paved the way for it, that the transformations I had used to define the Fuchsian function were identical with those of non-Euclidian geometry."¹⁴⁾ Poincare could not explain how this insight came to him, but what is clear is that mathematical creative insight "does not consist in making new combinations with mathematical entities already known," for if this were the case, almost anyone willing to devote enough time to the enterprise would be capable of achieving such creative heights--and this is just not so. Furthermore, Poincare adds that it is not entirely true that "to invent is to choose." Invention is not choice among an infinite number of "sample" answers. When the idea comes, it is characterized by "brevity, suddenness, and immediate certainty."¹⁵⁾ Appealing to a choice made from among many possibilities does not, then, even being to answer the principal question, namely, why this particular choice, and how does one arrive at it? The answer, not surprisingly, is that no one knows--not even those who actually have the experience.

The significant point as far as the act of creative freedom is concerned, then, is that it is always awesome, marvelous, ineffable, and impossible to predict, explain or analyze. It makes no difference whether the "experience" concerns philosophical conclusions, religious or even mystical experiences and intuitions, scientific discoveries, or artistic insight. The leading figures in the sciences, arts and humanities undergo basically the same experience, and neither the artist nor the mathematician can explain it. The fact that a given discipline is more exact does not mean that it has more exact answers to this question.

On the other hand, whereas the scientist and the mathematician can verify their sudden, creative intuition through experiment, neither the philosopher nor the artist can do so. (Yet we might say that the genius of figures like Plato and Mozart is eventually "verified" in some sense, via the judgments made by many people over a long period of time.) In this sense, creative freedom can be regarded as giving rise to what is highest in human achievement, to the best that beings can do in almost any field. The experience is also of such a nature that it reunites different disciplines--at least through the highest experiences of those who excel.

At this point someone might object that since the experience is indefinable, there is no solid ground for such a claim. If something cannot be exhaustively defined, it is hard to decide with any certainty what it is really like. And then it will be equally hard to affirm that two such indefinable experiences are like one another. For example, the claims made by the mystic are almost indefinable if we require a public demonstration of their actuality. And if this is so, it will be difficult to defend the claim that all mystical experiences are not the same, that they do not reflect "an underlying similarity which transcends cultural and religious diversity," in the sense that even if the various descriptions of the mystics are culturally bound, "their experience is not."¹⁶ Katz discusses this problem in detail and gives many examples. He concludes that "there are no pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences." Thus, even if we could be sure that all mystical experiences are experiences of the same X, Katz argues, they are always necessarily mediated through the beliefs, preparation, goals and background of Mystic A or Mystic B.

Even if we agree with this assessment, what remains constant is the existence of certain preparations, conditions and expressions of mystical experience. These experiences are like acts of free creative intuition in that they are intrinsically indefinable and ineffable. I believe we could draw a parallel here and say that all acts of free, creative intuition are mediated through the individual preparation and also the methodologies required by the specific sciences and arts practiced by these exceptional individuals. In other words, just as a Hindu or a Sufi mystic will have only Hindu or Sufi mystical experiences, so an artist is not likely to reach a freely creative conclusion in mathematics, any more than a scientist is apt to discover the ultimate symphony or sonata.

To sum up, my claim is that individuals who are so far "above" or different from others with the same calling that they can reach a moment of free creativity of the sort I have sketched, will indeed have different experiences, but they will all be alike in that they can accomplish the feat of going beyond discursive, argumentative reason. They do so through a sudden, freely creative act which, while different in each and every one of them, still serves to distinguish their achievement from what the rest of us are able to attain. There is a certain amount of commonness in the form and the conditions of the creative act itself, and also in terms of the formal, laborious preparations that are required in all cases; in virtue of this commonness, we can describe the freely creative act as basically alike in all cases.

If this claim can be accepted, the free act of creativity bridges the gap between different methodologies that are appropriate to the different disciplines. This would then indicate, first, that the alleged difference between philosophical and religious thought do not extend to the highest instances of each, and second, that even the alleged differences between "softer" and "hard" disciplines falls away at this level.

