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## BIBLICAL ETHICS AND PLOTINUS

### 0. Introductory note

This article is not about a direct response given by the Egyptian-Roman<sup>23</sup> Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus (204/5–270 CE) to Biblical conceptions of ethics. In fact, it is not possible to confirm that he had even read the Bible. And nothing definite can be ascertained with respect to any personal acquaintance with Jewish scholars. (Though it may be pointed out that Plotinus spent eleven years studying philosophy in Alexandria, which at the time had a large and flourishing Jewish community.) He never mentions by name either Jews or Christians as a group in his writings<sup>24</sup>. But concerning Christians, his student, editor and biographer, Porphyry (c. 234–305 CE), does have the following information to supply:

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<sup>23</sup> Plotinus was very reticent about his personal background — according to his biographer Porphyry because he “seemed ashamed of being in the body” (Plotinus/Porphyry 1989: On the life of Plotinus and the order of his books 1, p. 3) — and neither the identity of his family nor his country of origin is known with certainty. Eunapius (c. 345–420 CE) in his *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* states that Plotinus was born in Lycopolis; but Porphyry, who knew Plotinus personally, does not include this information, which weakens its reliability (cf. Armstrong’s note 1, Plotinus/Porphyry 1989, p. 2). Plotinus travelled to Rome when forty years old, established his own school there and stayed for the remainder of his life. (Ibid. 3, p. 11.)

<sup>24</sup> However, it should be noted that he has a preference for not naming his philosophical opponents in his works; he often merely refers to different opinions on a given philosophical question with phrases such as “So people say, some philosophers have held...” (III.7.2; see also III.7.7, which is a generous exhibition of the habit), leaving it to the reader to infer whether (for instance) the Stoics, Peripatetics, or Gnostic sectarians are meant. The Platonists are often referred to simply as “we”.

There were in his time many Christians and others<sup>25</sup>, and sectarians who had abandoned the old philosophy, men of the schools of Adelphius and Aculinus (...), deceiving themselves and deceiving many, alleging that Plato had not penetrated to the depths of intelligible reality. *Plotinus hence often attacked their position in his lectures*, and wrote the treatise to which we have given the title "Against the Gnostics"; he left it to us to assess what he had passed over. (*Plotinus/Porphyrus* 1989: The Life of Plotinus and the Order of his Books 16, p. 45. My italics.)

This is quite a passionate sketch of the situation; not surprisingly, if the "divine Plato" himself was openly rejected by the groups in question (the term "sectarians" refers to the multifaceted groups commonly labelled 'Gnostics'). When speaking of what his master had "passed over", Porphyry is most likely hinting at his own monumental work *Against the Christians*, a book now largely lost; but enough fragments are left to show that his attack on Christianity was based upon a thorough study of Biblical texts, and quite a shrewd, rational argumentation<sup>26</sup>. It is to be supposed that Plotinus would have sympathized with both the content and form of this work, if not with every detail.

But, as I have sketched, he did not himself explicitly indicate such an ambition in his own work; so the contrast I discuss in the following text is an implicit one, unfolded by me and not Plotinus — but, I hope, an acceptable inference from the texts themselves. My purpose with this small 'experiment' is to help further illuminate exactly what Plotinus would see as problematical, or 'deceitful', in the Bible-based faiths. Of course, the problem area may be expected to be an especially prized treasure from the point of view of the faiths themselves.

As the Biblical representative in the following, I shall mainly be employing the figure of Job, who (within his story's setting) has one thing in common with Plotinus, namely the courage to tackle some of the most 'existentially' difficult questions head-on; but answers them differently.

## I. Relationality

What are human beings that that you  
should take them so seriously,

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<sup>3</sup> Could this indefinite group be the Jews? Possibly. Porphyry produced several commentaries on Biblical texts, and his works tend to show a much more positive perspective on Judaism than Christianity (cf. *Cook* 2004, p. 247). He may therefore have been reluctant to mention Jews by name in the same breath as the Christians he found so repellent.

<sup>4</sup> Cook puts this book in a darker context by suggesting (with T. D. Barnes) that it may have been commissioned as propaganda material for one of the persecutions of Christians, for instance the Great Persecution of 303. (*Cook* 2004, 151 note 6.) Augustine reports of Porphyry that he witnessed the persecutions, but does not say that he participated. (*De Civ. D* 10.32; *Cook* 2004, p. 151 note 7.)

subjecting them to your scrutiny,  
that morning after morning you  
should examine them  
and at every instant test them?  
Will you never take your eyes off me  
long enough to swallow my spittle?

