

J. Noel HUBLER      Plotinus on Cosmogony: A convergence of reason, biology, and myth.

Typically, commentators explain Plotinus' account of the origins of the universe as an emanation characterized by an undiminished giving from its source. Although Plotinus does sometimes compare the origins of all from the One to a sort of emanation from a physical source, such as water or fragrance generated from a source, it is not his preferred method of explanation, for Plotinus recognizes that every other sort of generation is an insufficient likeness of the generative activity of the One. Therefore, although physical emanation does imitate the creative power of the One in some way, in Plotinus' cosmos, biological, and mythic accounts present a higher and fuller picture of the creative power of the One than do physical accounts, for in the hierarchy of being, living agents more fully reflect the perfection of the One than do merely physical entities such as fragrances, water, and light. The preferences of modern commentators for the merely physical explanations reflect their own preferences for the explanations of physics over biology and hence more serve to distort Plotinus picture in terms of their own presuppositions than to explain Plotinus' system in his own terms. As a result, modern commentators are led down a path that takes the creative activity of the One to be necessary and spontaneous rather than as a result of the will of the One, something that Plotinus explicitly denies.

A richer and more accurate picture of Plotinus' cosmogony emerges when one recognizes that his core analogy for the creative activity of the One is based not upon the accounts of physics but upon biological imagery. Further, his biological imagery is supplemented by very traditional mythic accounts of origins that Plotinus expressly invokes in his accounts of cosmogony.

Plotinus' expressly marks the core biological analogy as a natural likeness rather than as a mere linguistic comparison. Further, he holds to the core metaphor consistently throughout his writing career. Still further, the core metaphor is engrained in the vocabulary Plotinus uses to describe the production of the first principles and the cosmos. It is the metaphor and the language of biological reproduction. The reliance on sexual metaphor to explain creation marks a continuity with Greek thought that extends beyond Plotinus' philosophical predecessors and into the over-arching mythic structures of Greek thought extending back to Homer and Hesiod. Finally, and most importantly, myth serves not just to as a convenient illustration, but marks an underlying continuity with the long tradition of Greek thought. Myth therefore serves as an expression of a shared cultural heritage that Plotinus expressly invokes. For he does not randomly use illustrations, which can be drawn from anywhere, but selects myths from the sources with the greatest authority in his tradition: Homer, Hesiod, and Plato. Myths are not mere stories; rather they are charter narratives that set out shared cultural ideologies. As such Plotinus' invocation of myth is consistent with a broader Greek tendency described by Jean-Pierre Vernant, who explains that the ancient Greeks "continued to make literary use of it [myth] as the common treasure-house on which their culture could draw in order to remain alive and perpetuate itself." Plotinus sought to perpetuate the same tradition philosophically and spiritually.