A further point needs examination. I have repeatedly characterized Creative Freedom not just as a possible first principle (or even a religious first principle) but also as the highest value in purely human terms. Even if it should be granted that all the different methodologies and preparations (whether in the sciences or the humanities) represent necessary conditions for the freely creative act, they are not sufficient by themselves to achieve it. The final act is so rare and wonder-full that we view it as the ultimate in human achievement. Yet this view is open to a serious objection.

If we define the ultimate in human freedom as the freely creative act, with its components of originality, highest quality of content within the specific discipline, and sudden intuitive discovery, are we not viewing it purely formal terms? What we have in mind, presumably, are examples like great works of art or the achievements of Nobel Prize winners, but is there anything in our account that would require that the achievement be something good? Could we not, in principle, declare that an especially original mass murderer or exterminator also transcends general human abilities? Is it possible that Eichmann's grandiose ideas for genocide came to him in a way similar to the way intuitions struck Mozart or Einstein?¹⁷⁾

What I am suggesting at this point is not only that a marvelous human invention or discovery can be used afterwards for nefarious purposes by either its originator or other people who have access to it (this is an obvious truism), but also that it might be possible to reach the highest pinnacle of creativity when spurred by an absolute evil goal or an evil of the greatest magnitude. If we look at the description of the creative act and of the experiences leading up to it, we see that they lend themselves equally well--in principle--to evil free creation. (We should not be misled by the fact that the examples are always chosen from people who made highly positive contributions to the welfare of mankind.)

It is at this point that the Plotinian understanding of Freedom as the Good can be reintroduced in order to formulate an answer to this difficulty: it is only when we use Freedom (the Good) as Creativity that we can escape a specific or generally religious understanding of creativity--if that is indeed our desire--while retaining goodness as a necessary component. As I have shown, "evil freedom" is a contradiction in terms for Plotinus: if an act is evil, it cannot be free, and vice versa. There is nothing marvelous or wonderful about Eichmann's achievements when they are viewed from this perspective. For Plotinus such "achievements" would instead represent a manifestation of utter un-freedom and a lack of reason; they would signal a complete misunderstanding of the world as a whole, and also of our place and function within it.

Therefore, although the notion of value is implicit in our judgments of freely creative originality (regardless of whether they pertain to scientists, artists or philosophers), there appears to be nothing intrinsically good about a creative act as such--unless, of course, we understand creativity in the Plotinian sense, a sense that explicitly includes value as ultimate and as part of a cohesive worldview. And so, even if we should reach the conclusion that the concept of a freely creative act is a morally neutral notion (unless we qualify it in terms of some value we import in order to be able to regard it as the highest human achievement), we no longer have to add any qualification after we have understood it in Plotinian terms.

Creative freedom can therefore be regarded as bridging the alleged gap between the "hard" sciences and the humanities. This it does through a shared, ultimate experience underlying creativity in these two domains. It can also help overcome the perceived conflict between religion and philosophy, which is an instance of the same species of difficulty as the one between the sciences and the humanities. Creative freedom gives rise to a freely creative intuition, an act that is vastly different from the intuitive capacity we employ and manifest in general in our life and which shares with that act its characteristic nature as non-discursive, non-procedural and indefinable.

Bambrough, for instance, analyzes the procedure we use to follow a step-by-step demonstration and shows that the demonstrative validity of each step along the way is grasped in an essentially intuitive manner: "it is not by any procedure that we know each step is sound."¹⁸⁾ Bambrough acknowledges that "philosophers become quarrelsome when some in their number suggest that in morals and criticism, as well as in mathematics and logic, there are some things that can be known without proof and can serve as the basis of proof and argument."¹⁹⁾ His main claim is that the limitations present in words and expression, which are attested to by those who deal primarily in words, such as poets (he cites T. S. Eliot as an example), do not point to a corresponding non-existence of the entities which the words strive--more or less successfully--to refer to. In some cases, the fact that a precise definition is not available does not indicate that we are confronted with a non-entity. In a similar vein, Hausman, when discussing creativity and the "fundamental paradox" and intelligibility, cites the example of a piece of music. Even if the music is understood via the musical pattern it manifests and is analyzed in terms of "repeated melodies, harmonic support... [and] qualities correlated with emotions and extra-musical ideas," the piece we listen to ultimately "is not exhausted by this kind of intelligibility."²⁰⁾ Likewise, the absence of a rational explanation or definition for a general principle does not indicate lack on our part--and thereby also a false belief. The mystery of the holy sometimes best expressed by silence, and so Bambrough observes: "There is indefinitely wide scope, and not only in philosophy, for the inarticulate understanding that the philosopher denies or demeans. And not only the philosophers."²¹⁾ He concludes that non-procedural intuition includes those things that deserve to be called the foundations or ultimate grounds of the rest of our knowledge.

