

# WAS PLOTINUS INFLUENCED BY OPIUM?

by

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SOME justification is necessary for adding to the list of suspected opium-takers of the past. The academic game of seizing on certain similarities between the thought of a selected victim and the features supposed to be characteristic of opium dreams long ago became something of a bad habit. In the case of Plotinus (205–270 A.D.), however, grounds for the belief can be found outside his own writings, in the facts known of his life and times, and it is this evidence which the present article first sets out to bring forward. This is followed by a discussion of the influence that opium might with justification be supposed to have exerted on his thought.

## *The Evidence in Porphyry's Life of Plotinus*

From the writings of Plotinus himself we learn nothing directly about the state of his bodily functions; that could hardly be expected of a philosopher who so disparaged the material world that he 'seemed ashamed of being in the body.'<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, his disciple Porphyry, on a lower level of philosophic detachment, felt his master's health to be worth some passing mentions in his biography. He knew Plotinus well, having 'passed six years in close relation with him'<sup>2</sup>, and there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of his account; his description of Plotinus's final illness is precise enough for a diagnosis of leprosy (*elephantiasis graeca*)<sup>3</sup>. A number of facts he gave concerning Plotinus's health and habits are consonant with the idea that he took opium with some degree of regularity. Indeed, considering how few and brief his references to the subject are, the corroboration for such a view which they provide is surprisingly complete.

The relevant sentences run as follows:

Plotinus was often distressed by an intestinal complaint, but he declined clysters, pronouncing the use of such remedies unbecoming in an elderly man: in the same way he refused such medicaments as contain any substance taken from wild beasts or reptiles.<sup>4</sup>

Even his sleep was kept light by an abstemiousness that often prevented him taking as much as a piece of bread, and by this unbroken concentration upon his own highest nature.<sup>5</sup>

. . . the Term, the one end, of his life was to become Uniate, to approach to the God over all: and four times, during the period I passed with him, he achieved this Term.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, Plotinus suffered from constipation or some related bowel trouble, and his appetite was small; his thoughts concentrated on his inner life; he repeatedly had mystic experiences; and he took medicines of non-animal origin. Each of these points is consistent with the view that he took opium.

Constipation is one of the best known side effects of opium. It 'is commonly observed following morphine, even in addicted individuals',<sup>7</sup> and the non-morphine alkaloids also present in crude opium seem further to contribute

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to the same effect, for opium is reported to have twice the constipating action attributable to its morphine content.<sup>8</sup> 'The use of opium preparations by the Chinese for relief of diarrhoeas and dysenteries preceded by many centuries their employment for central depression'.<sup>9</sup> Diarrhoea used also to be attributed to opium-taking, but is now regarded less as a direct effect of the drug than as the prompt consequence of its withdrawal.

Suppression of hunger is another recognized effect of opium.<sup>10</sup> When an addict has to choose between his drug and his food, as he may have to do for financial reasons, he finds the choice an easy one.

For Plotinus's preoccupation with his inner life, we have not only the testimony of his biographer but the abundant evidence of his own writings.<sup>11, 12</sup> Modern psychological studies on human subjects given morphine 'indicate personality changes in the direction of introversion as manifested by increased fantasy living'.<sup>13</sup>

Plotinus's periodic experiences of mystic union could have been connected with larger than usual quantities of opium. It seems quite plausible that he occasionally got an overdose. Even if he or his physician never intended such an overdose or made a mistake in measurement, they can hardly have had accurately standardized preparations to measure. As a crude natural product, opium is always subject to variation in potency from batch to batch; and it was not unknown for such variation to be artificially magnified by fraudulent adulteration, a practice which was already rife two centuries earlier when it was described by Dioscorides.<sup>14, 15</sup>

Only one fact mentioned by Porphyry does not at first sight support the view that Plotinus took opium—the lightness of his sleep. The popular belief that opium sends the subject into deep sleep is, however, not quite correct. Although opium can bring on sleep if the external circumstances are favourable, this is by no means a necessary consequence of a normal dose. 'A significant feature of the analgesia [by morphine] is that it occurs before and often without sleep'.<sup>10</sup> Insomnia has even been noted in some cases as a late sequel to morphine administration.<sup>16</sup> Here again, confusion can easily arise between direct drug effect and withdrawal symptom; insomnia is characteristic of the latter category.<sup>17, 18</sup> Opium is said to be less sleep-inducing than pure morphine; this may well be connected with the fact that some of the opium alkaloids other than morphine exert more stimulant than depressant action.<sup>19</sup>