The ethical thinking of the Bible<sup>27</sup>, as here in the book of Job 7:17–19<sup>28</sup>, is fundamentally characterised by relationality. This goes for both the Jewish and the Christian Bible. The Judeo-Christian God is a jealous God. What he wants is a personal and exclusive relation. In the Old Testament both to his people as a whole and to the individual human being; and in the New Testament even more radically, when he impregnates a human woman, Mary, and is himself born as a human being to relate on an equal footing to the rest of us. The whole life of Jesus is centered around relating to other people; the following one-line quotation from the Gospel of John is typical of him:

his disciples returned and were surprised to find him speaking to a woman (John 4:27).

This was not *comme il faut* in Jesus' time and culture. One may also mention the incident with the children that the disciples try to shoo away, but Jesus forbids them to do so (Matth. 19:13–14). He also relates immediately to the robber on the cross and invites him to join him in Paradise (Luke 23:42–43)<sup>29</sup>. What is important is not whether one lives or dies, but how one relates. The ten

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<sup>5</sup> I am aware that there is not one form of ethical thinking common to all the vastly different texts and contexts of the Bible, however, the single aspect I am discussing is a recurrent one, and that is my main justification for using a generalizing language in the present discussion. I do think that the emphasis on a personal relation with a jealous God, common to Judaism and Christianity and absent in Plotinus' philosophy, creates a certain 'stamp', a orientation that contrasts in an illuminating way with Plotinus' characteristic emphasis on self-reliance and elevated solitude.

<sup>6</sup> All Bible quotations are from The New Jerusalem Bible. The Complete Text of the Ancient Canon of the Scriptures. Standard Edition. New York: Doubleday, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> As Boris Pasternak has put it with some irony in his poem Магдалина II (Magdalene II), when reflecting on this signature trait of Jesus:

Слишком многим руки для объятья  
Ты раскинешь по концам креста.  
Для кого на свете столько шири,  
Столько муки и такая мощь?

(Too many are you seeking to embrace / with these arms stretched out so wide along the cross.  
Who in the world is so much width meant for, / so great a suffering and might?)

(Пастернак 2005. My transl.)

commandments mediated by Moses are, similarly, almost exclusively concerned with the relation of humans to God or the relations of human beings to each other<sup>30</sup>. Thus, there is a fundamental diversity (a necessary condition of relating) presupposed in Biblical ethics, both by the Jews and the Christians. To us who have been raised within a millennial tradition of a Judeo-Christian world view, it is very hard to let go of the idea that ethics as such, both as a theoretical discipline and as a practice of life, is about relations to others. Ethics is about what we ought to do to others.

But all this is strange to Plotinus' way of viewing the nature and purpose of ethics. If we are to understand Plotinian ethics, the rôle he takes divinity to play in ethical improvement, and why he would necessarily be critical of a Jewish or Christian approach to ethics, we must first put this relation-based conception of ethics in brackets and set it aside for a while.

But what, then, *can* ethics be, if it is not about what we do to others?

## II. Insight into perfect unity

To Plotinus, ethics is comprised of two forms of striving: 1. the search for insight, which is itself a tool for the final goal (I.3.1 and I.4–5); 2. the search for perfect unity (a point repeatedly returned to in the *Enneads*, see for instance II.9.1).

The insight in question is concerned with the essential nature of reality, i.e. a metaphysical insight<sup>31</sup>. By philosophical training, which to Plotinus means learning to employ the honourable ancient method of dialectics as shown by Plato in his dialogues (I.3.5), one may discover the 'hypostases' soul (*psychê*) and mind (*nous*) as the underlying causes of the sensible phenomena, and beyond these causes the ultimate source of everything: the supra-cosmic unity (*to hen*, 'the One') which is the Good itself. This ultimate Good does not act, nor can it even be said to be, for it is beyond being (III.9.7 and 9; V.5.6). It is exactly good because it lacks nothing and therefore needs to change nothing (III.9.9; V.6.4). Such is the nature of perfection. The self-sufficiency of the Good is a crucial point to Plotinus. Action — the need to act — upon which most conceptions of ethics today in the Western world (secular as well as religiously based) hinge, to Plotinus always implies a deficiency (III.8.6–7; V.6.6). Diversity is for him a sign that one has not yet reached the summit and source of being, the highest Good

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<sup>30</sup> The only seeming exception is the commandment to rest on the sabbath, and even that is explained by a duty to commemorate God's creation of the world (Ex. 20:11) — and his rescue of the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage (Deut. 5:15).