My claim is that while Bambrough is correct in arguing for "intuition" as the common denominator in all life experience and knowledge, Plotinus' notion of Freedom as Creative Value²²⁾ unites the highest supernoetic experience (an experience that is beyond discursive rationality) attainable by human beings, even if they attain it only rarely. The fact that it is indescribable and ineffable and remains stubbornly opaque to any human effort to grasp its essential nature should not count against either its existence or its value. It should, however, spur further interest,--and also promote research into this question that has puzzled, awed and intrigued human beings for centuries.

Section Three - Cosmic Creativity in Plotinus and Some New Scientific Discoveries.

We have now arrived at the last, but perhaps primary aspect of creativity: its cosmic aspect in Plotinus, viewed against the background of today's science, particularly the new physics. All creativity in Plotinus is centered in the One: He is the Source from which Nous comes, the Soul, followed by Souls, and the rest of the universe. It is Absolute Simplicity, engendering effortlessly the greatest multiplicity; yet the stamp of Nous--so to speak--the forming of Intelligence cannot be denied to the whole Universe and everything within it. Plotinus says, "...but now let us talk about the earth itself, and trees, and plants in general, and ask what their contemplation is, and how we can relate what the earth makes and produces to its activity of contemplation..." (Enn. 3.8.2. 18-23). This, in some sense, underlies Plotinus' argument against the Gnostics (2.9), in fact, Plotinus' battle against what Cilento terms the "two adversaries, the old and the new," referring not only to the Gnostics' "chance" but also to Aristotle's "Thought thinking itself," neither which Plotinus accepts.²³⁾ In regard to the One, the argument

is simple: what majesty could one possibly ascribe to an entity engendered by chance? A thing of chance excludes reasons and reason itself from its existence. Plotinus says, "Such a statement is untrue to its subject, and introduces much difficulty." (Enn. 6.8.7). Moreover, if we cannot locate the principle of free will in the First, in what sense could it possibly be applied to us? Since the One is the Source of whatever we have and are, we cannot ascribe freewill to ourselves, while denying it to Him. Nor can we say that the One "acts in accordance with its being" (6.8.7), for that would make His nature a prior, thus a superior entity. The One would then no longer be the First, but would simply follow upon it, which would be a contradiction in terms. Moreover, this would also introduce an inappropriate duality between the One and His Being.

The second "adversary" is denied by Plotinus through his denial of knowledge to the One. The One requires neither will nor knowledge (as we, for instance, do), since neither multiplicity nor choices exist at that level. There is nothing for Him to transcend, to will Himself away from, to choose: as Aristotle said, long before Plotinus, nature makes nothing in vain, thus for the One to possess our sort of will and knowledge would be pointless, even if it were possible. Plotinus maintains: "Conscious awareness, in fact is likely to enfeeble the very activities of which there is consciousness...only when they are alone are they pure and more genuinely active and living" (1.4.10.30-34). Therefore, something that is Pure Act and Pure Virtuality cannot be dimmed by such obfuscation. Yet he is--in some sense--awake to Himself, since there is nothing else for Him to be awake to, and eternally so: "a waking without an awakener, and eternal awakening and a supra-Intellection" (6.8.16; McKenna).

Therefore Freedom and Will are not only present in, but identical with, the One, although neither planning nor design are to be found in Him. He creates not as He is, but simply as "generating power" (to en dunamis panton): "life and thought and all things come from the One, because that Good is not one of all things, for this is how all things come from Him, because he is not confined to any shape. That One is alone: if He was all things, he would be numbered among beings. For this reason that One is none of things in Intellect, but all things come from Him" (5.1.5.18-23; Armstrong).

