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The word in the soul and its counterparts: World, body, mind, and soul in Plotinus

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Abstract

Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, held that ordinary human cognition involves the interaction of three elements: (1) the soul's direct intuition of the Forms in Intellect; (2) the imaging faculty which enables subjective mental representations of external objects acquired via sensory perception; and (3) language and discursive reason. These three elements are vertically ordered with (1) being the highest and (3) being the lowest, with the relatively lower being an "image" or "imitation" of the relatively higher – not an exact duplicate, but an impoverished resemblance. The sensory organs act as intermediaries which convey an image of the Forms in matter to the soul ("eidetic perception"). However, these images are imperfect and dim. They need to be related to the true Forms in Intellect, which can occur by two means: a temporally immediate eidetic intuition, and a temporally delayed evaluation by discursive reason. Plotinus maintained that not all sensations reach consciousness due to failure to reach a sufficient threshold, which represents perhaps the first description of what is now called sensory gating. In addition to this lower unconscious associated with the body and vegetative soul, there is a higher unconscious related to the Forms in Intellect. Plotinus held to both the Eleatic Principle and its converse, and in combination with his view that objects in the physical world are not true substances, this entails a mind-body perspective which has been correctly described by Emilsson as "inverted epiphenomenalism" or "non-reductive idealism". His view on the question of determinism versus contra-causal free will is argued here to be a form of mysterianism; determinism is a better approximation to the underlying ineffable reality when the absolute is approached from a cosmological perspective as "the One", and contra-causal free will is a better approximation when it is approached from an ethical perspective as "the Good".

1. Continuities and discontinuities in Plotinus and the “New” Platonism

Plotinus, perhaps the next most significant philosopher of antiquity after Plato and Aristotle, has become known to us as “the Father of Neoplatonism”. It is worth briefly summarising what is known about his historical context, before considering the distinctiveness of his thought in relation to the Platonic tradition which preceded him. This will enable an assessment of the justification for the introduction of the term “Neoplatonism”, and a consideration of the ways in which his thought really marks a juncture in the development of Platonism.

Unlike many other ancient thinkers, we have a considerable amount of information about the details of Plotinus’ life. When his student Porphyry collated his writings, he included an introductory biography which, while it does not answer every question that we might like to pose, does contain a wealth of information and a few lively anecdotes. Porphyry opens by telling us that Plotinus at all times seemed ashamed of being in the body, and that for this reason he disliked having portraits made of himself (Porph. *Plot*, 1.1-20). He was born in 205 CE and died in 270 (ibid. 2.30-40). Porphyry does not record his place of birth, but Eunapius states that it was Lyco (presumably Lycopolis) in Egypt (ibid., translator note, p. 2).

Plotinus was 28 years old when he began to study philosophy under Ammonius, about whom little is known regarding his teaching, as he wrote nothing. Subsequently, Plotinus established himself as a teacher of philosophy in Rome, where he remained until the very end of his life, when he moved to Campania, where he died. Porphyry records that Plotinus was a vegetarian; Porphyry himself wrote a treatise defending vegetarianism, which he maintains was the accepted practice within their philosophical tradition (Porph. *Abst*, I.1). Porphyry also relates that Plotinus’ last words were, “Try to bring back the god in us to the divine in the All”¹ (Porph. *Plot*, 2.26-27).

The collection of Plotinus’ writings which Porphyry edited is called the *Enneads*. This refers to the arrangement of material into groups of nine treatises, six such groupings in all. Porphyry grouped treatises together based on his assessment of the primary topics covered within them. For this reason, they are not in chronological order, although Porphyry gives us the chronology in his introduction (Porph. *Plot*, 4-6). Plotinus presents a systematic and comprehensive philosophical system, but the fifty-four separate treatises which make up the *Enneads* were not written to have an overarching structural development of content like chapters in a book. A particular treatise often touches on a range of topics which are also discussed in other treatises. To understand the full breadth of Plotinus’ thought on a given topic, therefore, it is often necessary to read a range of treatises from different *Enneads*, since that topic may recur in varying contexts. The modern critical text of the *Enneads* based on the

¹ The English translation is that of Armstrong. All English translations of Plotinus in this chapter are also those of Armstrong as found in the 7-volume Loeb Classical Library critical edition of the *Enneads* (see primary sources in the bibliography section). Where there are words in square brackets not contained in the original, these have been added here for clarity.

manuscript evidence available to us is regarded as highly accurate and faithful to the original (ibid., translator's preface, p. xxix).