When Porphyry says that Plotinus refused drugs of animal origin, the implication is clear that he not infrequently took drugs from other sources. From what we know of the *materia medica* of the time, it must seem as likely as not that the poppy figured among these. The pharmacopoeia of Galen consisted overwhelmingly of plant products of many different kinds, poppy-juice among them. (Galen had made himself the most prominent physician of Rome during the later part of the preceding century; he had been there from about A.D. 169 to 192 as Imperial physician first to Marcus Aurelius and then to Commodus.<sup>20</sup>) The use of opium had been known for centuries.<sup>14, 15</sup> References to it have been extracted from the Ebers papyrus, it was mentioned

by Theophrastus, and was recommended as a pain-killer by Heraclides, founder of the Empiric school of medicine, whose members popularized its use. In the first century A.D., it was described by Celsus, who included 'poppy-tears' in prescriptions against pain and against poisoning;<sup>21</sup> by Scribonius Largus, who was aware that potency resides more in the head than in the leaves of the poppy plant; and by Dioscorides, who not only gave a detailed account of the collection of the drug in Asia Minor by incision of the capsules, but also mentioned the practice of adulterating it with other milky juices, indicating that its commercial production on a considerable scale was well established. Galen was fond of prescribing mixtures of great complexity. His recipes for theriac contain dozens of different components, most of them, except for opium, devoid of potent actions known to modern pharmacology. He reported that Marcus Aurelius was in the habit of taking a daily dose of such a theriac; at one stage, when the Emperor found himself becoming drowsy at his duties, the poppy-juice was omitted from the concoction for a time, but it was soon included again to help the Emperor to sleep.<sup>22</sup> Galen also recorded the fact that, as the second century drew to a close, Severus released opium for common use.<sup>23</sup> There is thus every reason to believe that opium was coming to be more and more widely employed as the third century began, and the probability is correspondingly increased that it was included in the presumably complex mixtures with which Plotinus was dosed.

### *Effects of Opium*

Much of the legend that the later nineteenth century built up around opium has been discredited by the twentieth. There is little left of the conviction, so congenial to moralizing Victorians, that abuse of opiates eventually brings an inevitable retribution in the form of bodily, intellectual and moral degeneration. Addicts need not become persons of emaciated physique and criminal tendencies unless their compulsive demand for the drug, irresistible despite a price inflated by social disapproval and legal prohibition, drives them into desperate financial straits. Modern medical practice knows plenty of addicts who have for years gone unrecognized as such by their colleagues, living apparently normal lives in positions of respectability and responsibility, with no evidence of mental deterioration.<sup>24, 25</sup>

Similarly, modern evidence provides no support for the idea that opium admits the subject into a new world of dreams and visions. Such claims originated in the literary world; notable sources include the preface to *Kubla Khan* (1816), in which Coleridge purported to explain how the poem had been written on waking from a profound sleep following an anodyne of opium,<sup>26</sup> and De Quincey's *Confessions* (1821), together with their sequel, *Suspiria de Profundis*. Modern experts doubt whether opium can either cause dreams or stamp them with a character not shared by non-opium dreams. To be fair to De Quincey, although he did attribute to the drug a specific power of promoting dreams, exalting their colours, deepening their shadows and strengthening the sense of their fearful realities, he also made reservations which

many later commentators, in their enthusiasm, chose to gloss over. Thus, he wrote that 'habitually to dream magnificently, a man must have a constitutional determination to reverie', and that 'he whose talk is of oxen, will probably dream of oxen'.<sup>27</sup>

One positive fact does seem fairly clear—that there is some psychological factor predisposing to addiction. Although anybody, apparently, becomes addicted after three weeks or so of regular use of opium, the majority of addicts seem to have previously displayed some kind of 'instability' which played a major role in making them take to the drug. The effect of a first dose of morphine is pleasurable for only a small proportion of subjects; apart from those who benefit from relief of physical pain, euphoria is felt mostly by those of anxious or otherwise emotionally tense disposition, while psychologically 'well-adjusted' persons more frequently find the effects markedly unpleasant.<sup>28</sup> In dealing with the interaction of opium and thought, therefore, it is easier to establish correlations than causes. Any patterns of thought associated with opium may be connected with the predisposition rather than the drug's effects on the consciousness. They may also, of course, be partly the one and partly the other, acting perhaps in mutual reinforcement.

Two general characters that have often been associated with opium are the distortion of space and time, respectively. De Quincey himself referred to these both in his *Confessions* and in the *Suspiria*.

Space, also, it amplifies by degrees that are sometimes terrific. But time it is upon which the exalting and multiplying power of opium chiefly spends its operation. Time becomes infinitely elastic, stretching out to such immeasurable and vanishing termini, that it seems ridiculous to compute the sense of it, on waking, by expressions commensurate to human life. As in starry fields one computes by diameters of the earth's orbit, or of Jupiter's, so, in valuing the *virtual* time lived during some dreams, the measurement by generations is ridiculous—by millennia is ridiculous; by aeons, I should say, if aeons were more determinate, would be also ridiculous.<sup>29</sup>

There seems to be no reason to doubt De Quincey's testimony as to the *correlation* between opium and these impressions of space and time, as long as we do not jump unjustifiably from correlation to cause. In his particular case, we have in fact clear evidence that such illusions were not *de novo* effects of opium. As a boy, De Quincey was 'unstable' and had hallucinations; a diary he wrote at the age of seventeen, before ever embarking on his famous career as opium-eater, shows that 'he was already expanding and contracting time and space like rubber bands'.<sup>30</sup> These distortions, then, were not new to De Quincey when he began to take opium. Neither are they peculiar to him; few human lives can have been free of some experience of this kind. Even for those who do not suffer from loss of memory or epileptic *petit mal*, time may seem to fly or to stand still, far-away objects may appear near or near-by objects infinitely far away, in day-dreams as well as in sleep-dreams. The compartmentalization of the spatial and temporal medium in which we exist, however rigidly metrical it may appear at other times, becomes plastic and blurred; space and time take on a subjective and non-quantitative character, becoming 'measureless to man' (to use the phrase that occurs twice in *Kubla Khan*).