We cannot expect to understand either clearly or a lot of a First Principle, or even to raise too many questions: negative predication is best, though unclear, and whenever we choose to use concepts positively, they must be prefaced--at least in our mind--by "as if." In chapter 15 of Enneads 6.8, as we saw earlier, Plotinus compares the One to the roots of an immense tree, the very source of all reason and beauty. In chapter 16, the picture becomes progressively clearer. His is not "everywhere"; the "everywhere" is in Him--in fact, it is Him. All things surround Him and crown Him (Enn. 6.8.16.10-12). What remains positive, is that chance is not and cannot be what brings about the universe, and neither in intellection, at least not as far as the Primary Source is concerned. Trouillard explains that the One simply confers the power to generate intelligence on the second Hypostasis: both Being and Nous are "first-born" (5.2.1.7), but somehow the a-noetic One can confer noetic properties. Nous, however, sees "without thought" (6.7.16.14). Its thought, which originates from the Source, is "non-thought, richer than thought itself" (6.7.35.30). This is a "contact" understanding of Nous not unlike the one suggested by Von Fritz.²⁴ Yet the paradox of infusing intelligence without possessing it is not the only one found in the One. As mentioned, He also represents "radical freedom" and "structure," with the latter understood as freely chosen

and self-originating. Trouillard suggests that he exercises the former by imposing the latter.²⁵⁾

The order His creation manifests is caused by His design and His providence. In chapter 17 Plotinus argues that He willed and planned the order that testifies to us of providence in the universe. Thus he reaffirms that it is not by chance that the First Principle is and acts. Yet we still face the perplexity of how the One can confer properties He does not Himself possess. Only Beauty, Goodness and Freedom--albeit understood in a different sense when applied to the One--seem to escape when we consider this dilemma, for they can be found in the universe even though they exist primarily in the One. As we saw, Being, Intellection, self-mastery (properly speaking), and simple freedom of choice are not in the One. Providentially designed order appears to belong to the second group (i.e. qualities that are not in the One), while Providence appears to be There, but only as a source of its actual application.

Once again Plotinus' main interest appears to be in refuting any possibility of "chance happening" being predicated of the One, which was also what he argued against in his treatise opposing the Gnostics (Enn. 2.9). It is not completely clear why certain properties or characteristics can be in the One, whereas others are presented as though their existence in the world rules out their presence in the One. The only plausible explanation that occurs to me is that Freedom, Beauty and Good may be understood in a way that does not import duality into the One, whereas the others cannot. At least we have seen Plotinus arguing against the introduction of duality for every single concept he admits into the One.

Perhaps we are falling into the trap of requiring and seeking too much clarification. We need to remember the warning Plotinus has sounded: leave Him in His infinite depth. That which follows upon Him is enough to embrace the totality of what He is, and enough for us to try and comprehend. A circumference draws its properties from its center: in this sense He "embraces and measures all things" (6.8.18.4-5). But in another sense, all things exhibit only "traces" of His quiet power (6.8.18.16-18).

In the final analysis we must admit that words fail us. We need to "see" Him (6.8.19.3-5) and abandon language with its failures and imprecisions. We understand, and we recognize His power, a power that does not even create according to an essence: it is "operating power." The only thing we can surely attest to is pure freedom, which is indeed the "essence" according to which He freely creates Himself and everything that is. At the supreme pinnacle He is totally free and alone and is the only example of "being freely oneself" that we can be aware of. Every other entity in the world is both itself and other simultaneously (6.8.21.30-33).

In the One, the Greek notion of individuality and self-determination, with all its nuances and interconnected meanings is stretched to its utmost limit for the first time. The result is the concept of absolute, infinite Freedom.

When we leave the ambit of Greek, Hellenistic or even--in general--of the history of philosophy, it is not easy to speak seriously of "creativity" or "creation" in a non-human sense, outside a strictly religious context. Plotinus' own view of creation of the universe, both of the way it came to be and the way it functions, has no claim to scientific verifiability and no interest in that aspect of the question at all. Now we have

seen to what extent the human meaning of "free creativity" fits within the Plotinian scenario and in turn helps to illuminate some other philosophical problems, the cosmic aspect of the same question should be looked at from the same, non-historical context.

