PLOTINUS
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On the Descent of the Soul into Bodies

Translation with an Introduction and Commentary

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1. I often wake up from my body into my true self, so that being within myself and outside all other things I enjoy a vision of wonderful beauty. It is then that I believe most firmly that I am part of the nobler realm, living a life of perfect activity; I have become at one with the divine, and being securely established in it I have entered into that higher actuality, setting myself above all the rest of the intelligible world. But when, after being at rest in the divine, I have started my descent from intellection to discursive reasoning, I wonder how on earth it is that even now I am descending, and how on earth it is that my soul has come to be in my body, since it has been revealed to be what it is in itself, despite being in the body.

Heraclitus, who urged us to enquire into this question, offered such phrases as “necessary changes between

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19 DK 60, 84a, 84b, 101.
opposites” and “the way up is the way down” and “what changes is at repose” and “weariness is to toil and to be making a start at the same things.” He left us to make our own conjectures, since he chose not to make his argument clear to us—perhaps because a person must search within himself, just as he found the answer by searching it out by himself.

Empedocles too, who said that it is a law that souls who have sinned must fall into this world, and that he himself came here “as an exile from the divine, obedient to maddened strife,” disclosed just as little, in my opinion, as Pythagoras and his followers who spoke in riddles about this and many other questions; but Empedocles’ lack of clarity is also due to the fact that he writes in verse.

We are left with the divine Plato, who has said in many places in his works many noble things about the soul and its arrival here, so that we can hope for some clarity from him.

So what does this philosopher say?

It is clear that he does not always speak with sufficient consistency for us to make out his intentions with any

20 DK 115, lines 13–14.
21 Phaedo 67d; Cratylus 400c; Phaedo 62b; Republic 514a, 515c, 517b; Phaedrus 246c, 247d, 249a; Republic 619d; Timaeus 34b.
ease. But he always holds the whole of the sensible world in low esteem, and censures the association of the soul with the body, saying that the soul “is in fetters” and “is entombed in the body” and that “the secret saying, which claims that the soul is in prison, is a great one.” And I think that for him the Cave signifies this world (just as the cavern does for Empedocles)—at least when he says that the soul’s journey to “the intelligible world” is “a release from its fetters” and “an ascent” out of the Cave. In *Phaedrus* loss of wings is the cause of the soul’s arrival in this world; furthermore he talks of cycles that return the soul, after its ascent, back to this world; and of judgments that despatch other souls down here, and of the casting of lots, and of luck, and of necessity. In all these cases he is censuring the approach of the soul to body. But in *Timaeus*, when he is speaking of this All, he praises the cosmos and calls it a blessed god; and he says that its soul was bestowed by the demiurge in his goodness so that this All might be intelligent, since it had to be intelligent and could not be so without soul. So that was the reason why the soul of the All was sent by the god; and the soul of each one of us was sent so that the All might be perfected. For it was necessary that all the same kinds of living creatures should exist in the sensible world as exist in the intelligible.

DK 120.
2. So that once we have sought to learn about our own soul from Plato, we find we are obliged to grapple with a search about soul in general. How on earth is it in the nature of soul to associate with body? What are we to claim about the nature of a cosmos that soul inhabits, either willingly or under compulsion or in some other way? As for its maker, has he acted correctly, or has he perhaps acted like our own souls? For since they govern inferior bodies they were bound thereby to sink deep inside them, if they were to control them. For each body would be scattered, swept away to its proper place; whereas in the All all bodies come by nature to rest in their proper places. Material bodies need much painstaking foresight, since many alien forces attack them and they are always held in the grip of deficiency and need every possible assistance in their great difficulties. But the cosmos is perfect, fully adequate and self-sufficient, and contains nothing contrary to its nature; so it requires only a brief word of command, as it were; and its soul is always as it wants to be by its nature, free of appetites and affections, “for nothing leaves or is added.”

