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Plotinus' Interpretation of Phidias' Statue of Zeus

In Plotinus' Neoplatonism, the attitude towards beauty in arts is essentially different in comparison with Plato. In Book X of *The Republic* (595a–608b), Plato denied that poetry and visual arts have a place in the ideal state, because he considered that artists were in their creativity only “imitators of images [...] and [did] not lay hold on truth” (ibid. 600e). In many critics of Plato, his attitude towards poetry and art has been considered as the heaviest flaw of his philosophy. It surely is a lapse, since Plato himself was a philosophical poet *sui generis*. However, Plotinus corrected this unfortunate “mistake” of his great master. In this respect, we have to consider the passage about Phidias' statue of Zeus in Plotinus' tractate *On the Intelligible Beauty* (*Enn.* V 8.1.33–40), where he expressed his belief that beauty and harmony, in nature as well as in arts, arise from the same source: from the pure Intellect and the highest Good-One. – This important passage is the following:

... if anyone despises the arts because they produce their works by imitating nature, we must tell him, first, that natural things are imitations too. Then he must know that the arts do not simply imitate what they see, but they run back up to the forming principles <logoi> from which nature <phýsis> derives; then also that they do a great deal by themselves, and, since they possess beauty, they make up what is defective in things. For Phidias too did not make his Zeus from any model perceived by the senses, but understood what Zeus would look like if he wanted to make himself visible. (Plotinus, *Enn.* V 8 (31) 1.33-40)

That is surely something quite different from Plato's devaluation of visual arts just to fabrication of the “images of images”, since according to Plotinus' belief, an artist who is inspired by the Beauty of the living Intellect, “recreates” this ideal Beauty in his work—almost as a human demiurge—by presenting to our eyes what the Form of some being, including Zeus, *would look like, if it were visible* (or audible, or tangible ...).

In Plotinus' philosophy, the beauty of art and nature, that is of the entire world of senses, is the reflection of the transcendent beauty of three "hypostases": the Soul, the Intellect, and the One-(or)-Good. Plotinus repeats this key thought in several ways and contexts from his chronologically first treatise *On Beauty* on. At the beginning of this early treatise, he opens the question, "what is it which makes us imagine that bodies are beautiful and attracts our hearing to sounds because of their beauty?" (*Enn.* I 6 (1) 1.7–8)—and he answers that everything that comes as immediate from the soul is beautiful (see *ibid.* 1.9 ff.). However, it does not mean that beauty comes from every kind of soul, since it is present only in a "purified soul":

So the soul when it is purified becomes form <*eîdos*> and formative principle <*lógos*>, altogether bodiless and intellectual and entirely belonging to the divine, whence beauty springs and all that is akin to it. Soul, then, when it is raised to the level of intellect increases in beauty. Intellect and the things of intellect are its beauty, its own beauty and not another's, since only then is it truly soul. (Plotinus, *Enn.* I 6 (1) 6.14–18)

Soul, the third hypostasis, itself is bodiless, but her *logoi*, "formative principles", which she receives from the second hypostasis, the Intellect, impart the ideal Beauty to the world of senses. Following Platonism, something is beautiful if it is transcendent, or more accurately, if it "participates" in the transcendent first hypostasis, the Good or the One. This is true also in the case when a work of art directs and attracts our view into itself—and it is indeed the intention of every artistic work—i.e., when it leads our view to its proper or, let us say, individual transcendent "height", or maybe even better said, to its own "depth". The specific value of a work of art is just in its capacity that it is transcendent by its own individual being. As Friedrich W. J. Schelling wrote in his *System des transcendentalen Idealismus* (1800), "das Unendliche endlich dargestellt ist Schönheit" (Schelling 1995, 688). From the point of Platonic aesthetics, no statue, no verse, no work of art is "self-sufficient", namely in the sense that it is "only itself" and nothing more. When some work of art reveals its "self-being", it is meaningful and precious just because of the transcendence of being that is revealed by it.

In the Greek mythological and religious tradition, the cosmic Intellect is impersonated in Zeus, who conquered his father Chronos, the ancient god of time, as well as Titans and other “dark powers” of the ancient days, and after his “Olympic” victory established the rule of law and order in the world. It is therefore not a coincidence that Plotinus in his treatise *On the Intelligible Beauty* takes the famous statue of Zeus, one of the “Seven Wonders of the World”, as an example of an eminent work in visual arts.¹

However, it is less clear what this athletic giant has in common with Plotinus’ spiritual conception of the Intellect, unless we reduce this “example” in his treatise only to an “abstract”, allegorical figure of Zeus that is supposed to “represent” the power and rule of the cosmic Intellect. But this reduction, which is anyway more classicistic than classical, is not an appropriate answer to our question, since Plotinus explicitly says that Phidias succeeded to present “what Zeus would look like if he wanted to make himself visible”, and these words surely do not mean the same as saying that the statue were made after a “model perceived by the senses”. Nevertheless, I am putting the question what is indeed the proper meaning of Plotinus’ thought that Zeus would look like Phidias’ statue *if he wanted to make himself visible*. Would Zeus as the cosmic Intellect indeed look somehow like this sculpted giant? Probably not.