The term "Neoplatonism" was coined by German scholars in the nineteenth century (Dillon & Gerson, 2004, p. xiii). It therefore represents a modern evaluation that the philosophy of Plotinus and his successors was sufficiently divergent from the teachings of Plato to warrant a distinguishing moniker. This differentiation represents a modern perspective; Plotinus and his followers thought of themselves simply as Platonists, faithful expositors of the philosophy of the great Athenian. If development occurred, for Plotinus this merely involved drawing out and making explicit what was already implicit in Platonism itself.

What should we make of this issue? In the six centuries or so between Plato and Plotinus, significant philosophical evolution occurred, and Plotinus' writing necessarily responded to developments which Plato did not anticipate. Plotinus and the later Neoplatonists drew heavily on Aristotle as well as Plato, although they did not see the former as an adversary of the latter, but merely as primarily discussing a lower aspect of reality (Emilsson, 2017, pp. 30-31). They also critically appropriated important developments from other schools of philosophy such as the logic of the Stoics. There is a great deal of originality in Plotinus' thought itself, and his interpretation of the Platonic corpus sometimes seems strained and recontextualised to the modern reader. These factors seem to legitimate a division between Neoplatonism and that which came before.

The question remains, however, whether Plotinus' philosophical innovations can be regarded as expressing an organic development of earlier Platonism, so that continuity predominates, or whether they mark a sharper break with the past, and thus express enough discontinuity to be regarded as a new movement. To the modern reader who moves from Plato to Plotinus, the gulf between them can seem large. In Plato we can clearly recognise the analytical rationalist metaphysician, whereas in Plotinus we sometimes seem to encounter a mystic who engages in imaginative theosophical speculation. Modern thought is at least sympathetic to the rationalist, but is relentlessly hostile to the mystic, which accounts for the devaluation of the merit of Plotinus' thought in much contemporary philosophical discussion.

It might be argued that a strong differentiation of Neoplatonism from earlier forms of Platonism, including that of Plato himself, represents, at least in part, the anachronistic projection of the modern dichotomy between reason and mystical "superstition", according to which "never the twain shall meet". Such a sharp demarcation between reason and mysticism may have little relevance in relation to ancient Greek thought, and may even be quite misleading, as is the case with Indian philosophy. The "parting of the ways" (Hanegraaff, 2012, pp. 148-149) between the mystical and the rational was a product of Western historical development from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. It may be the case that, if we were to reread Plato without our modern biases, we might discover more mystical elements than would sit comfortably with his reputation as the originator of a secularised philosophical discourse.

Regardless of the answer to this question, the historical impact of Plotinus' thought has been profound, particularly in the religious sphere in relation to the Abrahamic religions.

Theologians within Judaism, Christianity and Islam have all incorporated many elements from Plotinus' thought, sometimes consciously, and sometimes mediated indirectly via works such as *Pseudo-Dionysius*. This influence was particularly strong in relation to the more mystically inclined expressions of these religions, such as Kabbalah in Judaism (Scholem, 1974, pp. 87-91), esoteric currents in Christianity (Hanegraaff, 2012, pp. 7-9), and Sufism in Islam (Sedgwick, 2023, p. 141). Furthermore, despite the strong anti-mystical bent of post-Enlightenment philosophy, echoes of Neoplatonism can be found re-emerging from time to time, such as in the system of Hegel, whom Feuerbach called "the German Proclus" (Redding, 2009, p. 137). Although these echoes were not always faithful to core aspects of the ancient original, they nonetheless illustrate the seductive power of Plotinus' thought on the ongoing imagination of thinkers in the modern West.

