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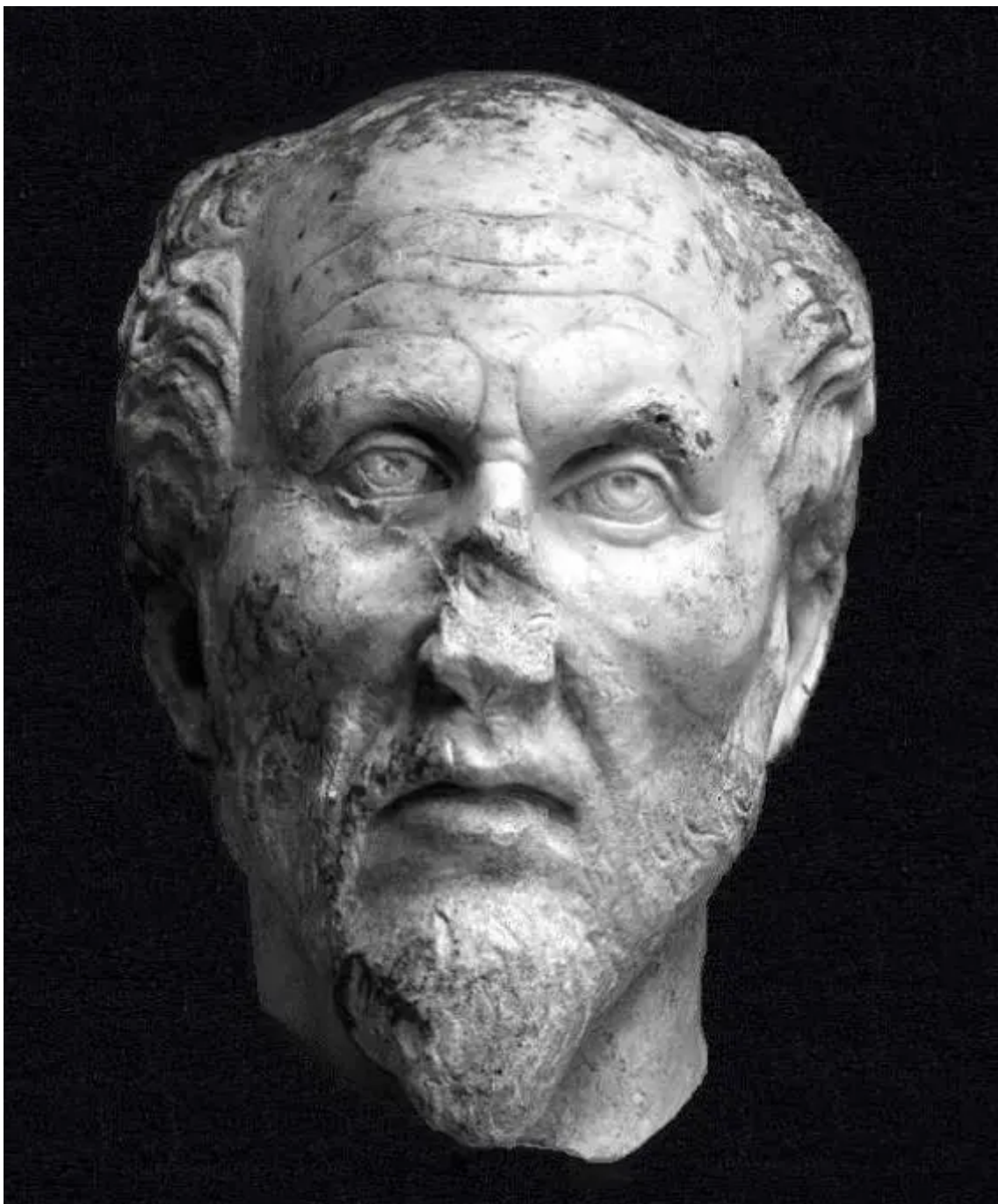
BEING TRULY ALIVE: PLOTINUS ON
MINDFULNESSIn [Greek Literature](#), [Philosophy](#), [The Classical Tradition](#)*Mateusz Stróżyński*

