

A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON PLOTINUS' CONCEPT OF BEAUTY AS AN ECSTATIC EXPERIENCE OF THE SOUL

Justin Nnaemeka ONYEUKAZIRI

Abstract

This paper posits Plotinus' conception of beauty as not only one of the answers to the question on how to fill the lacuna created by the demise of religious sublimity and awareness in many. But is the most persuasive and transforming way for individual spiritual transformation and by extension the transformation of the world. It focuses on Plotinus' concept of beauty, from the perspective of the human person. Attention has been given to Plotinus' aesthetics mostly within the general scope of Platonism, focusing on the notion of beauty as form (intellectual beauty) and on the question of whether or not beauty is conceived as symmetry both in Plato and Plotinus. This paper claims that the notion of beauty for Plotinus is an ecstatic experience of the soul. Thus, for Plotinus, beauty is not just aesthetical, it is more so a spiritual experience in the soul. This focus on Plotinus' notion of beauty is considered important as an alternative way for the cultivation of the interior life, in a world that is increasing becoming secularized. It is also relevant because the philosophical focus on beauty has largely been on the object out there. Even when a subjective focus is given on the concept of beauty, it is not largely focused on the spiritual transformation of the human person. Hence, this paper, is an analytical exposition of Plotinus' works on beauty.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Beauty, Ecstatic Experience, Soul

1. Introduction

Plotinus (203-270 CE), as the father of Neo-Platonism no doubt occupies a very important position in the history of Western Philosophy, especially in the ranks of Hellenistic philosophers. His impact and the influence of his thoughts on Christian philosophy and religion in general during its earlier period is enormous. Thus, his works are not unfamiliar to many Christian and Islamic religious and philosophical scholars, especially during the early medieval period. While attention has been sizably given to his metaphysics, comparably less has been given to his aesthetics. On many occasions, when attention is given to his aesthetics, it is done within the general scope of Platonism. By focusing on the question of whether or not beauty is conceived as symmetry or in sense-perception, this work thus, aims at focusing on Plotinus' notion of beauty, from the perspective of the human person. That is to say, what does beauty do to the human person; how does beauty affect and transform the human person. This paper claims that the notion of beauty for Plotinus is an ecstatic experience of the soul. Thus, beauty is not just aesthetical, for Plotinus it is more so spiritual. This focus on Plotinus' notion of beauty is considered important as an alternative way for the cultivation of the interior life, in a world that is increasing becoming secularized. It is also relevant because the

philosophical focus on beauty has largely been on the object out there. Even when a subjective focus is given on the concept of beauty, it is not largely focused on the spiritual transformation of the human person. Therefore, to execute this research, focus would be given primarily to Plotinus' works and reference to other texts would be provided if it is necessary to understand Plotinus' own text. The methodology implored would be more an analytical and personal reflective reading of Plotinus. Hence, to put in perspective the Plotinus notion of beauty as the ecstatic experience of the soul, a brief exposition of Plotinus' Cosmology will be exposed. This will help to clarify Plotinus' understanding of the soul and its relationship with the realities in his cosmology as it relates to his notion of beauty. Thus, to execute this, the following steps are taken: first, concisely expose Plotinus' Cosmology. Second, Plotinus' Analysis and Critique of the General Concept of Beauty will be exposed. Third, a reflection on Beauty as an Ecstatic Experience of the Soul will be expounded. Then there will be a conclusion reflecting on the transforming effect of beauty in the individual and the world.

2. Plotinus' Cosmology

Plotinus is a thinker of an acutely active and rigorous critical mind, yet deeply spiritual and transcendental in his thinking and speculation. O'Meara (2010:301), describes Plotinus thus: "Among the philosophers of late antiquity Plotinus stands out as a thinker of exceptional depth, subtlety, originality and power." He is indeed a man fully devoted to the transcendental life, whose last words to his pupil and his doctor, Eustochius, is: "Try to bring the divine in us to the divine in the All" (quoted in O'Meara 2010: 302). As a diehard Platonist, to understand the philosophy of Plotinus, and specifically his notion of beauty, one has to understand at least the fundamental positions in the philosophy of Plato. For instance, with respect to the concept of beauty, Yount (2014:49), notes:

Both philosophers hold the following claims to be true: beauty is a Form; beauty is similar to but not identical with the Good; one can have a transformative vision of Beauty; the imitator (artist, poet) of Beauty does not know if the imitations are in fact beautiful or how bad his imitations are.