2. An overview of Plotinus' metaphysical system

Whatever else may be said about Plotinus' thought, it cannot be denied that he presents a systematic philosophical vision within which the answers he provides to distinct questions in different domains of philosophy are interrelated and enmeshed with each other in a holistic manner. Thus, an understanding of his metaphysics requires an appreciation of his theory of meaning and epistemology, and vice-versa. This is particularly important since there are crucial differences between Plotinus' thought in relation to these latter domains compared with modern philosophical discourse, and we need to avoid imposing anachronistic assumptions to properly appreciate his position. Because of the centrality of metaphysics to ancient philosophy in general, and to Plotinus in particular, an outline of his metaphysical system is required to provide an overall context for what follows concerning cognition.

For Plotinus, reality consisted of a hierarchical succession made up of three fundamental entities, usually called *hypostases* (ὑπόστασεις, subsistences), although the term in the title of *Enn. V.1 (On the Three Primary Hypostases)* used in this specific sense was introduced by Porphyry when he gave titles to Plotinus' writings (Emilsson, 2017, p. 37). The three *hypostases* are firstly, "the One" (*to hen*, τὸ ἓν), also frequently called "the Good", (*tagathon*, τὰγαθόν), secondly, "Intellect" (*nous*, νοῦς), also known as "Being" (*on*, ὄν), and lastly, "Soul" (*psuchē*, ψυχή). Use of the term "hierarchy" might be misleading due its negative connotations in contemporary usage (O'Meara, 1996, p. 78), but it is nonetheless useful provided that we recognise it merely as describing a vertically structured ordering of reality from the "higher" or "prior" to the "lower" or "posterior", in which moving from one level of reality to another involves an "ascent" (*anodos*, ἀνοδος) or "descent" (*kathodos*, κάθοδος). The two higher *hypostases* possess both an "internal" activity (*energeia*, ἐνέργεια) and an "external" activity which comprises the next lower hypostasis. The lower two hypostases are the spoken utterance (*logos*, λόγος) and external activity of the immediately preceding one (*Enn. V.1.6*) and are produced by it, Intellect by the One and Soul by Intellect. The lower a reality is in the hierarchy (the more "descended"), the "lesser" and more inferior it is, and the more fragmentary and "broken into pieces" it is compared to that which is higher. Plotinus frequently speaks of the lower as being merely an "imitation" (*mimēma*, μίμημα) or "image"

(*eikōn*, εἰκών) of the higher. The lower in the hierarchy a thing exists, the deeper it is into “Plato’s cave”. Soul looks to Intellect and is illuminated by it, and, in a similar manner, Intellect looks to the One, as a child looks to and loves its parent (*Enn.* V.1.6). The cascading generative process comes to an end with Soul because the potency of Form is exhausted in producing the visible world, and “is dead and no longer able to produce another” (*Enn.* III.8.2). This process of generation is often referred to as “emanation”, although Plotinus does not have a single term with this meaning (Emilsson, 2017, p. 49). Reality below the level of the One, which is Plotinus’ first principle or absolute, has a hylomorphic structure and is the manifestation of the interaction of a forming principle and matter (*hulē*, ὕλη). This applies both to Intellect and Soul, although the matter involved in each case is different.

The One (the Good) in Plotinus is a radically transcendent entity. One of the unfortunate consequences of the appropriation of Neoplatonism by the Abrahamic religions, especially Christianity, is that the One has historically become conflated with the personal God of Hebrew monotheism. This is misleading because the One in Plotinus is not a personal subject. The One does not possess self-consciousness (*sunaisthēsis*, συναίσθησις) - see *Enn.* V.3.13 & V.6.5. In V.4.2 Plotinus does use the term *sunaisthēsis* of the One, but he makes clear that he is only speaking loosely and not literally by immediately preceding it with “as if” (*hoionei*, οἶοιεν). The One utterly transcends the subject/object distinction altogether, as it transcends all other dualities, even that of Being and non-Being. Thus, Plotinus asserted that the One is “beyond being” (*epekeina tou ontos*, ἐπέκεινα τοῦ ὄντος / *epekeina tēs ousias*, ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας) – for example, *Enn.* V.4.1, V.4.2, V.5.6, & VI.2.17. He identifies Being with the second hypostasis (e.g., *Enn.* V.1.8). Since this second hypostasis, Intellect, is subordinate, derivative, and inferior compared to the One, so Being was thereby relegated to a secondary position in the metaphysical hierarchy. For this reason, Plotinus’ metaphysics represents a henology (Schürmann, 1983, p. 26), not an ontology, and is not a Heideggerian “ontotheology” or philosophy of Being. Real undifferentiated infinitude, as found in the One, transcends both Being and non-Being.