Two dangers threaten such an enterprise; first, that of using Plotinian terms equivocally, that is, in a sense which goes beyond the specific, technical meaning they acquire within his thought. Second, that of reading Plotinus back illegitimately and anachronistically in some modern theory. Perhaps the two problems are really one and the same. At any rate, I will simply show how some of the new insights in physics and biology re-echo some of the metaphysical principles and concepts in Plotinus.

The first point worth noting is that in our effort to understand the coming to be of the universe, it is necessary to learn once again to look at it as purposeful and holistic (in an almost Aristotelian sense), rather than viewing it in a reductionist, mechanistic way. There has been an undeniable conflict originating in early Greek thought, but persisting to this date, between mechanistic reductionism and a purposeful view of the universe. It is the latter that tends to accord with what science learns today. The "reductionism" approach, the old so-called "scientific method," is no longer deemed to be absolutely valid:

Just as there are idealized simple systems (e.g. elementary particles) to use as building blocks in the reductionist approach so one must also search for idealized complex or irregular systems to use in the holistic approach...It is, in short, nothing less than a brand new start in the description of nature.²⁶⁾

Indeed in this way, it is not only Aristotle who is rivindicated, but also Plotinus, through that cosmic kinship that Armstrong, for instance, discovers in his work. Because the soul for Plotinus, is not exclusively or even primarily human, Armstrong can affirm that "we have a single apprehension or awareness of divinity: self and cosmos, taken together."²⁷⁾ He also writes that, although "the One or the Good correspond to what most of us...mean by God," we need neither religious orthodoxy nor mystical rapture to understand most of what Plotinus says. And--because Plotinus understands how central this insight is for life on earth--he will want to move toward "closing the gap between man and non-human nature."²⁸⁾ Here, of course, as he goes beyond Aristotle, Plotinus' own intention is not to defend or uphold nature as such, but rather to uphold the One and, at the same time, whatever issues from that Source.

According to Plotinus, as we saw, in nature everything contemplates: intelligence, soul are not only signs of human dignity. Both are indeed present in different degrees in the different entities "receiving" them. But matter is not "brute" or soulless, some level or degree of form or intellection permeates all that is. A strange metaphysical motion? Perhaps. But some scientists view the ultimate origin of the universe as something which lies "on the boundary of science," while others "would say it is beyond the scope of science altogether."²⁹⁾ Among the former are not only scientists, but philosophers.

Belgian Nobel prize-winner Ilya Prigogine says, "Our universe has a pluralistic, complex character. Structures may disappear, but also they may appear"; Evan Jantsch

"expounds the view that nature has a sort of free will and is thereby capable of generating novelty."³⁰⁾ In simple terms, the difference lies between the view of a universe created once and for all, unfolding mechanistically according to strict, unbending laws, and the possibility that there might be alternative developments, "free choices" of sorts, that natural things might take. Paul Davies speaks of "matter with a will of its own": there is in nature a progressive drive from the simplicity of primordial gasses' "soup" at the dawn of creation, towards increasing complexity: recent discoveries attest to the fact that simple laws and "simple procedures can be the source of almost limitless variety and complexity."³¹⁾

There are therefore indications of the existence of a "cosmic blueprint" or a sort of "global plan"³²⁾ in both physical and chemical phenomena. Yet when matter moves from a state of equilibrium (or a "stable state") and faces two "alternative pathways of evolution," "no prediction can be made about what 'branch' will be chosen."³³⁾ Thus, in the indeterminacy and unpredictability inherent, for instance, to quantum physics, there is the clear possibility of an unpredictable event: matter exhibits freedom of choice, therefore it exhibits also some intelligence. Davies cites Prigogine on this point:

Prigogine calls this phenomenon order through fluctuations, and proposes that it is a fundamental organizing principle in nature: It seems that environmental fluctuations can both affect bifurcation and--more spectacularly--generate new non-equilibrium transitions not predicted by the phenomenological laws of evolution.³⁴⁾

Plotinus could not anticipate Prigogine, nor am I suggesting that Prigogine drew his own insights from Plotinus. In the latter, it is the existence of form, intelligible and the product of Intelligence (Nous), that suggest to him the nature/contemplation passages of 3.8. But whether he was interested in the physical consequences or implications of his metaphysical views or not, there might be a great deal of verifiable truth in his views after all.