Besides, the philosophical kinship shared between Plato and Plotinus, to understand Plotinus' philosophy, one also, needs to understand the positions where Aristotle differs from Plato. More so, how Aristotle attempts to resolve the problems he considers inherent in Plato's philosophy. This is because Plotinus, though being the most outstanding and faithful Platonist, especially during the Hellenistic period, he never considered Aristotle as an adversary of Plato. Plotinus, considers Aristotle as walking on the same philosophical paths as his master, Plato, and that he misunderstood certain positions of Plato. This, he tries to rectify by

mutually employing the philosophical thoughts of both Plato and Aristotle in his own philosophical discourse. Keeping with the philosophical spirit of the Hellenistic Roman periods, Plotinus thoughts are not merely rational philosophical positions separated from life, but a philosophy of life. A seeking, that is aimed at being a source of moral and spiritual ways of life for a person. During this period, in fact, philosophy as spirituality, the training and preparing of the soul for death, was at its peak. Keeping this in mind, the perspective of the cosmology of Plotinus could be understood.

As a Platonist, Plotinus' world-view or cosmology is idealist, thus, he maintains the key trends of Plato's cosmology and cosmogony. Plato's main exposition of his cosmology is in the dialogue entitled, *Timaeus*. And Plato's cosmology is the fruit of his reflection and the discussion with his students in *Timaeus*. Plotinus believes in a world that is structurally ordered, with three hypostases/principles: The One, the Intellect (nous) and the Soul (psuche). O'Meara (307: footnote no. 11), observes: 'Modern studies sometimes refer to Soul, Intellect and the One, in Plotinus, as "hypostases". However, Plotinus uses the term *hypostasis* to refer, not to the One, but to the realities it produces, and a better term for all three would be "principles", as suggested by Gerson 1994:3.' He holds the existence of an ultimate transcendental reality, the First Principle, which he calls the One or the Good. The One is the First, "in the sense that it is simplest, and the self-Sufficient, because it is not composed of a number of parts" (Against the Gnostics, Bk II, 9(1),10). From the one comes the Divine Intellect which contains the Forms of all things. After the Divine Intellect comes the Soul, and then the bodies and all other lower realities of purely corporal nature. The One is the generative force of all things, thus it is the transcendental Absolute Being, Good, Beauty and Truth. Thus, the One is beyond the complete grasp of every human language. Hence, he maintains, 'whenever we say "the One" and whenever we say "the Good," we must think that the nature we are speaking of is the same nature, and call it "one" not as predicating anything of it but as making it clear to ourselves as far as we can' (Against Gnostics, BK II, 9(1), 5-10). Thus however, language is used, however, because it is the only way to communicate or engage in a discourse of the One. The One is not like the Judeo-Christian God, that is, a creator outside the world. The One is eternally transcendent from the world and immanent in the world. In the same way, other levels of being in the Plotinus' universe, are not completely apart from another. Hence, though the Divine Intellect, the Soul and body are distinct beings, the body is in the soul, the soul is in the Intellect and the Intellect is in the One.

While the One is the Absolute Good, Plotinus conceives matter, that is the sense-world, as the principle of evil (in the moral sense). Plotinus, employs a rational formative principle which he calls, *logos*, that flows from the Intellect, to explain the becoming and order of all things by providence (On Providence (1), Book 3(2),15-25). On the hierarchical order of levels of being in Plotinus, Armstrong (1966: xvii), elucidates that the One though ontological remote and distinct from

other beings in his cosmology, the One is metaphysically present in all the other beings in the hierarchy. Hence, Armstrong (Armstrong,1966: xii) contends that there is an outgoing movement from unity (the One) to ever-increasing multiplicity (matter), which is a downward movement; the other movement is an upward movement from multiplicity to unification (the One). He considers these two movements as the profound tension in the thought of Plotinus on the understanding of the First Principle.