It might be objected that such a claim violates the law of the excluded middle; either something exists, or it does not exist. In response to this, it should be noted that Plotinus would not accept the law of the excluded middle as a universal principle. For Plotinus, both “X” and “not X” are linguistic conceptualisations, and ultimate reality cannot be conceptualised at all. Plotinus’ view of logical inference will be discussed later, but for Plotinus, behind every conceptual duality ultimately lies an inexpressible unity. As an aside, it is worth noting that there is a contemporary school in the philosophy of mathematics, intuitionism, which does not accept the law of the excluded middle either (Iemhoff, 2020).

Plotinus held that the One is totally ineffable (*arrēton*, ἄρρητον, *Enn.* V.3.13) and cannot be literally described. Even the term “the One” should not be taken literally (“it is false even to say of it that it is one, and there is “no concept or knowledge of it””, *Enn.* V.4.1). The One does not think at all (*Enn.* V.6.2 & VI.7.37), and it does not employ language or discursive reason, which are not even present in Intellect (*Enn.* I.8.2 & V.1.11). The One is also strictly atemporal (*Enn.* III.7.11). Even negative (apophatic) descriptions, while they can be useful, are nonetheless ultimately inadequate (*Enn.* VI.8.9).

For Plotinus, if anything could be said of the One, that would comprise a limitation on it, and it would not truly be infinite (*Enn.* V.3.13, V.4.1, V.5.6). In this regard, his view comes very close to that expressed centuries later by Śaṅkara in the East, who, in his *Advaita Vedānta*, argued that the first principle of reality is *nirguṇa brahman* (निर्गुणब्रह्मन्), that is, brahman without attributes or qualities (King, 1999, 218). It is important to avoid confusion here regarding the term “infinite”. In contemporary mathematics, the term has a different meaning, and refers to a quantitative infinite or transfinite number, which is larger than all finite numbers. There are many different “sizes” or cardinalities of infinite numbers, often called alephs, as they are denoted \aleph_0 , \aleph_1 , and so forth (Sierpiński, 1958, p. 100). While these concepts are perfectly legitimate in a mathematical context, they are not the infinite as Plotinus understands it, because they have a quantitative character, which serves as a limitation. Quantitative infinities, or transfinite numbers, as understood by modern mathematics are in metaphysical terms relative infinities (they are unbounded only in certain respects), not the absolute infinite (unbounded in all respects). The absolute infinite, the One, is not quantitative in character, and is also not quantitatively infinite in any respect, because that would imply that it is ultimately finite (Clarke, 1959, p. 76). The infinite for Plotinus is not something that can be conceptualised in any way whatsoever, and neither can any predication be made of it.

This completes our overview of Plotinus’ first hypostasis, the “One”. It is a radically transcendent entity that is beyond all description. It is not an “I”-wielding subject or person but transcends the subject/object and even the Being/non-Being dichotomy. This brings us, then, to the second hypostasis, Intellect and Being. This second hypostasis comprises the realm of the Forms, which represents one of the two central doctrines of Platonism (the theory of Forms, and the immortality of the soul). In Intellect is multiplicity and differentiation - “being and substance cannot help being many” (*Enn.* VI.2.17). It does, however, still comprise a holistic unity, in which every part is related to every other. Contrary to what the word “Intellect” might seem to imply, there is no time in Intellect (*Enn.* III.7.2), nor is there any discursive reasoning (*Enn.* IV.3.18). The knowing of Intellect involves a direct apprehension of the Forms, not the affirmation of a set of propositions. Intellect is a lesser “image” of the One; the undifferentiated whole has begun to fragment into parts. This has come about due to the “dark” limiting or constraining influence of “intellectual matter” on the “light” forming principle that originates in the One (*Enn.* II.4.5). That is, intellectual matter acts to limit and thereby finitely realise something which is part of the undifferentiated pure infinite potency of the One. Because this is the realm of the Forms, this finite actualisation does not exhaust their potency. The Forms themselves contain a relative infinitude of potency with respect to their possible instantiations. However, they are no longer absolutely infinite, as is the One.