That is why Plato says that our soul, if it is in the company of that perfect soul, itself reaches perfection, “journeying on high and organizing the whole cosmos”; when it withdraws so as not to be within bodies and not to belong to any one body, then it too, just like the soul of the All, will organize the All with ease. For it is in no
way an evil for soul to give body the power of well-being and existence, because not all providential care taken over an inferior stops the carer from remaining in the best possible state.

For there are two sorts of caring in the totality of things. There is overall caring, on the part of someone organizing by decree with a royal authority that keeps him clear of the action; and there is caring for an individual, where there is already self-actuated engagement and a contact with the operation, which infects the doer with the nature of the operation. The divine soul is said to control the whole of the heavens in the former way, eternally, remaining aloof in its higher aspect but transmitting its lowest power into the world. But the god could still not be criticized for having produced the soul of the All in something inferior, nor has the soul been deprived of what is in its nature, since it has this from eternity and will always have it as something that cannot be contrary to its nature, something that belongs to it for ever, without end or beginning.

And when Plato says that the souls of the stars bear the same relation to their bodies as <the soul of the All> does to the All (for he inserts their bodies too “into the circles” of the soul) he would also be preserving the appropriate well-being of the stars. For there are two reasons why the association of the soul with the
body causes it difficulty. First, it inhibits intellection; and secondly, it fills the soul with pleasures, appetites and distress; in neither case would this happen to a soul that has not sunk inside the body, is not someone’s soul, and does not belong to the body (but rather owns the body), and is such as not to need anything nor be defective in anything. Consequently this soul is not filled with appetites or fears, since it will never feel apprehension concerning a body of this kind, nor does any distraction deflect it downwards and draw it away from the better blessed vision. Rather it is always turned to those higher beings, marshalling the All with a power that remains uninvolved.

3. But the human soul is said to suffer all kinds of distress and harmful affections in the body, where it finds itself beset by follies, desires, fears and the other evils; for the body is its fetter and tomb, and the cosmos its cave and cavern. So let us now state what view Plato has about the soul’s descent—a view that does not show any inconsistency, since the causes are different.

Universal Intellect, then, exists whole and entire in the realm of intellection, which we call the intelligible world. But there also exist the intellective powers included in it, as well as the individual intellects—since Intellect is not just one, but one and many; and there had to be many souls as well as one soul, and these
many souls had to be distinct, stemming from the one soul, just as species stem from a single genus, some better, others worse, some more intellective, others less intellective in actuality. For there, in Intellect, there is one thing—Intellect including everything else by its power like a great living creature; and there are too the beings that Intellect included by its power, each one existing in actuality. It is just as if a living city included other living beings; the life of the city would be more complete and powerful, but nothing would stop the other lives from sharing the same nature. Or it is as if both a great fire and small fires stemmed from a universal fire; universal being is the being of universal fire, or rather the being from which the being of universal fire stems.

The function of the more rational soul is intellection, but not only intellection. For otherwise in what way would it differ from intellect? For it took on something extra, in addition to being intellective, so that it did not remain just intellect. And it too has a function, as does everything that exists in the intelligible world. It looks to what is prior to it and has intellection of it; but when it looks into itself it has intellection of what is posterior to it, which it organizes and directs, and controls it. For it was impossible for the totality of beings in the intelligible world to remain static when it was possible for something else to come into being in succession to
it—something that is inferior but which has to exist if what is prior to it exists.

4. In turning back to their source, individual souls experience a yearning that is intellective, but they also have a power directed to the world below—just like light, which depends on the sun above but is unstinting in its generosity to what comes after it. As long as these souls remain in the intelligible world together with universal soul, they are untroubled, and in the heavens they remain together with the universal soul and share with it in directing. They are just like men in the court of an absolute monarch who join with him in directing, without themselves coming down from the palace. For they are then all together in the same place.