This means, that while there is generative movement of multiplicity downwards from the One via the Intellect and the Soul, there is a transcendental ascending movement of unification and perfection, from the Soul via the Intellect to the One. This ontological relationship between the One, the Intellect and the Soul and their downward and upward movements respectively, are very essential in understanding Plotinus' notion of beauty. Below, then, shall be an analysis of his critique of the general conception of the beautiful.

3. Plotinus' Analysis and Critique of the General Concept of Beauty

Plotinus' concept of beauty is brilliantly exposed in his treatise entitled, *On Beauty*. Plotinus begins this treatise by reflecting on how beauty has been hitherto generally understood. Hence, Plotinus (On Beauty Book(Bk) 1, 6(1), 1-5) submits:

Beauty is mostly in sight, but it is to be found too in things we hear, in combinations of words and also in music, and in all music [not only in songs]; for tunes and rhythms are certainly beautiful: and for those who are advancing upwards from sense-perception ways of life and actions and characters and intellectual activities are beautiful, and there is the beauty of virtue.

In the above reference, Plotinus briefly summarizes how beauty has been generally conceived before and during his era. Thus, it should not be understood as the definition of beauty proper to him. His assertion is, according to the general view of many, beauty is conceived as activities within the realm of sense-perception. He strongly disagrees with this position. To this general view, the organs for sight and hearing, are the most prevalent human organs in the activities of conceiving beauty. When this is the case, then objects of beauty, could be found in physical and visible objects of nature and in fine and literary art works, like painting, sculpture, drawings, music, poetry, and songs of different forms. The second level of the general view of beauty in his submission stated above, is the conception of beauty in "action and characters." Though Plotinus did not provide examples of the beauties conceived in "action and characters". It would not be incorrect to include here the beauties of drama, play and other theatric activities and the beauty of sports and military actions. The third level of the general view of beauty, is the

beauty of or in intellectual activities: this would include all contemplative activities that engage the human mind or intellect. Definitely the engagement in the natural sciences, mathematics and above all Philosophy (metaphysics) would belong to this category of beauty. The fourth level of the general view of beauty is the beauty of virtue: The beauty of virtue as the name implies is the beauty of the soul as a result of the virtuous activities of the soul. Thus, this, is the beauty we perceive in the actions of a courageous, humble, patient, charitable person and the like.

Among the four general views of beauty highlighted above as summarized by Plotinus, the first and the second are not considered to be essential in what Plotinus constitutes as the beautiful. He only considers the third and the fourth views as the activities where what constitutes beauty could be possible. It shall be argued below, that Plotinus considers the beauty of virtue as the greatest of all conceptions of beauty. The beauties of intellectual activities and the beauty of virtue are both that of non-sense-perception. They are spiritual in nature, for they involve and engage the interior life of a person. Therefore, Plotinus considers the realm of sense-perception as not being principal for the conception of beauty.

In the second paragraph on the treatise *On Beauty* (Bk 1, 6(1), 10-20), Plotinus raises six questions which could be considered as fundamental aesthetic questions:

- a. What makes us imagine or think a thing (body) is beautiful and attracts us?
- b. How are all the things which depend on the soul beautiful?
- c. Are things all beautiful by a single beauty or are there different beauties in different things?
- d. What is this single or multiple beauties?
- e. What is the principle of beauty which is present in bodies (things)?
- f. What is it that attracts the gaze of people to a thing and makes them to enjoy the thing?

(a) raises the question on the why and where of the beautiful. Is the beautiful objectively in things or subjectively in the person who perceives the object? In other words, is the beautiful in the object *per se*, or in the person *per se* or in both? (b) presupposes that things depends on the soul to be judged to be beautiful. Which means that the beautiful is not in the object *per se*. But the critical question of (b), is how does the beautiful in a thing/object depend on the soul? This he claims has to do with the forms of things. Things can be beautiful because they possess forms. As would be argued below, for Plotinus to be formless is to be ugly; formlessness is disorder. The question (c) raises the problematic that is inherent when the beautiful is conceived in respect to being “well-proportioned” or mathematically symmetrical. When a beautiful house is adjudged to be such, is it as a result of the combination of the beauty of the constituted parts that are well-proportioned or is it as a result of the collective whole, which is the house? If it is either a single beauty or multiple beauties, (d) seeks to know what this beauty or these beauties are. (e)

raises the questions on the *quiddity* of beauty, what makes beautiful things beautiful? That is to say what is the Form of beauty *per se*? He considers, the last question (f) of a paramount importance. For the understanding of it, he thinks is a stepping-stone to the understanding of the rest of the questions. (f) presupposes that the beautiful attracts and excites. But why do we get attracted to the beautiful and are excited in the beautiful is the crux of the question.