The third hypostasis, Soul, completes Plotinus’ metaphysical system. It is an “image” of Intellect and is even more differentiated and fragmented. However, it also is held together in a holistic unity because all souls are ultimately one (*Enn.* IV.9.4). Soul has an “upper” and “lower” aspect, although the “lower” aspect can be further subdivided, as will be seen later. It is in the lower aspects of Soul that time and the sensible world become manifest, and

discursive reasoning becomes necessary (*Enn.* I.1.10). The physical world is animated by the world-soul (*Enn.* IV.8.2). As was the case with the Forms in Intellect, the manifestation of sensible reality in Soul is the result of a limiting factor, matter, which in this case is “primal evil, absolute evil” (*Enn.* I.8.3), and lifeless, so that the sensible world is a “decorated corpse” (*nekron kekosmēmenon*, νεκρὸν κεκοσμημένον, *Enn.* II.4.5). It is at the level of the sensible world that potency is finally exhausted in finite concreteness. For this reason, there are no further hypostases beyond the third. Plotinus’ doctrine of Soul realises the second central doctrine of Platonism, the immortality of the soul. Since this chapter is primarily focussed on cognition in the ordinary sense, it is this third hypostasis, Soul, that will be the focus of most of the following discussion. However, since the Forms are crucial to Plotinus’ theory of cognition, Intellect will also play a not insignificant role.

3. Mental content, concepts, and language in Plotinus

Understanding Plotinus’ theory of cognition requires distinguishing three distinct elements of consciousness that he sees as being involved in cognitive processes, namely, (1) the soul’s direct access to the Forms in Intellect, (2) the subjective mental impressions of external objects arising from perception, and (3) linguistic representations and reasonings. In this section, the interrelationship of these three factors in generating cognition will be explored. Following this, in the next section Plotinus’ account of how sensory perception occurs – that is, the way in which element (2) above is produced through sensory interaction with the external physical world – will be considered, providing an overview of how his position avoids modern sceptical concerns. After that, the issue of the unity of consciousness in Plotinus will be considered, along with his view of the mind-body problem.

In distinguishing these three elements of cognition, a useful place to start is with the following statement in *Ennead* I.2:

As the spoken word (*ho en phōnē logos*, ὁ ἐν φωνῇ λόγος) is an imitation (*mimēma*, μίμημα) of that in the soul (*en psuchē*, ἐν ψυχῇ), so the word in the soul is an imitation of that in something else: as the uttered word, then, is broken up into parts as compared with that in the soul, so is that in the soul as compared with that before it [Intellect], which it interprets (*Enn.* I.2.3).

Here we see the three elements of cognition and their hierarchical relationship. The spoken word, encompassing linguistic representations and discursive reasoning (element (3) in the list above), is the lowest in the hierarchical ordering. Whenever Plotinus speaks of something as being the “imitation” (*mimēma*) of something else, that places the former at a lower level in his ordering of reality with respect to the latter. Next, he mentions “the word in the soul”. This is not speaking of the Forms in Intellect (element (1) above), because they are listed subsequently as superior to it; the “word in the soul” is an imitation of the Forms, just as the spoken word is an imitation of the “word in the soul”. The “word in the soul” is intermediate between language and the Forms. It seems clear from its usage here and elsewhere that the phrase “the word in the soul” corresponds to “the mental picture produced by sense-

impressions” (*Enn.* III.6.4). A parallel passage occurs in *Enn.* V.1.3: “just as a thought in its utterance is an image of the thought in soul, so soul itself is the expressed thought of Intellect”.

The “word in the soul” is also described by Plotinus as the “imaging power” or “imaging faculty” (*phantasia*, φαντασία):

For this reason nature does not have an imaging faculty either; but intellect is higher than the power of imaging: the imaging faculty is between the impression of nature and intellect. Nature has no grasp or consciousness of anything, but the imaging faculty has consciousness of what comes from outside; for it gives to the one who has the image the power to know what he has experienced; but intellect itself is origin and activity which comes from the active principle itself (*Enn.* IV.4.13).