<sup>31</sup> For quite a long time, in fact until the last few decades, Neoplatonic philosophy has often been misinterpreted as taking little interest in ethics at all, because of its strong metaphysical focus. But by Plotinus and his successors, the dedicated study of metaphysics is in itself seen as ethically purifying; in Plotinus' view, it is even an indispensable condition for advancing towards the one true Good. The road to salvation is in his view an intellectual effort.

(V. 6.4–6<sup>32</sup>), and thus to him it would be a lamentable misunderstanding indeed to identify ethics with a relation. What is more unified is always superior to that which is more diverse.

Becoming a philosopher and receiving dialectical training will help a person understand that all relations are in fact illusionary, or at least unimportant, because they take place only at a low and dependent level of existence. This point is rather powerfully illustrated in IV.3.32, where Plotinus describes how the human soul, as it ascends to the higher levels of being, loses its memory of its family relations: friends, children and wife. The sooner one forgets, the better:

since here below too it is best to be detached from human concerns, and so necessarily from human memories (...). For the higher soul also flies from multiplicity, and gathers multiplicity into one and abandons the indefinite (*apeiron*); because in this way it will not be [clogged] with multiplicity but light and *alone by itself* (*di' autēs*) (IV.3.32).

This was in A. H. Armstrong's translation (my italics). MacKenna and Page translate *di' autēs* (literally = 'through itself') as "self-conducted". The point is that the soul, when ascending, begins to mirror the self-sufficiency of the One, who (as Plotinus puts it in III.9.9) "touches nothing" (*peri ouden gar auto to prōton*, literally "for the First is not in contact with (or [circling] around) anything"), i. e. is not part of any relation, is not directed towards anything else by any interest, care or desire — although it is the condition of all: *ta alla de peri auto*: "but the other things are around (or refer to) it".

Here, in the corporeal world, we experience ourselves as individuals with individual cares, and often are even in opposition to one another. Humans are at war, and animals eat each other. (III.2.15.) But at a higher level, all the apparently different consciousnesses — all the individual souls, whether of humans or animals (or plants, presumably; all that lives is shaped by the same all-soul) — are one. (This is the theme of the treatise IV.9.) Plotinus uses the concept of *eklampsis* (or *ellampsis*, depending on the perspective) — an irradiation — to illustrate this (see for instance IV.5.7.63). There is ultimately only one soul: It is like one luminous body emitting a multitude of rays, and the rays are likened to the individual souls.

The soul that is their common source is the lowest of the three so-called hypostases that together make up, respectively, the ground of being, and being itself. The second hypostasis he calls mind, *nous* in Greek, and the first and highest, he calls simply the One. There is nothing that we can say about the One, exactly

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<sup>32</sup> This passage concerns the simplest of diversities: the duality inherent in all thinking, which by necessity immediately creates a subject and an object (and thus diversity). On the ground that thinking implies this split, Plotinus dismisses it — and *nous*, the being who is by thinking — from being the Good itself. This must be an undivided unity.

because it is the perfect unity. Saying anything substantial about it would be to impose upon it a division. You may not even say that it *is*, since it is “beyond being” (*epekeina tēs ousias*). Plotinus is very fond of this quotation from Plato’s Republic 509b. It is the Platonic formula most often quoted by him — more than thirty times in the *Enneads*. Only this can be said of the One: That it is good. It is, in other words, the goal and measuring rod of ethics. Becoming good, living ethically, is the process of acquiring this knowledge of the state of things, and uniting with unity through contemplation.

What we should notice in our context of comparative ethics is, then, how the good is defined by Plotinus. It is that which is beyond any division, including that division regarded as the most beneficial one in a Biblical context: that of adoration (“faith, hope and love”, if one is to put it the Christian way).

From a Biblical point of view, this exact division is conceived of as eternal, and the essence of heaven. Whether the beatific state is called salvation or redemption or just bliss, it is for a Christian or a Jew to be put face to face with God.

To Plotinus, divinity itself is located not at the ultimate centre of things, but at the second hypostasis, where there still is the most basic diversity to be found: that of duality — a subject and an object. This is, indeed, how the second hypostasis is distinguished from the One: Mind (*nous*) turns towards the One and contemplates it, thus establishing a duality (V.6.1–2). The soul (*psychē*), the third hypostasis, creates a multitude, by turning in several directions — not only, and not primarily, back towards its source, but also downwards and away from it, towards matter and non-being (IV.9.5). By looking — or ‘shining’ — into matter, the soul shapes what we know as the corporeal world (I.1.8.13–18). The individual bodily creatures are created by rays emanating from the one soul. But each of these rays has the opportunity of returning to, and reuniting with, its source. This is the goal of all existing creatures, according to Plotinus. To return to the perfect unity not only of the soul or mind, but beyond it all the way to the One itself.