Thus, he asks: “What is it that attracts the gaze of those who look at something, and turns and draws them to it and makes them enjoy the sight?” First, he gives the general responses of people. The first and common response is “good proportion of the parts to each other and to the whole, with the addition of good colour” (Bk 1, 6(1), 20-25). Simply put, being beautiful is being “well-proportioned and measured.” This is the question: whether or not beauty is symmetry? There has been a scholarly controversy among scholars on Plotinus, whether Plato and Plotinus have the same view on beauty as symmetry. Yount (2014:49-51), claims, Anton and Rist, posit that Plato did not hold beauty as symmetry but Plotinus does; but contrary to their views, he argues that both Plato and Plotinus are in agreement on the idea of symmetry and beauty. Yount argues, that Plotinus holds that beauty is Form, but only argues for beauty as symmetry with regards to objects of sense-perception. And he believes that, that is also Plato’s position. Gerson (1994), seems to hold that Plotinus was reluctant to identify beauty with symmetry. He contends: “On reflection, however, the refusal to identify beauty, even bodily beauty, with symmetry is somewhat puzzling. As we have seen, matter is unmeasuredness or absence of symmetry and form is a kind of symmetry” (p. 213).

This paper argues, neither Plato nor Plotinus opposes this theory, they both hold that well-proportioned and measure of parts and the whole, make up what is said to be beautiful. Nevertheless, they did not consider well-proportioned and measure, that is, symmetry, as what defines the beautiful. It is the contemporaneous Hellenistic school of thought, the Stoics, who exclusively define the beautiful as well-proportioned and measured with the addition of good colour (see Cicero, Tusculan Disputations, IV). Plotinus’ contention on this theory, is that if well-proportioned and measured is what essentially defines the beautiful, it implies that “nothing single and simple but only a composite thing will have any beauty” (Bk 1, 6(1), 25-30). For if beauty is in the whole as well-proportioned, it implies, the parts cannot be beautiful, since the parts are not well-proportioned. But how can there be the whole without the part? One can not even conceive the whole without necessarily conceiving the parts. Hence, Plotinus contends, if it is the case that beauty is exclusively well-proportioned, then, only the whole will be beautiful not the parts that make the whole. For the parts of a whole, do not have the property of beauty by themselves. When the beauty of a thing is grasped, the thing is grasped as a whole not in parts.

Plotinus’ question for those who claim that beauty is well-proportioned *per se*, then will be, how can the whole be beautiful when the parts that makes the whole

are not beautiful? Plotinus' counterargument is that, "if the whole is beautiful the parts must be beautiful too; a beautiful whole can certainly not be composed of ugly parts; all the parts must have beauty" (Bk 1, 6(1), 30-35). Therefore, he deductively contends that it is not possible for the whole to be beautiful without the parts. More so, even for a body that is whole, sometimes either because of lack of colours, or excess of colour from natural sunlight or from human made lights, things are judged to be beautiful or not beautiful. Therefore, Plotinus rejects this theory of beauty as well-proportioned as unsubstantial. He adjudges, "being beautiful is something else over and above good proportion, and good proportion is beautiful because of something else" (Bk 1, 6(1), 40-45). This "something else" that constitutes "being beautiful" is what this paper intends to disclose and will be explored below. Plotinus, further rejects this theory (beauty as well-proportioned or symmetry) by arguing from beauty as actions: intellectual actions and virtuous actions. He holds that it will be practically impossible to state what constitutes the "well-proportioned" in these non-body-like activities, if one considers them as having beauty.

After establishing that the theory on well-proportioned and measured in addition with good colour, is not sustainable for defining the beautiful, he proffers what he thinks the primary beauty in bodies is. He maintains that the primary beauty in bodies:

Is something which we become aware of even at the first glance; the soul speaks of it as if it understood it, recognizes and welcomes it and as it were adapts itself to it. But when it encounters the ugly it shrinks back and rejects it and turns away from it and is out of tune and alienated from it (Bk 1, 6(2),1-10).