Further, the creative progression from simplicity to multiplicity (or complexity) and the existence of intellection in the world outside human beings, are not the only "new discoveries" that suggest a renewed consideration of Plotinus' doctrines. For instance, for him beauty and intellection go hand in hand: there is beauty in regular universal laws as well as truly moral action. But although we find the background to this doctrine in Plato, Plotinus forges ahead on a different path, as he claims that it is not correct to identify Beauty with Symmetry. His reason is that Beauty transcends Intelligence, as Nous is no longer the ultimate. But what Symmetry can there be in Absolute Simplicity and Unity?

Thus Plotinus is faced with the choice between either affirming there is no Beauty in the One (as there is no symmetry of parts possible there), or to abandon the Platonic connection between symmetry and beauty. Now symmetry entails not only parts to be arranged in a certain manner, thus multiplicity, but also the existence of certain pre-ordained, necessary laws, if we look for it in a universal, physical, natural context. For Plotinus, beauty and intelligence both permeate in various ways the whole universe: Beauty is one of the very few concepts (with that of Freedom and the Good)

which are the One and are imparted to the rest of creation through Nous. Are there any recent scientific discoveries which re-echo some aspect of these doctrines? Davies, for instance, says:

Historians will distinguish three levels of enquiry in the study of matter. The first is Newtonian mechanics--the triumph of necessity. The second is equilibrium thermodynamics--the triumph of chance. Now there is a third level, emerging from the study of far-from-equilibrium systems.³⁵⁾

It is my belief that it is in this "third level" that we find the most interesting and philosophically deep aspects of science, and that many of these are strangely close to some ancient metaphysical insights. It is at this "third level", for instance, that we can raise the question of a "will" for matter, discussed above. It is also here that we find with Prigogine, "many physical, chemical and biochemical dissipative processes which display self-organization."³⁶⁾

Under this heading also fit some amazing chemical processes, one of which, the so-called "chemical clock", manifests a chemical mixture deliberately forced away from equilibrium (or a steady state), which:

...suddenly starts to turn blue throughout. This lasts for a minute or two. Then it turns red, then blue, then red, and so on, pulsating with perfect regularity.³⁷⁾

"Prigogine refers to this remarkable rhythmic behavior as a 'chemical clock'", adds Davies. The ultimate reason for this strange phenomenon is "autocatalysis", whereby a "certain chemical reaction is accelerated. What this does, is to introduce "non-linearity" into the system, and thus produce a form of 'symmetry-breaking'".³⁸⁾ Therefore, necessity and symmetry are not matter's unavoidable companions, the manifestation of lawlike regularity.

According to such discoveries, we might say, in Plotinian terms, that through "freedom" and a component of intellectual formation, all of nature is both law-like and formed, and, on occasion beautiful though a-symmetric, and somewhat creative in its processes. As the "chemical clock" example indicates, the original condition might well be "symmetric under time translations (it looks the same from one moment to the next), but this symmetry is spontaneously broken by oscillations."³⁹⁾ One is even reminded of Plotinus' treatment of Providence, in Enneads 2.3(1) and 2.3(2). He dutifully reports Stoic arguments, but the centrality of freedom in his doctrines does not permit the simple repetition of their doctrines.⁴⁰⁾ In essence, according to him, a human being is essentially free because of his upper soul, or true self that always remains There, undescended, with and like the One. Therefore, while matter is indeed under the sway of necessary laws, what is immaterial instead, is not in the same category and needs not submit, (whether willingly or unwillingly) to unswerving rationality. Rationality, in fact, is below the highest goal in Plotinus: we must go beyond it, to be like the One, as much as possible, and that transcends even Nous. One might even speculate whether even Plotinus' acceptance of this limited aspect of "necessity" from the Stoics, might need re-thinking.