In this passage, Plotinus is distinguishing between the imaging faculty and Intellect based on how they are produced. The impressions of the imaging power are produced by sensory input from nature, whereas the Forms in Intellect are produced from the One. As he says elsewhere, “sense-objects are observed from outside, but the intelligibles in reverse come out, one can say, from within ...” (*Enn.* IV.6.2).

Cognition, then, consists in the dynamic interaction of these three factors, the word in utterance (language), the word in the soul (mental images, impressions, and representations, the “imaging power”), and the word in Intellect, the Forms, as apprehended or remembered by the soul. One might ask, if language is merely an inadequate imitation of the imaging power, then why is it necessary at all? The answer which Plotinus gives is that language, although inferior as a direct mode of representation, is much more flexible than the imaging power in terms of relating different aspects of elements of consciousness to each other. Thus, “the reasoning power in soul [discursive reason] makes its judgement, derived from the mental images present to it which come from sense perception, but combining and dividing them ...” (*Enn.* V.3.2). Language, being more fragmented and multifarious than the imaging power, is able to “take to pieces” what “the image-making power gave it” (*Enn.* V.3.3), and combine these image components in different ways, comparing the results to each other and to the Forms in Intellect, so that “the new and recently arrived impressions” can be compared to “those which have long been within it”, that is, the remembered or intuited Forms (*Enn.* V.3.3). For this reason, sense-perception, “gives its impression to discursive reasoning” (*Enn.* V.3.3).

It is important to emphasise that Plotinus is not a solipsist, and at all three levels of cognition noted above there is intersubjective engagement between different persons. Indeed, language would be nothing but mere empty symbols if there were not a shared world of both external physical objects and Intellect. For Plotinus, language is fundamentally a tool to direct oneself and others towards the sensory world and, ultimately, a direct apprehension or vision of the Forms that transcend it. He insists that it is the very same external object that is perceived by different perceivers from different perspectives, and is therefore a realist about the external world, not a subjective idealist like Berkeley. For example, he writes:

Just as there is often a sound in the air, and a word in the sound, and an ear is there and receives and perceives it; and if you put another ear in the middle of the space between, the word and the sound would come also to it, or rather the ear would come to the word; and many eyes would look towards the same thing and all be filled with the sight of it (though the object of sight would be separate because one was an eye and the other was an ear) ... (*Enn.* VI.4.12).

More will be said of Plotinus' theory of the external physical world in the next section, but it is important for present purposes to note that the objects of sense are themselves imitations of the Forms and participate in the Forms. But the appearance of Form in matter in the sensory world is somewhat illusory: "They [external physical objects] appear because they come from a higher world, but their appearance is false because that in which they appear [matter] does not exist" (*Enn.* III.6.17). Because of the nature of matter, which is not a Form but pure indefinite "non-being" (*Enn.* II.4.10), we do not perceive matter and cannot even conceive of it (*Enn.* II.4.10). We can only infer the reality of matter indirectly but any attempt to conceive of it directly is futile and misguided. Due to the imperfection of the material substrate which gives rise to material objects, the objects as they are perceived in sensation are "apparitions" (*phantasmata*, φαντάσματα) and the observers are "like people dreaming". Plotinus writes that "the activity of sense-perception is that of the soul asleep" (*Enn.* III.6.6).

In order to gain genuine knowledge, therefore, it is not enough to simply observe the external physical world by means of sensory perception. Plotinus is no empiricist. Indeed, he argues that the cause of the Stoic's error was that "sense-perception became their guide and they trusted in it for the placing of principles and the rest" (*Enn.* VI.1.28). As a result, they "give non-being the first rank as that which is most of all being and so rank the last first" (*Enn.* VI.1.28). To really understand the truth, we should turn from the world of sense towards the world of Intellect. The world of sense, and language, both have value only insofar as they act to guide us towards the Forms in Intellect. How the Forms are involved in perception will be discussed in the next section, but first some comment on the apprehension of the Forms is necessary.