Philosophy is nowadays considered an occupation divorced from daily life and practical affairs. It is something that professors of philosophy presumably do, reading books and writing books, maybe teaching students as well. This attitude towards philosophy is not entirely the product of modern times. Already in antiquity there was a famous story about the first philosopher, Thales of Miletus (7th/6th century BC), who predicted the solar eclipse in 585 and was one of Europe's first mathematicians and engineers. Plato (427–347 BC) tells the anecdote as follows:

“While he [Thales] was studying the stars and looking upwards, he fell into a pit, and a neat, witty Thracian servant girl jeered at him, they say, because he was so eager to know the things in the sky that he could not see what was there before him at his very feet.”^[1]

So here we have the stereotype of a philosopher who is so impractical that he deserves only a laugh from the down-to-earth, clever girl, who knows what is really important. And yet most ancient schools of philosophy insisted that philosophy is in fact not a thing dissociated from our practical life at all. They believed that philosophy was not only a search for the truth about reality, but also a way of life and a path towards happiness and peace of mind. Philosophical schools taught not only doctrines and rational arguments supporting them, but also what Pierre Hadot called “spiritual exercises”, that is, practical methods of achieving wisdom and happiness.^[2]

In the last few decades, thanks to Hadot and others, the idea that philosophy can transform daily life into the good life has spread and become more popular among non-professional philosophers. The most popular school of ancient thought in this regard is still Stoicism. But another school, Platonism, which was often accused of being *the* other-worldly and impractical philosophy – the sort that makes you fall into pits – actually offers its own unique practical, and applicable, wisdom.



Plotinus, maybe? (a bust of c. AD 300 from Ostia Antica, now in the Ostiense Museum outside Rome)

One of the greatest philosophers of antiquity and perhaps the greatest interpreter of Plato in history was Plotinus (AD 204–270). In his treatise *On Happiness* (*Peri Eudaimoniās*), Plotinus briefly discusses the phenomenon of consciousness or awareness and its relationship with the good life. [3] He points out that there are many beautiful activities which we perform while we are fully awake (Greek *egregorōs*), and yet we are not consciously aware of them

(Greek *parakolouthēin*). Plotinus gives two examples of such activities, one theoretical and one practical: reading a book and behaving bravely. He says that when we are reading a book with great concentration and attention, we are not really consciously aware that we are reading. The same goes for courageous acts: when we are being truly brave, we are not consciously aware of the fact.

Plotinus is speaking here about two different kinds of consciousness or awareness. When he points out that we are not aware of reading when we are reading attentively, he does not mean that we do not see the words on a page or that we do not follow what we read. We are not asleep after all. Plotinus uses the term “awake” to refer to one sort of awareness, while a different Greek word, here translated as “consciously aware”, signifies another sort or level of awareness. *Parakolouthēin* means literally “to follow alongside” and evokes an image of one person doing something and another person observing and following him. Plotinus says this is an impediment to the good life, because it makes our actions “more vague” or “more confused” (Greek *amudroterai*).

In other words, the wise person who, by the practice of philosophy, becomes truly happy is living his life *without* this sort of conscious awareness, and so is living with a greater intensity and clarity. Plotinus seems to mean here a kind of conscious awareness which is primarily associated with verbal thought. Indeed, if I am reading a book and I’m trying to say to myself all the time “Now I’m reading”, this will make it virtually impossible for me actually to read the book. Just as thinking constantly “Now I’m being brave” doesn’t seem like a good recipe for performing an act of true bravery.



