Life’s Ultimate Questions

“Plotinus”

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Plotinus (203-270 A.D., aka C.E.)

- Born in southern Egypt
- Schooled in
  - Alexandria, the Oxford/Cambridge of the post-Greek ancient world
  - Persia, learning Persian philosophy
- Opened a school of philosophy in Rome
- Got the Roman emperor’s consent to found Platonopolis, a city modeled after the ideal city of Plato’s Republic
- Cared for orphan children
- Made no enemies and had many friends
Why Should We Study Plotinus?

- He was the greatest of the Neo-Platonic philosophers. They
  - Sought to complete what Plato started
  - Stood as a counter to the Stoics and Cynics

- He influenced at least two great Christian thinkers
  - Augustine
  - Aquinas

- He influenced at least one great Muslim thinker
  - Averroes

- He cherished the unity and simplicity of God
- His upward path of salvation
  - Passionately New Age!
- He led a deeply spiritual life
  - He never became a Christian, however
  - His editor Porphyry attacked the Bible and many Christian doctrines
Plotinus: A Panentheist

- Everything is *in* God
  - God is the world’s mind or soul
  - The world is God’s body
- **Process Theology** is the 20th century version of this concept
  - Charles Hartshorne
  - Fuller Theological Seminary

- The highest thing in P’s worldview is God
  - He never called this being *God*
  - He called this being *The One*
- P. isn’t a pantheist
METAPHORS as aids to understanding PLOTINUS

- **Waterfall Fountain**
  - Everything overflows in a successive hierarchy with The One being the source

- **Candle**
  - As the flame is to the candle, so things are to The One

- **The Radiant Sun**
  - As light emanates from the sun automatically, without diminishing it,
  - so all that exists emanates from The One
METAPHORS as aids to understanding PLOTINUS

- **The Seed**
  - The seed has in itself the nature of that which it produces
  - The seed unfolds itself, to accomplish its goal

- **The Mirror**
  - The object it reflects is duplicated, without the object undergoing any change or loss
**Pantheism** is a teaching that equates God with all that there is.
- Universe = God, God = Universe

For Plotinus, this could not be true, because:
- The One always transcends everything that issues from The One
- The One is simple, and not diverse or consisting of many things

**Biblical creation** teaches that God stood outside of space and time and created the universe out of nothing (*ex nihilo*).
- God | Universe, God ≠ Universe

For Plotinus this could not happen, because:
- Change initiated by The One is not possible, because
- If The One can change things, The One has the change within, and therefore is not simple
Some Problems with Plotinus

- **The Problem of the One and the Many**
  - How does the undifferentiated, non-component One give rise to many different things?

- **The Problem of the Origin of Evil**
  - How does the Good ultimately become the source of any evil?

- **The Problem of the Too-Small God**
  - God is portrayed as
    - Unknowable
    - Incapable of thought about anything but himself
    - Inert (not reacting with or to other beings)
  - Nevertheless, the Source of All that Exists
An Observation on Plotinus

His Upward Path resembles *Pilgrim’s Progress*

1. The seeker consecrates himself to **purification**
   - freeing himself from the downward pull of the body & senses

2. **Rising above mere sense perceptions**
   - he ponders and reflects exclusively on the ultimate questions

3. The seeker then can ascend to the place of **total truth and self-consciousness**
   - These stages prepare him for the final stage

4. **Union with God** (the One) in which he loses all awareness of being separate from the One