With this reference, Plotinus maintains a different position on the conception of the beautiful. He points to the soul as the fundamental factor in the conception of the beautiful. He makes the soul of the human person the ground where the activities of beauty take place. For him what makes a thing beautiful is the form of the thing, and this form of the thing can only be grasped by the soul of the human person. Hence, without the soul it is not possible to grasp the beauty of things. But how does Plotinus conceive the soul, which is for him the fundamental principle where the conception of the beautiful happens?

Plotinus' conception of the soul is akin to the fundamentals of Plato's conception of the soul, however, it has its own specificity. Plotinus agrees with Plato, in the understanding of the soul as the true spiritual and incorporeal being of the human being that inhabits in a physical and corporal body. Thus, both agree that the soul is the "great intermediary between the worlds of intellect and sense and the representative of the former in the latter" (Armstrong, 1966: xxii). Plotinus, unlike

Plato, distinguishes the concept of the third hypostasis/principle (that is to say, the hypostasis after the One and the Intellect, in the hierarchical structure of Plotinus' cosmology as exposed above), into two: the individual souls and the Universal Soul. This means for Plotinus, the third hypostasis (the soul) in his hierarchy of beings, though one reality is understood in two ways, the Universal Soul and the individual souls. The Universal Soul is the same soul that individuates itself as the individual souls in every human person. Thus the individual soul as the form of the body for Plotinus is more in the sense of the Plato's form than in the sense of the Aristotle's form. The soul of which Plotinus speaks of in reference to beauty, is the individual souls. It is the part of a person where the contemplation of forms, and actions of virtues are produced and enacted. It is that part of a person that can bring the individual into union with the Absolute One.

Hence, Plotinus maintains that, the soul by its very nature, "is related to the higher kind of reality in the realm of being, when it sees something akin to it or a trace of its kindred reality, is delighted and thrilled and returns to itself and remembers itself and its own possessions" (Bk 1, 6(2), 5-10). What this implies, is that Plotinus thinks that the soul which is spiritual has the similitude and capacity not only to recognize the beauty as a form of everything beautiful, but to also delight in beauty *per se*. In other words, there is something in the nature of the soul that enables it to grasp the beautiful. It is only by the means of the soul that beauty as one of the forms produced by the One, by the creative principle of Logos in the Intellect can be grasped and experienced by the human person.

Hence, it implies that for Plotinus, the beauty is not in sense-perceptions but in the soul or the Intellect. He maintains, that things are beautiful in the material world because they participate in the form of the beauty in the Intellect. He puts it thus: "We maintain that the things in this world are beautiful by participating in form" (Bk 1, 6(2),15). While he explains absolute ugliness, thus: "for every shapeless thing which is naturally capable of receiving shape and form is ugly and outside the divine formative power and form" (Bk 1, 6(2),15-20). One should be careful not to understand the sense of form here, merely as the structure of a thing as in Aristotle's notion of form. For as in Plato's notion of form, Plotinus holds that everything has, or better put is capable of a form. If beauty is *well-formness*, ugliness is the distortion of form. It is thus the privation of the form of a thing that is naturally capable of receiving form, which is thus, outside the divine formative power, that is said to be absolute ugliness.

Below, shall be an exposition of how the soul grasps the form of the beautiful and what happens to the soul in its experience of the beautiful.

4. Beauty as Ecstatic Experience of the Soul

For Plotinus, beauty like truth is grasped by the contemplation of the soul on the form of beauty in things, as the soul ascends upwards through the Intellect towards union with the One. The beauty grasped by the contemplation of the soul, is

referred by Plotinus as “the beauty beyond.” He maintains that, “about the beauties beyond, which it is no more the part of sense to see, but the soul sees them and speaks of them without instruments—we must go up to them and contemplate them and leave sense to stay down below” (Bk, 6(4), 1-5). It follows, that, the grasping of the beauty beyond involves a personal encounter or an intuitive experience of the soul with the form of the beautiful. To this effect, Plotinus posits this experience of the beauty, thus: “These experiences must occur whenever there is contact with any sort of beautiful thing, wonder and a shock of delight and longing and passion and a happy excitement” (Bk, 6(4),15-20). Thus, one can say for Plotinus the *quiddity* of an aesthetic experience is: *a feeling of wonder, a shock of delight, passionate longing, and a happy excitement*. These feelings are experienced irrespective of the beautiful thing encountered. Based on the fact that these experiences take effect in the soul of a person, Plotinus thus, argues for the reality of invisible beauties. Hence, holding that one can have these aesthetic experiences, he adjudges that the souls can have invisible beauties, especially in the soul of those who are passionately in love with the invisible activities, which are basically activities of the mind and virtue (See Bk, 6(4),20ff).