10 But the individual souls move out of the universal to become partial and to belong to themselves; each of them, as if weary of being with something else, retires into its own place. When it does this over a period of time, fleeing the All and setting itself apart, and does not look at the intelligible—then it becomes a part, is isolated, grows weak, becomes embroiled and looks to the partial; in its separation from the universal it has mounted a single vehicle and has abandoned everything else; it has come and turned to that one vehicle that is battered by everything on all sides. By now it has deserted the universal, and governs the particular
with great difficulty, caring for what is outside itself through contact, | being present in it and sinking deep inside it. This is where it experiences what Plato calls “moulting,” and is caught in the fetters of the body, losing the invulnerability of directing the nobler part | of the cosmos> that is enjoyed by the universal soul. It was altogether better for it earlier on when it had soared back upwards. | So it has been ensnared, having fallen and become entangled in chains; it acts by sense since it is prevented from acting by intellect as it originally did; it is said to have become entombed, to be in a cave—but when it turns to intellection it is said to be freed from its chains and to ascend, when it starts “to contemplate real beings” by recollection. | For in spite of everything it always keeps something in some way transcendent. So souls come to have two lives, so to speak, forced to live one life “there” and one “here,” turn and turn about. Those more able to consort with Intellect live more of their life “there,” while those in the opposite state, either by nature or chance, live more of their life “here.” | Plato tacitly implies this when he makes a division in the contents of the second mixing bowl and distinguishes them as parts, saying that at this point they had to enter into becoming, since they had become parts of a particular kind. And if he says that god “sowed” them he must be understood to be speaking in the same way as when he has him talk and make declarations. | For his
explanation generates and creates things that exist in the nature of universals, bringing forward one after another things that are everlastingly coming into being in this way and that are everlastingly existing, to make his exposition clear.

5. There is no inconsistency in Plato’s “sowing seed for birth,” “the descent for the perfection of the world,” “judgment,” “the cave,” “necessity,” “volition” (for necessity includes volition), and “being in the body which is something evil”; or in Empedocles’ “flight from god,” “the wandering” and “the sin which brings judgment”; or in Heraclitus’ “repose consisting in flight”; nor, generally speaking, is there a discrepancy between the voluntary and the involuntary nature of the descent. For everything that goes to the worse does so unwillingly; but even so, when it goes by its innate momentum, in suffering what is worse it is said to be experiencing justice for what it has done. But whenever it becomes necessary to act and be acted upon eternally in this way by the law of nature, and when, descending from what is above it, it encounters and serves the need of another in its progress, then one would not be speaking inconsistently with the truth or with oneself in saying that a god had sent it down. For even if there are many intervening stages, the final outcome of each chain of events is referred to the starting point.
The error of the soul is twofold. On the one hand it lies in the cause of its descent, on the other in acting wrongly when it has arrived down here. The penalty in the former case is just this—what it has suffered after descending. In the latter the lesser punishment consists of sinking into further bodies in quick succession, depending on the judgement of what it deserves, \( \text{that this happens by divine decree is made clear by the word “judgment”} \) while excessive degrees of vice are considered to deserve severer punishment under the direction of avenging deities.

So although the soul is something divine and comes from the higher realm, \( \text{it comes to reside in the body; although it is a god, albeit of lower status, it comes down here in this way through self-willed inclination, because of its power and its intention to organize its posteriors. If it escapes quickly, it will have suffered no damage by acquiring a knowledge of evil, by having learnt about the nature of vice, by bringing its powers into the open and by displaying its functions and actions, which would have remained latent in the immaterial world and would have been meaningless, forever failing to come to actuality. The soul itself would never have known the powers that it possessed, since they would not have been brought to light or issued forth. For actuality revealed everywhere the power that would have remained utterly} \)
hidden, blotted out, so to speak, and not existing since it never truly existed. For now each one of us, seeing the outer richness, marvels at the inner reality and the creation of such subtleties.

6. So there must be not only a unity, because otherwise all things would have been hidden within it, lacking shape; and not even one of the real beings would exist if it remained within itself, static. Nor would there be the plurality of those beings generated from the One if the beings that came after them had not issued from them to take the rank of souls.

