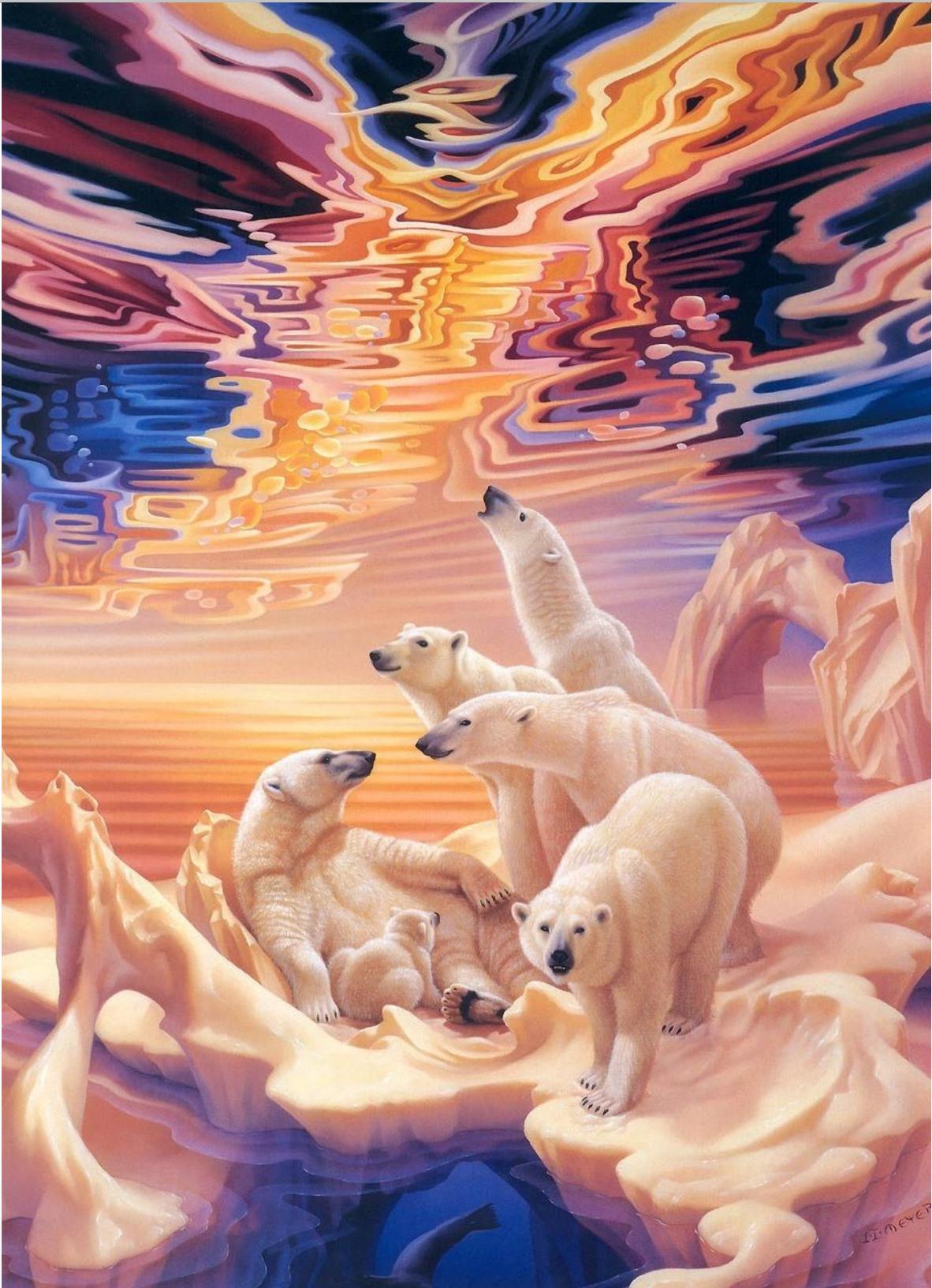


The Good of Plotinus



How the multiplicity of ideal-forms came into being and on “The Good”

Commentary on Ennead VI vii,¹ by Thomas Taylor

Plotinus seems to have left the orb of light solely for the benefit of mankind . . .

. . . that he might teach them how to repair the ruin contracted by their exile from good, and how to return to their true country, and legitimate kindred and allies. I do not mean that he descended into mortality, for the purpose of unfolding this sublimest truths to the vulgar part of mankind; for this would have been a vain and ridiculous attempt; since the eyes of the multitude, as Plato justly observes, are not strong enough to look to truth. But he came as a guide to the few who are born with a divine destiny (θεια μοιρα); and are struggling to gain the lost region of light, but know not how to break the fetters by which they are detained; who are impatient to leave the obscure cavern of sense, where all is delusion and shadow, and to ascend to the realms of intellect, where all is substance and reality.²

But let no one deceive himself by fancying that he can understand his writings by barely reading them.