After all, if all nature contemplates, perhaps all of it, as ensouled and informed in some measure or other, possesses at least rudimentary freedom and consciousness. As an additional "bonus" of sorts, this appears to be in line with verifiable recent discoveries and their astonishing implication. All comes from the Source for Plotinus and thus not only manifests traces of Nous' intellective and forming activity, but also of the Freedom, Beauty and Goodness, which are the One. This position further cements the cosmic kinship Plotinus defends and supports the respect due all that is, in direct conflict with Gnostic teaching (2.9).

Conclusion

I have started by arguing for the identification of Freedom and Creativity in the One of Plotinus, before taking the notion of Creativity in its full Plotinian sense, and applying it to human endeavour, in order to establish its importance and value to human beings. If this value is accepted, then Plotinus may be interpreted as having a coherent metaphysics, even leaving aside a possible religious understanding of his thought: thus it is not necessary to view Absolutely Free Creativity as the pagan counterpart of God, in order to make sense of the notion. It also manifests as such, the highest attainment a human being can reach, and it remains a non-religious as well as a religious ideal well worth striving for.

Moreover, as I argue in the latter part of section 2, it is a human goal which manifests the same characteristics (in form and procedure, if not content), whether the free creativity occurs as a philosophical, artistic or religious insight, or discovery. Therefore, it is an ideal which all branches of human endeavour and knowledge can share. The cosmic kinship Plotinus advocates clearly reigns, in spite of divisive human efforts to exalt one's preferred field, by depreciating others, or to attempt to set up one field of knowledge as paradigmatic, at the expense of others, which then may fail to "measure up" to this or that specific ideal.

Not only are all areas of knowledge subject to logical laws (such as consistency, or instance), but at the level of conclusions, arguments in all fields, if they represent a new discovery, will share the unpredictability, imprecision and unexpectedness that is the distinguishing mark of true creativity. Neither scientist nor philosopher, neither mathematician nor mystic can predict or guarantee an insight that will couple novelty with Value (as Hausman for instance, requires), to achieve free Creativity.

Further, it is in Plotinus' metaphysical understanding of the universe that this concept of creativity fits best. The reason is that the irreplaceable component of "goodness" or "value" is needed equally to turn simply "novelty" into creativity, and also to produce Plotinus' own notion of free creativity. For Plotinus, "not-good" equal "unfree", in the sense of being slave to passion, unimportant concerns, even overly attached to our embodied condition or to friends and family.

Finally, recent scientific discoveries in the behaviour of matter, the processes of chemistry and biology, and in cosmic creativity as well, all appear to fit well within Plotinus' own insights. Perhaps the time will come when those who wish to prepare for research in physics or biology, will need to read the Enneads of Plotinus, who shows how Unity and multiplicity arise from and ultimately fit within the One's free creativity.

The recent cosmological work of the philosopher John Leslie, among others, argues that the "argument from design" is not as silly as many previous philosophers have made it out to be, and the "God," could be understood--even from the standpoint of someone not belonging to a specific religious denomination--as creating the universe as a "Creative Ethical Requirement." He adds:

Using God like this has the approval of a long line of Platonic theologians. It is compatible with calling God personal, on the grounds that the unity of power and goodness, the ethical requirement which creativity requires our universe, is imagined as acting much as a benevolent person would, as expressing itself most fully in the creation of person (and, for Christians, in its creation of one person in particular), and so on. ⁴¹⁾

Plotinus, of course, is much more than just a commentator on Plato, although that is indeed how he viewed himself. His originality cannot be disputed, and most of the doctrines and texts discussed in this paper attest to that fact, and to his real distance from Plato on many points. Nevertheless his concern with Plato's work on one hand and with metaphysical principles, on the other, could earn him the status of metaphysician within the Platonic tradition. Still, having a First Principle which is Free Creativity, and which is identified with the Good, makes Plotinus a far better source of such cosmological views than any truly Platonic scholar.