A distracted reader (Herculaneum, 1st cent. AD; now in the National Archaeological Museum, Naples, Italy)

The sort of consciousness that Plotinus criticises is allowing our consciousness to split into an observer distinct from the agent, instead of simply doing whatever we do with full attention, in a state of being fully awake to what we are doing. Plotinus' chosen term *parakolouthēin* underlines the dualistic and divisive character of this kind of awareness. If we diminish it by philosophical practice, we do not lose anything significant, because not only can

we still read or act bravely (or, for that matter, clean our apartment, walk in the woods, or play with our child), we can do it in a much more intense way.

A quite similar attempt to overcome our tendency to *parakolouthēin* and practise a more awakened kind of daily life has pervaded Buddhist philosophy since its beginnings in the 5th / 4th century BC. In the last decades, those forms of Buddhist meditation have inspired psychologists in the West to promote what is usually called today “mindfulness”, that is, a practice of being silently aware of whatever we are doing in a particular moment, instead of giving in to daydreaming. Typically, mindfulness is taught today as something like chopping vegetables for a soup and being fully attentive to this particular action. It is about first taking a carrot into our hands, feeling it, maybe smelling it, trying to experience it with a sense of openness and childlike wonder, and then chopping it with full attentiveness, without thinking about what we will do next. Very often the awareness of our natural breathing – when we do not try to breathe in a certain way, but just experience the sensations in our body – is considered to be a very useful way to practising mindfulness during daily chores.

Mindfulness practised daily can reduce stress, limit our preoccupation with the future and the past, and help us to control our emotions. When we are afraid of something, instead of thinking about the thing we are afraid of, we are invited to be attentive to the sensations in our body (like a tightness of the stomach, coldness of hands, etc.), alterations in our breathing, and the peculiar “taste” of an emotion itself. Mindfulness, as it is practised and taught today, aims at helping us to find more joy in daily life, even in the most mundane, supposedly boring activities. In this way, it seems to tend in the same direction as the ancient idea of philosophy as a way of life and the practice of happiness.



Ancient and modern meditation: Buddhists at the Wat Pa Tam Wua Forest Monastery, Thailand

Plotinus, however, seems to have much more ambitious goals. First, he says that when we are awakened to our activities without thinking verbally about them, we live to a greater or higher degree; we become more fully alive. Our experience of our daily activities becomes less vague and more clear as we become intensely present in whatever we do.

At the end of this passage from *On Happiness*, Plotinus adds that this kind of awareness is also much more unified. He says that when we habitually function as dissociated observers of the things we do, our life is dissipated, or literally “spilt out” (Greek *kechumenon*), into sense-perception. Our awareness is then not only occupied by the multitude of objects that call for our attention, but also fragmented, since we attend now to this, now to that thing we see or hear; or we desire now this, now that, thus being drawn out of ourselves towards those objects. On the other hand, when our soul becomes unified, we no longer feel as if we were

drawn to different objects of perception or desire, but we are more free, while, at the same time, we experience our life in a clearer and more intense way.

In this way we can see all our experience as united in something single and simple, or rather, as Plotinus claims, not in something, but in *someone* – that is, in ourselves. We who have awakened to our experience and action find out that we ourselves are a clear, intensely alive presence untouched in its essence by the constant distraction of our senses and imagination.

For Plotinus, philosophy is the path to such a life, and such a life is the good, happy life, in which we can be who we really are: pure, immaterial souls. But we do not become like Thales who fell into a pit. On the contrary, we become intensely aware of whatever is under our feet and whatever happens to us in a given moment. Philosophy, for Plotinus, is not an escape from this world, but instead a better way of actually living in it.



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Notes

- 1 *Theaetetus* 147a, as translated by H.N. Fowler, which can be accessed [here](#).
- 2 P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercise from Socrates to Foucault* (transl. M. Chase; Malden, MA-Chichester, UK, 2017); *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (transl. M. Chase; London, 2002).
- 3 *Enneads* 1.4.10. The Greek text and translation can be most conveniently found in the Loeb edition of Plotinus' *Enneads* (transl. A.H. Armstrong; 7 vols, Cambridge, MA, 1966–88).

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