If therefore a man of such great sagacity and penetration as Porphyry, and who from the period in which he lived possessed advantages with respect to the attainment of philosophy which are denied to every modern, found so much difficulty in fathoming the profundity of Plotinus, there must necessarily be very few at present by whom this can be accomplished. Let no one therefore deceive himself by fancying that he can understand the writings of Plotinus by barely reading them, For as the subjects which he discusses are for the most part the objects of intellect alone, to understand them is to see them, and to see them is to come in contact with them. But his is only to be accomplished by long familiarity with, and a life conformable to the things themselves. For then, as Plato says, “a light as if leaping from a fire, will on a sudden be enkindled in the soul, and will then itself nourish itself.” See Plato’s 7th Epistle. [341d, TTS vol. XIII, and in our Hellenic and Hellenistic Papers.]³

¹ Excerpted from Taylor T. (*Tr. & Annot.*). *Collected Writings of Plotinus*. (Vol. III of The Thomas Taylor Series) From: The Prometheus Trust, 2000

² *Collected Writings of Plotinus*; [Introduction to *Select Works of Plotinus*, pp. 166-67]

³ *ibid.* p. 161 *fn.*

Self-consciousness derives the splendour of its intellectual energy from Unconsciousness, with which it illuminates Nature.

All things, therefore, are invested with beauty and possess light through that which is prior to all things. And intellect, indeed, derives from thence the splendour of intellectual energy, with which it illuminates nature. But soul receives from thence a vital power, and an abundance of life proceeding into it. Intellect, indeed, is elevated thither [*i.e.* to *The Good*], and there abides, rejoicing in subsisting near it. But soul being converted to it as far as she is able, as soon as she knows and perceives it, is delighted with the spectacle, and from as much of it as her power of vision permits her to see, she is astonished, feels as if she had been struck, and is conscious of containing in herself some portion [of the splendour] of *The Good*. Being, also, thus disposed, she becomes desirous, like those who from the image of a beloved object, are excited to wish for a perception of the object of their love. But, as here, lovers fashion themselves to a similitude of the beloved object, and, in consequence of this, cause both their bodies and their souls to be more decorous and elegant, wishing as much as possible that they may not be deficient in the temperance and other virtues of the object of their love, lest they should be despised by this object; and these are able to become amatory associates; — after the same manner soul, also, loves *The Good*, being excited by it to this love from the beginning, and the love which it promptly possesses does not wait, from the beauty in sensible objects, to be recalled to the recollection of *The Good*. Possessing, however, love, yet being ignorant of what it possesses, it perpetually seeks for it.¹

Evil exists only on earth, in the shadows of sentient life and personal mind.

He, therefore, who beholds this abundant life, which comprehends in itself in one all, and the first life, will he not gladly embrace this, and despise every other life? For other inferior lives are darkness, small and obscure shadows, vile, impure, and defiling uncontaminated lives. Hence, if you look at them, you will no longer either perceive pure lives, or live simultaneously according to all those lives, in which there is nothing that is not vital, and nothing that does not live with purity, and without the possession of any evil. For evils exist in these terrene abodes, because they contain only a vestige of life and a vestige of intellect. But there the archetype subsists, which Plato denominates boniform, because it possesses goodness in forms.²

The Good cannot measure anything. "Man is the measure of all things."

. . . *The Good* exists eternally, and is in all things, does not ascribe to him either measure³ or unbounded extension. For how, if this were the case, could it measure [all] other things? Again, therefore, neither has it any figure. Hence, that object of desire which is wholly without figure and form will be the most desirable, and the most

¹ *Collected Writings of Plotinus*; [*Ennead* VI, vii ¶ 31, comment by Taylor, p. 467]

² *ibid.* [*Ennead* VI, vii ¶ 15, comment by Taylor, p. 461]

³ For if *The Good* possessed measure, it could not be the measure of all things, since it could not measure incommensurable natures.

lovely of all things. The love of it, also, will be immeasurable: for here the love is not definite, because the object of love is infinite.¹

Hence, that which is solitary and alone is not participant of good, but possesses good after another, and a more excellent manner. It is necessary, therefore, that *The Good* should be desirable yet not from being desirable that it should be good, but that because it is good it should be desirable.²

Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

Hence, when we speak of beauty itself, we must far remove from ourselves such a form as this, nor must we place it before our eyes, lest we should fall from the perception of the beautiful into an obscure participation of it, which is also, said to be [though erroneously] beautiful. Form, however, which is without *morphe*, is beautiful,³ if it is form of this kind. — But reason asserts, that whatever has *morphe*, and *morphe* itself, and everything that has form, is measured. This, however, is neither that which comprehends all things in itself, nor is sufficient to itself. Nor is it beautiful from itself, but is a thing of a mingled nature. It is necessary, therefore, that these things should be beautiful [yet measured], but that the nature which is truly beautiful, or rather, which is above beauty, should be without measure. But if this be the case, it is necessary that it should neither be formed, nor be form. Hence, that which is primarily lovely, and which is the first of things, and the beauty of the intelligible which is there, is the nature of *The Good*. *This, also is testified by the passion of lovers. For as long as some one is conversant with that figure only which is manifest to the eyes, he does not yet love the object which he sees; but when departing from it, he generates in himself, in his impartible soul, a form which is not an object of sense, then love springs forth.* Nevertheless, he desires to see the beloved object, in order that he may irrigate his love, which from absence becomes marcid and dry.⁴ If however, he should conceive that it is necessary to pass beyond this to something more formless, after this superior nature, he will more vehemently aspire. *For the passion which he experienced from the beginning was the love of an immense light, excited by an obscure splendour. For morphe is the vestige of that which is formless. This, therefore, generates morphe, but morphe does not generate the formless nature. But that which is without form, when it accedes to matter, generates morphe. Matter, however, is necessarily most remote from form, because it has not in itself even the last vestige of form: If, therefore, a sensible object is lovely, it is not through matter, but through that which is invested with form. But the form which is in matter is derived from soul; and soul is in a much greater degree form, and is much more lovely. Intellect, also, is in a still greater degree form than soul, and is still more lovely. And this being the case, it is [obviously] necessary that the first nature [or primary source] of beauty should be formless.*⁵

¹ *Collected Writings of Plotinus*; [Ennead VI, vii ¶ 32, comment by Taylor, p. 469]

² *ibid.* [Ennead VI, vii ¶ 25, comment by Taylor, p. 466]

³ In the original, *το δε αμορφον ειδος καλον*. But *μορφη*, as we learn from Simplicius, pertains to the figure, colour and magnitude of superficies.

⁴ See the *Phaedrus* of Plato, from which was Plotinus here says is derived.

⁵ Because it is that from which form proceeds; and every cause is better than its effect. *Collected Writings of Plotinus*; [Ennead VI, vii ¶ 33, comment by Taylor, pp. 469-70]

Adorned with every virtue, we ascend to the intelligible world and banquet on ambrosia “the supplier of firm and undeviating intellection.”

For with respect to *The Good*, either the knowledge of, or the contact with it, is the greatest of things. And Plato says, that this is the greatest discipline,¹ not calling the intuitive perception of it a discipline; but he thus denominates the learning something previously about it. Analogies, therefore, ablations, the knowledge derived from things produced by it, and certain gradual ascents, teach us something pertaining to it. We proceed, however, to it through purifications, prayer, a soul adorned with every virtue, an ascent to the intelligible world, an establishment in it, and banqueting on the divine food which is there. But whoever is a spectator of this [divine] world, becomes at one and the same time both the spectator and the spectacle. For he both surveys himself and other things; and becoming essence, intellect, and an all-perfect animal, he no longer beholds this intelligible world externally, but now being the same with it, he approaches to *The Good*, which is proximate to this divine world, and illuminates the whole of it. Here, however, dismissing every discipline, and arriving at the utmost extent of erudition, he becomes established in beauty, as far as to which it is possible to energise intellectually. But being lifted from this, as from a wave of intellect,² and elevated, as it were, by its tumefaction, he will suddenly perceive [*The Good*]. He will, however, be ignorant of manner in which he sees it; but the vision filling the eyes with light, will prevent him from seeing anything else, since the light itself will be the object of his vision.³



¹ Plato in the sixth book of his *Republic* [505a] says, “that the idea of The Good is the greatest discipline.” [TTS vol. IX]

² Plotinus in what he here says, alludes to the following passage in the fifth book of Homer’s *Odyssey*, where Ulysses is represented swimming in order to reach the Phæacian coast, after

The winds were hush’d, the billows scarcely cur’d,
And a dead silence still’d the wat’ry world.

. ο δ’ ἀρα σχεδον εισιδε γαιαν
Οχυ μαλα προῖ δων, μεγαλου υπο κυματος αρθεις. [v. 393, etc.]

i.e., When lifted on a ridgy wave he spies
The land at distance, and with sharpen’d eyes. — Pope

But in this translation of Pope, for “*at distance*” in the second line, it will be more conformable to the original to substitute *not now remote*, omitting *and*. And for *ridgy* in the first line, to read *mighty*. With this alteration the lines will be,

When lifted on a mighty wave he spies
The land, not now remote, with sharpen’d eyes.

³ *Collected Writings of Plotinus*; [Ennead VI, vii ¶ 36, comment by Taylor, pp. 474-75]