In further reflection upon this comparison, we can state with certainty at least that Plotinus’ Intellect is *not* like a majestic king with a royal scepter, neither like the almighty Christian Pantocrator as presented mostly in the Greek Orthodox basilicas. To my mind, it is essential for understanding Plotinus’ philosophy to comprehend that the “power” (*dýnamis*, this term also means “potentiality”) of the first hypostasis, the One-(or)-Good, whose “Light” emanates into the whole cosmos through or by two next hypostases, the Intellect and the Soul, that this

¹ The Statue of Zeus at Olympia was a giant seated figure, about 12.4 m tall, created by the famous Greek sculptor Phidias around 435 BC in the Temple of Zeus in Olympia. The statue was made of ivory plates and gold panels on a wooden framework. Zeus sat on a painted cedar wood throne ornamented with ebony, ivory, gold and precious stones, in his hand holding Nike, the goddess of victory. The statue was lost and destroyed during the 5th century AD, so some details of its form are known only from the ancient Greek descriptions (Pausanias & *al.*) and representations on coins. Phidias’s Zeus is mentioned also in Cicero’s book *On the Orator*, and in several other classical treatises on art it is also considered as an example of the imagining of the non-imaginable, divine.

dýnamis is very far from the power of an absolute ruler, some secular king or emperor. –

Let me express in this context another opinion of mine, which seems to me important for our understanding of Plotinus: it is precisely because the One-Good is *not* “powerful” in a secular and/or theistic sense, Plotinus’ philosophy is not “onto-theology”, it is not “metaphysics” in Heidegger’s sense of “oblivion of being”. In Plotinus’s philosophy, neither the One as the first hypostasis nor the Intellect as the second hypostasis, which is the self-reflexive knowledge and “life” of the One, do *not* have the “executive” power of an onto-theological “Highest Being”, who or which would rule over all other beings and—following Heidegger—dominate in the long historical period of “metaphysical nihilism”, in the epoch(s) of “concealment” of the so-called “ontological difference” (between *Sein–Seiende*). Let me repeat: just this point, namely the pure *transcendence* of the One-Good (and at the same time, paradoxically and “mystically” its “transcendence-in-immanence” in the Intellect, the Soul and in the world) is to my mind essential for the right understanding of Plotinus’ philosophy and (Neo)Platonism in general.

Now let us return to Phidias’ statue of Zeus. Even if we agree with Plotinus’ observation that Phidias “did not make his Zeus from any model perceived by the senses”, a deeper and more basic question remains open: *How could (or might or should) the works of art present what is “unpresentable” or “unimaginable”?* What does it really mean and imply when we say that Phidias succeeded in his “presenting” a higher, with our human eyes unseen being, Zeus or some other god, maybe Apollo whose figure is even more splendid and at the same time also more “veiled” in our imagination? – In the Holy Bible, the Lord revealed himself to Moses (only) as “the burning bush”, in order not to burn Moses with His too brilliant glare. In the Old Testament, there are at mostly angels as higher beings who manifest themselves to human eyes, during the daytime or in dreams. The same, even in a stricter sense, is true for Islam: melek Jibreel (angel Gabriel), the messenger of the invisible and unimaginable Allah, visited Muhammed in the form of a human being to reveal him Quran. But we can find similar beliefs of gods’ burning splendor already in the Greek mythology, for example, when Zeus, trapped by Hera’s jealous intrigue, reveals himself in all his too splendid power to his mistress Semele, mother of their son Dionysius, and burns her by this epiphany.

Generally speaking, before the rise of Christianity human eyes and souls could not survive the vision of God. On the contrary, Jesus Christ as the Son of God manifests himself to his apostles and to other human beings already in his terrestrial life and gloriously after his resurrection, without destroying them—on the contrary, His “parousia” gives firm belief and salvation to his followers. However, as we know from the history of Christianity, especially from the period of iconoclasm, the *problem* itself of “imagining” God has not been completely solved in Christianity, and it remains as a kind of theological problem also nowadays, for example as a simple question, whether Jesus was a white or a colored man etc.

And so Plotinus’ question concerning Phidias’ Zeus has to be understood in all its depth and universality: *What would God look like if he (or she or it) were visible to our human eyes?* Plotinus might agree with me in the assumption that if Zeus as the god of heavens *really* wanted to be visible to our human eyes, he would tell us that we should better forget His similarity with Phidias’ statue at Olympia, and that we should rather visualize Him as the great sky above us, like in Plotinus’ “starry vision”, i.e. in another passage from the same treatise *On the Intelligible Beauty*.² – So let me quote at the end of this short presentation this “starry” passage, which is one of my favorite passages in Plotinus:

... For all things *there* are transparent, and there is nothing dark or opaque; everything and all things are clear to the inmost part of everything; for light is transparent to light. Each there has everything in itself and sees all things in every other, so that all are everywhere and each and every one is all, and the glory is unbounded; for each of them is great, because even the small is great; the sun there is all the stars, and each star is the sun and all the others. A different kind of being stands out in each, but in each all are manifest. (Plotinus, *Enn.* V 8 (31) 4.4–12)

² By the way, according to a legend, when Phidias was asked what inspired him—whether he climbed Mount Olympus to see Zeus, or whether Zeus came down from Olympus so that Phidias could see him—the artist answered that he portrayed Zeus according to Homer's *Iliad*, Book I, verses 528–530: *He spoke, the son of Cronos, and nodded his head with the dark brows, / and the immortally anointed hair of the great god / swept from his divine head, and all Olympus was shaken.* (I have taken this anecdote from Wikipedia.) If this story is true, Phidias avoided the proper question very smartly indeed!

Therefore, following Werner Beierwaltes, a prominent interpreter of Plotinus, especially in his very inspiring essay *Die Metaphysik des Lichtes in der Philosophie Plotins* (“Metaphysics of Light in Plotinus’ philosophy”), we can conclude this presentation with a statement that in Plotinus’ contemplative and mystical vision, the *Light* itself is the highest “form” of beauty: formless Light, which is all-present *there*, is the “power” (*dýnamis*) that enables all beautiful forms, in nature and art, which are *here*. Light is a sublime “transcendence-in-immanence”.

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