Using the metaphor of loving affection stung sharply between lovers, Plotinus, engages in a discourse of beauty as an ecstatic experience of the soul. The experience of love between lovers, carnal or spiritual, has the characteristic experiences used by Plotinus to describe the experience of beauty. They are: *wonder, a shock of delight, passionate longing, and a happy excitement*. Plotinus’ project here is to demonstrate that the kind of ecstatic experience that happens in the soul of the lover in the encounter with the beloved, is a similar kind of ecstatic experience that happens in the soul of the person who in union with the One, encounters the form of beauty in beautiful things.

Plotinus, asks the question: What makes lovers to have the above feeling? He completely rules out all activities on the order of sense-perception, such as shape, colour, size, as the cause of the ecstatic experience in the lover. But he claims that what makes lovers have these feelings is because of the presence of the souls which possess a moral order of virtues. He claims that, “you feel like this when you see, in yourself or in someone else, greatness of soul, a righteous life, a pure morality, courage with its noble look, and dignity and modesty advancing in a fearless, calm and unperturbed disposition, and the godlike light of intellect shining upon all this” (Bk, 6(5),10-15). By this response, Plotinus once again dismisses mere “well-proportioned and colour” as the essential properties of beauty. He thus exalts beauty to a more sublime realm, that is effected by righteousness, virtues and an illuminated intellectual life. These properties of beauty, righteousness, virtues and illuminated intellectual life, as adduced by Plotinus, are of the invisible and spiritual sublime realm that the soul must attain in order to truly grasp the beauty. They are what throw us into wonder and excitement when we are in love. Courageous acts or the virtues of patient endurance and charity are always attractive and applauded by all, irrespective of

time, nationality, race, colour or culture. This explains why ethics and aesthetics always go together and are rarely inseparable. This sustains the point made above that for Plotinus, beauty is essentially a spiritual experience in the soul, not in the activities of sense-perception.

Having established beauty as the ecstatic experience in the soul due to the contemplative relationship of the soul on the form of beauty, Plotinus further argues that beauty, “really exists”, by the real existence of the properties that reveal the beautiful above. That is to say, beauty as form in the Intellect, has subsistence existence. Beauty is not merely the idea or the notion of the beautiful, it has a real existence. Thus, the human soul becomes a beautiful soul when it falls in love with Beauty in its path to union with the One. According to Gerson (1994:212), this happens “Because beauty is a property of Forms as contemplated, images of Forms possess images of that property. Images of beauty are found in bodies, and generally in objects of sight; objects of other senses; ways of life; actions; characters; and virtue (1.6.1).” In other words, individual things and actions or virtue are beautiful because in them is possessed the image of the form of Beauty. Therefore, what happens in the experience of the beautiful is the encounter of the soul with the form of Beauty *per se*. This thus, requires a transcending upward movement of the human soul beyond the natural realm of sense-perception of individual things. This transcendence movement of the soul is enabled and perfected by activities of: virtue, righteousness and intellection. Hence, these activities are what makes the soul lovable and beautiful. Therefore, for the soul to maintain its beauty, it must not be corrupted by matter and the desires and passions of the body. For, “So we shall be right in saying that the soul becomes ugly by mixture and dilution and inclination towards the body and matter” (Bk, 6(5),45-50). Thus, the soul must constantly purge itself of the lust of the body, by leading a virtuous and righteous life with a love for a contemplative intellectual life.