- 1 - J. H. Sleeman and G. Bollet, Plotinian Concordance, Ancient and Medieval Philosophy, DeWulf Mansion Centre, Catholic University of Louvain, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1980, lists four passages on "freedom" in the whole of the Enneads:Enn. 3.1.8.9-10; Enn. 3.3.4.7; Enn. 4.3.12.10; Enn. 5.5.9.14-15.
- 2 - Cilento, V. Saggi su Plotino, U. Mursia and Co., 1973, Milano.
- 3 - Cilento, V. Saggi su Plotino, "Liberta' divina e discorso temerario," p. 98.
- 4 - Cilento here speaks of "infaticabile potenza," and Armstrong (see the Loeb Translation of the Enneads, p. 23) of "overwhelming power."
- 5 - A. H. Armstrong "The Apprehension of Divinity in the Self and the Cosmos in Plotinus," in the Significance of Neoplatonism, SUNY press, New York, 1976.
- 6 - Desmond, Wm. "Paul Weiss and Creativity," paper presented for the Society for Philosophy and Creativity, 29 December 1987, APA, New York, p. 3.
- 7 - Desmond, Wm. *ibid.*, p. 3.
- 8 - Hausman, C. R. A Discourse on Novelty and Creation, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1975, p. 43; see also G. Wallas The Art of Thought, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1926.
- 9 - Hausman, C. R. *ibid.*, p. 52, note 1.
- 10 - Hausman, C. R. *ibid.*, pp. 46-47.
- 11 - Hausman, C. R. *ibid.*, pp. 49-52.
- 12 - Hausman, C. R. *ibid.*, p. 52.

- 13 - A letter written in 1789, in E. Holmes, "The Life of Mozart Including His Correspondence," in Creativity, Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1972, p. 55.
- 14 - H. Poincare, "The Foundations of Science," trans. G. B. Halstead, Science Press, 1924, pp. 383-394, in Creativity, p. 81.
- 15 - It is significant that the very same properties characterize the "superior" (i.e. more than human) capacity of the faculty on "intellectus" for Thomas Aquinas; in this regard it is different from the more laborious human faculty of "ratio." See L. Westra, "Ratio and Intellectus in Thomas Aquinas," in Atti del Congresso di Metafisica e Scienze dell' Uomo, Rome, 1980.
- 16 - Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism," in Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis, Galaxy Books, Oxford University Press, New York, 1976, pp. 22-24.
- 17 - I am indebted to Prof. J. Rist for this example, and for the discussion that ensued.
- 18 - "Intuition and the Inexpressible," in Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis, pp. 200-213.
- 19 - *Ibid.*, p. 203.
- 20 - Hausman, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
- 21 - Bambrough, *op. cit.*, pp. 209, 211.
- 22 - John Leslie, in Value and Existence (Oxford University Press, 1979), discusses the possible creative capacity of value, understood apart from any religious content.
- 23 - Cilento, V. *op. cit.*, p. 107.
- 24 - Rist, J. M. "The One of Plotinus, p. 83.
- 25 - Rist, J. M. Stoic Philosophy, p. 223.

- 26 - Davies, Paul The Cosmic Blueprint, Simon and Shuster, New York, 1988, p. 23.
- 27 - Armstrong, A. H. "The Apprehension of Divinity in Plotinus," op. cit., p. 191.
- 28 - Armstrong, A. H. *ibid.*, p. 193.
- 29 - Davies, Paul op. cit., p. 4.
- 30 - Davies, Paul op. cit., p. 5.
- 31 - Davies, Paul *ibid.*, p. 63.
- 32 - Davies, Paul *ibid.*, p. 63.
- 33 - Davies, Paul *ibid.*, p. 88, fig. 27.
- 34 - Davies, Paul *ibid.*, p. 89, ft. 3.
- 35 - Davies, Paul *ibid.*, p. 83.
- 36 - Davies, Paul *ibid.*, p. 85.
- 37 - Davies, Paul *ibid.*, pp. 85-86.
- 38 - Davies, Paul *ibid.*, p. 87.
- 39 - Davies, Paul *ibid.*, p. 86.
- 40 - Westra, L. Freedom in Plotinus (Enneads) 6.8, forthcoming (in press), ed. Mellon Press, Lewiston, especially chapter on "Freedom and Providence," pp...

41 - Leslie, J.

"Modern Cosmology and the Creation of Life," in Evolution and Creation, U. of Notre Dame Press, ed. E. McMullin; 1985, p. 117; for Leslie's full argument, see his Value and Existence, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1979.