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One Alone and Many

It is a common error to contrast Mysticism and Morality, and thence to conclude that either Plotinus can have little to say about everyday moral concerns, or else that what he does say is too robust and uncompassionate to convince us now. It is true that, on the one hand, Plotinus seems to suggest that we should detach ourselves from all earthly concerns, turning to more and more abstract goals, and regarding events here-now as no more than children's games (*Ennead* I.4 [46].8; III.2 [47].8). On the other hand, he is confident that we should care for whatever is kin to the Father (and therefore should care for every living soul: *Ennead* II.9 [33].16), and supposes that Minos's communion with Zeus issued in laws for the proper conduct of society (*Ennead* VI.9 [9].7).

My argument is that the flight of the alone to the Alone (*Ennead* VI.9 [9].11) is misinterpreted. Seeking solitude is the very essence of the fall: as if they were tired of being together, they each go to their own (*Ennead* IV.8 [6].4, 11f), and the inward turn that Plotinus recommends is actually a turn towards community. When we look outside that on which we depend we do not know that we are one, like faces which are many on the outside but have one head inside. But if someone is able to turn around, either by himself or having the good luck to have his hair pulled by Athena herself, he will see God and himself and the all. He will stop marking himself off from all being and will come to all the All without going out anywhere (*Ennead* VI.5 [23].7, 9f). Similarly those passages that now seem to us robust and uncompassionate are a recipe for a more genuine love: seeing the beauty of each living soul, but without concupiscence, sets each soul free to help the World Soul make the world.