Now this common type of experience is also an essentially self-centred mental pattern, in which the inner consciousness functions in a high degree of isolation from the external senses. As such, it seems entirely reasonable to suppose that it could be exaggerated and promoted by the action of opium in inducing 'personality changes in the direction of introversion',<sup>13</sup> a shutting-up of the personality against the outside, conducive to reverie. Even if it does not heighten the intensity of such feelings, the drug will presumably bring them on more often or for a greater proportion of the time.

To a certain degree, then, the tendency towards introverted distortion of space and time, leading to a subjectivized, dequantitated picture of the world, is traceable in every normal disposition of the human mind. When it occupies an unusually large proportion of the consciousness, however, it may well contribute to, or be interpreted as, the sort of 'instability' that predisposes to opium. In individuals with this type of predisposition, impressions of the flexibility of space and time may, in their turn, be magnified and exaggerated under the influence of the drug.

### *Plotinus's Thought*

Trends very similar to those discussed above have been shown to be marked in Plotinus's thought.<sup>11, 12</sup> Thus, Plotinus attempted to strip the elements of number and measure from space and time, and this was done in the context of a philosophy in which the stress lay heavily on the subjective—indeed, it would hardly have been feasible otherwise. Quantitation goes hand in hand with an objective attitude; number is the means *par excellence* of achieving objectivity. Plotinus's introverted mental habit deprived space and time both of their essential quantitateness and of their rigid objectivity. His cosmology turned out to be a subtly demathematized and subjectivized version of Plato's; he followed the account in the *Timaeus* closely up to, but not including, the elements of quantity, measure and number, which he firmly deleted. His 'matter' corresponded to Plato's space, being a recipient of Forms, except that he denied it magnitude. 'The Matter must be . . . ready to become anything, ready therefore to any bulk. . . . Quantity is given with the Ideal-Form. . . .'<sup>31</sup> Time, for Plato, was generated by the movements of heavenly bodies, 'made to define and preserve the numbers of Time'.<sup>32</sup> For Plotinus, it was nothing so external and objective—'it is we that must create Time'<sup>33</sup>—and he considered it essentially unextended and incapable of subdivision into parts.<sup>34</sup>

It has been argued<sup>12</sup> that the flexible views Plotinus took of space and time are connected with his emphasis on the unity of the universe, as distinct from the separateness of the parts. The unity-seeking trend shows itself, for instance, in the way he refused to admit any rigid dualism between mind and body; 'all things are for ever linked; the one order Intellectual in its being, the other sense'.<sup>35</sup> The same trend is seen at work in the way he formulated the concept of action at a distance; 'this All is one universally comprehensive living being . . . the far is near', he wrote,<sup>36</sup> making the effect depend on the elasticity of space in a disarmingly simple way. It is worth noting that a most powerful statement

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of this attitude occurs in Francis Thompson's poem, *The Mistress of Vision*:

All things by immortal power  
Near or far,  
Hiddenly  
To each other linked are,  
That thou canst not stir a flower  
Without troubling of a star.

Of this poem, a critic and biographer of Thompson writes as follows:

Whether or not *Kubla Khan* was written directly under the influence of opium, and Elisabeth Schneider seems to have shown that it was not, Coleridge's poem surely contains memories of opium visions, as does *The Mistress of Vision*. In Thompson's mysterious garden are the bogus sense of timelessness, and the suspension of sound and sense characteristic of opium.<sup>37</sup>

Thompson is known to have taken opium for all but six of the years from about 1880 until his death in 1907.<sup>38</sup>

Plotinus's mystic experiences, it was suggested above, may have been connected with overdoses of opium. In what he wrote of these experiences, the trends towards introversion, towards the dequantitation of space and time, and towards unity are pushed to their extreme limits.<sup>39</sup> 'We must withdraw from all the extern, pointed wholly inwards; no leaning to the outer', he dictated.<sup>39</sup> Near the climax, 'you find yourself wholly true to your essential nature, wholly that only veritable Light which is not measured by space . . . but ever immeasurable as something greater than all measure and more than all quantity. . . .'<sup>40</sup> All Plotinus's expository skill was brought into play to overcome the inadequacy of language to express the utter completeness of the final unity.<sup>41</sup>

It cannot be said, of course, that any of the above considerations *prove* that Plotinus's philosophy was influenced by opium. There is no justification for supposing either that such a way of thinking requires a drug, or that opium is the only drug that might promote it.<sup>42</sup> Even if Plotinus were alive today, it would be difficult to assess the extent to which a drug influenced his thought. Nevertheless, it may be accepted that the historical evidence about his life and times makes it seem more likely than not that he did take opium; and the fact remains of the close correspondence between certain trends which are particularly marked in Plotinus's thought and those believed to be exaggerated by opium.

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