It should be stressed that the One is not Plotinus’ conception of a god. It is, so to speak, not only beyond being, but also beyond divinity!

In several places, Plotinus identifies *nous* as “God” in the singular — no doubt inspired by the Aristotelian God of the *Metaphysics*, ‘thought thinking itself’ (Met. 12, 1072b) — but at other times he is happy to speak of gods in the plural, meaning the stars and planets. In both cases, though he acknowledges that one may pray to these beings and receive some benefit from it physically or mentally, this does not mean that they themselves relate to the devoted human being. The reaction merely happens through the underlying unity of everything, here understood as “sympathy” in the magical sense of the word (IV.4.26 and 32). For like a liberated soul, the gods have no memory (IV.4.30). They are alive, but in an eternal now, and have no cares or interests, except circling the One and striving for unity, the same as the soul does on its own level. The fundamental lesson to learn concerning God or gods is thus, in

Plotinus' view, that ultimately, we are all left to ourselves, and the salvation of a given individual rests only on his own efforts and determined training in philosophy.

Plotinus' formula for this is "escape in solitude to the solitary" (*phygē monou pros monon*, VI.9.11). These are the very words his editor Porphyry have chosen to conclude the *Enneads*. One must take upon oneself a truly Titanic struggle of detaching oneself from all division, from all that is personal and relational, in order to unite perfectly with the one. Plotinus writes:

(...) we must put away other things and take our stand only in this, and become this alone, cutting away all the other things in which we are encased. (VI.9.9.)

Plotinus describes the sage who has attained such unity as follows:

He was one himself, with no distinction in himself either in relation to himself or to other things — for there was no movement in him, and he had no emotion, no desire for anything else when he had made the ascent — but there was not even any reason or thought, and he himself was not there (...) he was (...) in a quiet solitude and a state of calm (...), altogether at rest and having become a kind of rest. (VI.9.11)

### III. Assertion of the mortal being

It is interesting to compare this with Job's description of how he longs for just such a state at one point of his suffering. He asks several times of God to be released from the trouble of having to relate, and be instead made into nothing, left in a quiet nothingness:

Why was I not still-born,  
or why did I not perish as I left the womb?  
Why were there knees to receive me,  
breasts for me to suck?  
Now I should be lying in peace,  
wrapped in a restful slumber,  
(...)  
or put a way like an abortive child, I should not have existed,  
like little ones that never see the light.  
Down there, the wicked bustle no more,  
there the weary rest.  
Prisoners, all left in peace,  
hear no more the shouts of the oppressor.  
High and low are there together,  
and the slave is free of his master. (Job 3:11–19.)

Here is described exactly a suspension of all diversity — a oneness in death. It would have been better, Job exclaims, never to have been born than to suffer the multiple adversities and the cruel relations that some people establish between them in this life. The warm welcome of the mother's knees and breasts is not enough compensation for the miseries in wait. Job would have understood why Plotinus named a perfect rest as the highest good. Plotinus himself was indeed afflicted as was Job, with a very painful skin disease, and on top of that digestive problems and failing vision (*Plotinus/Porphry 1989: 2, p. 5*). His last years were quite difficult. But he would not ask for any pity (I.4.8); the wise man finds his consolation, Plotinus held, by realising that the one who suffers is only the transient body and illusory individual consciousness; the real self is only the rational part of the soul, and this is and remains unmoved by all that the body or the passions of a person suffer (I.4.7).

To Plotinus, the real challenge of ethics is to learn how to detach oneself totally from personal cares and afflictions, whether they be bodily or emotional — there is very much of the Stoic in him, his main disagreement with Stoic philosophy is, of course, that it is materialist, while he as a Platonist holds that ultimate reality is incorporeal. But when it comes to *apatheia*, the ability to be perfectly detached from bodily, mental and emotional disturbances, as an ideal, Plotinus and the Stoics are of one mind.

Job, however, does not stay upon this path. To Job and other Biblical figures, the main challenge of ethics is to come to terms with the human condition of having to relate to others, not least to God. And to learn how relations are properly carried out. It brings a fruitful reading of the book of Job, in my opinion, to see it as an ongoing exploration of this perspective. The whole debate between Job and his friends, and also God's spoken judgment at the end, hang upon this question: How should we relate properly to one another?