Socrates in Plato’s *Phaedo*, has argued strongly for philosophy as the major means for the purification of the soul, asserting: “release and separation of the soul from the body is the preoccupation of the philosophers” (67d). Thus, the courageous and self-controlled soul is not consumed by the fire of lusts of the body and has no fear of death, since death brings forth the final liberation of the soul from the body. Plotinus, then submits: “So the soul when it is purified becomes form and formative power, 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” (Bk, 6(5),15-20). As the soul ascends upwards toward the Intellect in the Plotinus’ cosmology, it increases in beauty. This is because, “Intellect and the things of intellect are its beauty, its own beauty and not another’s, since only then [when it is perfectly conformed to intellect] is it truly soul” (Bk, 6(5),15-20). Since the soul becomes truly the soul when it conforms to the Intellect, the soul, thus, becomes truly beautiful when it unites with the universal soul, in the Intellect. To this effect, Gerson (1994:212), maintains:

“just as the desire for good is the desire to be associated with Intellect in contemplating Forms, so beauty is that aspect of intelligible reality that produces delight in the contemplator when contemplation is occurring.” Beyond the conformity with the intellect, the soul becomes not only beautiful but also good, when it unites with the One, God. By God here, Plotinus’s God should be understood. Which is the Ultimate First Principle of reality, which because it is the Absolute, is the Absolute Good and the Absolute Beauty. On the contrary, a soul that is not tending in union with the One, becomes ugly and evil. Note, by evil, Plotinus means a privation of the good, and by ugly he means a privation of the beautiful. Now God, the One, is the Absolute Beauty from which comes the Intellect, which is beauty. The soul is given beauty by Intellect. Hence it is the shaping of the soul that makes everything beautiful. The soul, which is a form can and is what grasps and masters the form of the beautiful in all things said to be beautiful. In fact, the things that are beautiful exist because they have forms and they are spoken of as beautiful by the form of the human person which is the soul (see Bk, 6(7),35ff).

Having established, what beauty, and how the soul can be beautiful and how the soul makes everything it grasps beautiful, Plotinus makes a passionate appeal to seek the truly beautiful, the One, God. Since, the One, is the remote source of all forms which is the cause of the beautiful, the most sublime experience of the beautiful is union with the One. He exhorts that the seeking of this beauty is worth more than any other attainment in life. Hence for him, failure in life lays not in the inability to attain physical or perceptive beauties, nor socio-political beauties. It lays rather in the failure to grasp and unite with the Absolute beauty, which is the One. For a true lover of the One gives away every attainment in order to be united with the One, God (see Bk, 6(7),35ff).

This kind of person, no doubt must be spiritual minded not carnal; must seek the things above not the things below; must search for the good interiorly not exteriorly. Hence, Gerson (1994:216), expounding this point, maintains that Plotinus by this position:

... describes and promotes qualifiedly a world-renouncing conversion.... Let us remember that this call to holiness.... is located in the middle of a discussion of beauty. This remarkable association of the religious with the aesthetic is not of course uniquely Plotinian. But it is to say naturally Plotinian.

The soul of such a person must be ready to undergo a necessary training, “first of all to look at beautiful ways of life: then at beautiful works, not those which the arts produce, but the works of men who have a name for goodness: then look at the souls of the people who produce the beautiful works” (Bk, 6(9),1-10). With

personal cultivation and training of this sort, the flight of the soul to its lover, Intellect, becomes possible and easy. For the Intellect, is the beauty *par excellence*, and from the Intellect, the soul aims at union with the source of beauty, the One. Only the souls which are akin and are like the One, can grasp and be beautiful as the One. For as he posits, “No eye ever saw the sun without becoming sun-like, nor can a soul see beauty without becoming beautiful” (Bk, 6(9),25-35). What it implies is that one must necessarily become godlike in order to be united with the One, God and become beautiful. And the path to godlikeness is the ascent of the soul to the intellect, where lies the Form of beauty, by the ascent to the Intellect to union with the One.

5. Conclusion

This paper focused on Plotinus’ notion of beauty as the ecstatic experience of the soul, by arguing that sense-perception is not considered essential for the grasp of beauty in Plotinus. It engaged in a reflection of Plotinus’ notion or conception of beauty as it concerns the spiritual transformation of the human person. That is to say, what beauty does to the human person, how beauty affects and transforms the human person, and by extension how the beautiful soul could transform the world. It emphasizes that for Plotinus beauty is not just aesthetical, it is more so a spiritual experience in the soul. It is the transcending upward movement of the soul in union with the One, through the contemplation of the form, Beauty, in the Intellect.