In just the same way there could not, of necessity, be just souls without their products coming to light, since it belongs to every nature to produce its posteriors and to unfold itself, as from a seed, from some undivided starting point that proceeds to an outcome in the sensible world. What is prior remains for ever in its proper abode, while what is posterior is engendered, so to speak, by some ineffable power, as great as the power that resides in the beings “up there,” a power that could not remain static like someone who has jealously drawn a circle round himself. Rather it had to move forward ceaselessly until all things reached the ultimate limits of their potential, driven by a power, limitless in every direction, that sends them out from within itself and cannot leave anything without
a share in itself. For there was nothing to prevent anything, whatever it was, from having a share in the nature of good to the extent that each thing had the ability to participate.

If, then, the nature of matter always existed, it was impossible for it not to participate, because of its very existence, in that which bestows the good on everything to the extent that each thing can receive it. Or else, if the coming to be of matter was a necessary consequence of prior causes, not even in this case did it need to exist in isolation as if that which grants being like some favor had come to a halt before reaching it because of some inability. So the very great beauty of the sensible world is a manifestation of all that is most noble in the intelligible, of its power and goodness. All things that exist, both in the intelligible world and the sensible world, are for ever bound together—the intelligibles by their own nature, the sensibles receiving their being eternally by participation in them, imitating the intelligible nature to the best of their ability.

7. Because this nature is twofold, both intelligible and sensible, it is better for the soul to have its being in the intelligible world; but even so, since it has the sort of nature that it has, it must of necessity have the ability to participate in the sensible world as well, and it should not feel aggrieved with itself, in that it is not
superior in all respects, for holding a middle rank among real beings.

It belongs to the divine realm. But since it is on the fringe of the intelligible world and borders on the sensible nature, it must give something of itself to this world, but is also bound to receive something back from it, if ever it should not organize with the secure part of itself but sink into the interior with excessive eagerness, not remaining whole along with the whole. Most particularly, it is possible for it to emerge again having gained some record of what it saw and experienced “here,” and having understood what existence “there” is like. By comparing what are in a way opposites it in a way understands more clearly the nobler things. For experience of evil amounts to a clearer understanding of good for those whose powers are too weak for them to know with real understanding what evil is before experiencing it.

Just as the outward progress of Intellect is a descent to the limit of what is inferior—for it cannot ascend to the transcendent, but must act outwards from itself, and since it cannot remain within itself, it must by the law of nature come to be soul; this is its end, and it must hand over to soul what comes next in order while it itself rises swiftly back upwards. Of just the same nature is the activity of soul; what is posterior to it is this world, and what is prior to it is its vision of real beings. This
sort of experience happens in time to souls that are in division and in an inferior situation, when a reversion towards the superior occurs. By contrast, what is called the soul of the cosmos has not even become involved in this inferior activity, but has no experience of evils, but embraces intellectively what is below it in contemplation, although forever depending on its priors. It has both abilities at the same time—to receive from “there” and to minister to the world “here,” since it is inconceivable for it, being soul, not to touch upon this world too.

8. Furthermore—if I may venture to state my convictions more clearly against the opinions of others, as I must—not even our own soul sinks in its entirety, but there is always some part of it in the intelligible world. But if the part in the sensible world wins mastery, or rather is itself mastered and thrown into turmoil, it hinders us from having perception of whatever the higher part of the soul is contemplating.

For the object of intellection reaches us only when it descends and arrives at the level of perception. For we do not know everything that occurs in any one part of the soul until it reaches the whole soul. For example appetite is not known to us while it remains in the appetitive part of the soul, but only when we apprehend it with our inner powers of perception or of discursive thought, or both. For every soul has in it something of
what is below on the side of the body, and something of what is above on the side of intellect.

The soul that is whole and belongs to the whole brings order to the whole by the part of it that is on the side of the body, transcending it effortlessly, because it acts on what is below it not through calculation, as we do, but by intellection—for “art does not deliberate”—organizing what is below it, what belongs to the whole. But souls that have become partial and belong to a part, although they too contain the transcendent, are troubled by perception and apprehension when they apprehend many things that are contrary to their nature and that cause them distress and turmoil. For they are concerned with what is partial, defective, and surrounded by much that is alien and much that arouses desire in them. It has pleasures too, and its pleasure is deceptive. But it has a part that is free of the pleasures of the moment, and this part lives a life of consistency.