It also takes seriously the freedom of a human being to choose whether to relate to God or not. The wicked people are described exactly as those who refuse to relate to God:

In chapt 18:21 Bildad the Shuhite describes them as those who do not know God. In chapt. 21 Job characterises the evildoers in the same way:

Yet these are the ones who say to God: '*Go away!*  
We do not want to learn your ways.  
(...)' (Job 21:14–15. My italics.)

Though Job toys with the idea of striving for detachment and oblivion, he never gives fully in to it. Basically, he clings to his passions even more ardently than his friends do, including the young, angry man Elihu; Job insists on the importance of his personal sufferings, and demands an answer from God concerning them. In other words: He takes his sufferings deeply *personally* — something Plotinus



explicitly warns against as an attitude that would bind a person stronger to a life of illusion.

But the Biblical God points to “his servant Job” as the one who spoke truly of him all along (Job 42:7–8). The Biblical God approves of people who want to relate personally to him, and who care about their bodily existence.

To Plotinus, such a conception of divinity is blasphemous. This because it upsets the neat Platonic hierarchy completely. It does not, for one, put rationality above passion. Nor does it put mind or soul above body, nor does it show the person a road away from his irksome individuality. In Plotinus’ view, this would not guard us properly from suffering and thus not deserve the name of salvation<sup>33</sup> or liberation of the soul.

As long as there is a relation, there is some sort of interest, desire and passion.

Plotinus does not ask for any pity from outside, neither from gods nor men. He describes the good man, the ethical ideal, as such:

He [= the good man] is not to be pitied even in his pain; his light within is like the light in a lantern when it is blowing hard outside with a great fury of wind and storm. (...) One must understand that things do not look to the good man as they look to others; none of his experiences penetrate to his inner self, grieves no more than any of the others. (I.4.8.)

As opposed to this, Job, the exemplary righteous man of the Old Testament, demands that his sufferings be taken in earnest — that everyone notices them and pities him:

“Is not human life on Earth just conscript service?

(...)

Like a slave, sighing for the shade,  
or a hireling with no thought but for his wages,  
I have months of futility assigned to me,  
nights of suffering to be my lot.

(...)

*That is why* I cannot keep quiet:  
in my anguish of spirit I shall speak,  
in my bitterness of soul I shall complain.

(Job 7:1–3:11.)

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<sup>33</sup> Plotinus does not employ a technical concept of salvation as Christians do, yet I think it is defensible to use the term (non-technically) when describing his philosophy. One may argue the case that there is indeed a ‘salvific ambition’ in Plotinus’ philosophy — meaning a desire to show a definitive way out of suffering, involving a profound change of essence or rather a return to essence — to a ‘right’ and perfect state of things, from a false or fallen state.

With his complaint, Job personally affirms before God — confesses to God, so to speak — that the human being as an individual has an absolute importance<sup>34</sup>; in other words, is not (as suggested by Plotinus) something to be dispensed with. And in his final response to Job, God confirms this view, and refutes the speeches of the friends who, each in his own way, tried to diminish the importance of personal suffering. Job's question: "What are human beings that you should take them so seriously?" has been answered.

To sum up:

In the *Enneads*, one of the images Plotinus repeatedly employs when speaking of the One, is that of the centre of a circle — identified as the point where all differences end (VI.9.8; III.8.8; VI.4.7; IV.3.17, and others).

"[A] god," he says in VI.9.8, "is what is linked to that centre, but that which stands far from it is a multiple<sup>35</sup> (*polys*) human being or a beast."

To Plotinus, to be human is to be beside the point<sup>36</sup>. By contrast, in the Book of Job, the person is the point.

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### **Biblical Ethics and Plotinus**

*Abstract:* This article focuses on the question of unification versus relationality in ethics. It compares two different ethical approaches from Late Antiquity, highlighting the contrast between Plotinian (Neoplatonic) ethics as striving for perfect unification of the human soul with the divinity — and Biblical ethics as a relational ethics, where alterity remains operative in the encounter with the deity, and where the primary ethical demand is to relate properly to fellow creatures and God as other. The latter demand is exemplified by the figure of Job, whose righteousness is interpreted as his insisting on this relation at a more fundamental level than his friends.

*Key words:* Plotinus, Job, unification, relationality, Neoplatonic ethics

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<sup>34</sup> His ferocious insistence on his own unimportance (7:16) is (consciously) self-defying — which in this case would mean self-affirming! (Any utterance addressed to God immediately receives an amplified importance. Job knows that perfectly well.)

<sup>35</sup> That is, an individual.

<sup>36</sup> As he also puts it: "Our concern is not (...) to be out of sin, but to be god". (I.2.6.)

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