Now, one may ask: Of what relevance is Plotinus’ philosophy of beauty to the world today? This paper contends that Plotinus’ notion of beauty as ecstatic experience of the soul is relevant now, not only for the transformation of the individual human person, but also for the transformation of the world today. Of course, when individuals are transformed, the world by logical necessity will be transformed since it is individual human persons that make up the world as a social reality. The world today epistemologically speaking, is a scientifically led world. People today seek empirically based fact; thus, truth is becoming equal to fact and knowledge equal to science. Our world, led by this epistemological attitude has brought enormously unparalleled economic and technological advancements when compared to any other period in human history. The metaphysics that seem to support this epistemological disposition is fundamentally materialistic and/or physicalistic. The natural consequence of such metaphysical dispositions, coupled with capitalistic economic pursuit, is atheism or at best agnosticism or secularism. In this kind of world, religion is either killed, suppressed or manipulated. In Africa, and most other parts of developing areas of the world, religion is getting more and more manipulated. While in the developed parts, religion is getting more and more directly or indirectly suppressed.

As the world becomes more scientifically advanced and economically richer, the souls of men and women are becoming more and more impoverished and thirsty for truth, beauty and tranquility. The interior part, the soul, of the human person can only be cultivated and guided by the teachings of religious masters and/or the teachings of wise persons, generally called philosophers. Religion and philosophy take upon themselves the responsibility to guide the spiritual, intellectual and moral lives of people. They also cultivate the soul to transcend the world of sense-perception and encounter the transcendent beyond. But in the event when more and more people are becoming areligious, secularized or atheistic, the souls of many are panting for a means to satisfy their longing for the sublime and for the order of their interior being. It is little wonder that there is revival of philosophical discourses in most developing parts of the world. It is interesting to see a wave of revival in the ancient and Hellenistic philosophies in the West and the increase intensity in the study and research of classical Chinese philosophy and Buddhist philosophy in the East. Many non-religious people are going to Stoicism, Neo-Platonism, Epicureanism, Confucianism and Buddhism, as guides to cultivate their interior life and spirituality. More and more, it is becoming clearer to many that the problem of the world today is not merely socio-political or scientific, It is rather, greatly aesthetical, or more precisely meta-aesthetical. There is a role that religion plays in human consciousness, which is a constant reminder to the human person on the transient nature of this world and of the value and aspiration towards the transcendental. But with secularization and atheism overwhelming many parts of the West and with the manipulation and commercialization of religion in Africa, aesthetical awakening has become a central option for the salvation of human interiority.

This paper posits Plotinus' conception of beauty as not only one of the answers to the question on how to fill the lacuna created by the demise of religious sublimity and awareness in many. But is the most persuasive and transforming way for individual spiritual transformation and by extension the transformation of the world. The person who follows the path of Plotinus' activities of the soul in the grasp of beauty, becomes a beautiful soul in itself. The "beautiful soul" of Plotinus, is always longing for and desires to remain in the ecstatic experience of beauty and union with the One. It does not attach itself to goods and honours of this world of sense-perception. Because it has a beautiful soul, it is well-ordered and endeavours to make everything it encounters ordered. The beautiful soul puts forms in everything that is formless, by so doing making the ugly beautiful. When the souls of men and women of this world are converted, and transformed into the beautiful soul of Plotinus, this world will be definitely be more peaceful, just and livable.

Therefore, this paper is a reminder of the place of philosophical reflection in our world today and a call to visit or revisit the richness in the philosophy of Plotinus, a man who spent his life desiring to have a beautiful soul.

References

- Aristotle (1984). *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (Vol I&II), Jonathan Barnes (ed.), New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Cicero (1884). *Cicero's Tusculan Disputations*, Andrew P. Peabody (trans.), Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.
- David J. Yount (2014). *Plotinus the Platonist: A Comparative Account of Plato and Plotinus' Metaphysics*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Lloyd P. Gerson (ed) (2010). *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Vol. 1), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lloyd P. Gerson (1994). *Plotinus*, London: Routledge.
- Plato (1997). *Plato Complete Works*, John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (eds), Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
- Porphyry (1966). *Plotinus Ennead*, A. H. Armstrong (translator), Cambridge, Harvard University Press.