Just as the "lower" aspects of the soul are bound to the body and are "asleep", the "upper" aspect of the soul is (or at least, can be) "awake" and gazes towards Intellect. Not everybody is capable of apprehending the Forms – there are those who "neither have understood this world here nor seen that higher world" (*Enn.* II.9.16). Nonetheless, "they [the Forms] exist and appear to us and he who sees them cannot possibly say anything else except that they are what really exists" (*Enn.* I.6.5). Plotinus describes "intuitive intellect" (*nous*, νοῦς) as one of the faculties of humans distinct from "discursive reason" (*dianoia*, διάνοια, *Enn.* III.3.5). It is by means of intellectual intuition, which can also be called a remembrance of the Forms from our preincarnate state (*Enn.* IV.4.4), that we come to apprehend the Forms. When this comes about by means of perception, which is discussed more below, it constitutes something like Husserl's "eidetic intuition", except that the Form intuited is something genuinely transcendent in Plotinus.

An important aspect of contemporary discussions of cognition is the distinction between conscious and unconscious processing. It is generally conceded that the vast bulk of cognition

is unconscious, and that conscious processes come into play only when certain thresholds are exceeded (Williams et al., 2004, p. 65-66). Plotinus also acknowledges the role of unconscious cognitive processes: "... it is only knowledge of the more extreme changes [in the body] which reaches the associated souls; if the changes are not extreme, they know nothing of them" (*Enn.* III.6.19). Plotinus also speaks of sense-perceptions that do not reach consciousness:

When what is perceived makes no difference, or the perception is not at all personally relevant, but is provoked involuntarily by the difference in the things seen, it is only the sense-perception which has this experience and the soul does not receive it into its interior, since the difference is not of concern to it either because it meets a need or is of benefit in some other way (*Enn.* IV.4.8).

This may be the first historical description of the psychophysiological phenomenon known as "sensory gating", a point which will be taken up later. The idea of the unconscious is also implicit in the idea that souls forget their preincarnate understanding of the Forms when they come into a body, but these memories remain with them and are accessible by means of intuition. The "lower" aspects of the soul, especially in individuals who have not achieved a vision of the Forms, are largely unaware of the activity of the "upper" soul. For this reason, we may speak of a "higher" unconscious (related to the intuition of Intellect) as well as a "lower" unconscious related to the body and sensation in Plotinus.

4. Sensory perception and the external world

Any discussion of the sensible world in Plotinus must traverse difficult terrain that has been the subject of much scholarly controversy. Plunging in where angels fear to tread, a good place to begin is by emphasising that the external world that lies beyond the individual soul does not consist of a disparate collection of objects acting mechanically but is itself ensouled in an overarching "soul of the All" (*hē tou pantos psuchē*, ἡ τοῦ παντὸς ψυχή). This soul of the All, the world-soul, animates the physical universe and makes it alive. However, this does not mean that individual souls are merely parts of the larger world-soul. Plotinus is at pains to deny this and to give individual souls a genuine autonomy from the world-soul, in order to preserve individual free-will. Thus, "The soul of the All has made the universe, but the particular souls direct [each] a part of it" (*Enn.* IV.3.6). Humans are parts of the All insofar as their bodies are concerned ("... each thing in the perceptible All is a part of it, and completely a part of it as regards its body...", *Enn.* IV.4.32), but there is something in humans, their soul, which transcends the world-soul.

Plotinus argues that perception occurs via the sense organs acting as intermediaries between the external world and the soul of the observer. He states that "sense-perceptions must take place through bodily organs", and that "the organ ... must not be the same either as the knower or what is going to be known" (*Enn.* IV.4.23). The perception itself that is passed to the imaging faculty of the soul represent the imitation of Forms in matter. This is an extremely important point that goes to the issue of whether Plotinus is, as Emilsson claims, a

direct realist (2017, p. 252), or an indirect realist (the other option, anti-realism or subjective idealism, can be ruled out, as will be seen). If it were Form in its absolute clarity that is passed to the soul in perception, then Plotinus would be an unqualified direct realist. But Plotinus tells us that this is not the case, and that the Forms in nature are merely “apparitions” (*Enn.* III.6.6). He writes, “... those [form appearances in matter] present themselves to our contemplation in the middle between matter itself and form itself. They appear because they come from a higher world, but their appearance is false because that in which they appear does not exist” (*Enn.* III.6.17). For this reason, “in the soul the mental picture is a phantasm” (*Enn.* III.6.15). In other words, while sense-perception does perceive Form, it perceives it as in imperfect and distorted imitation, not as it is in Intellect.

It is at this point that the distinction between direct and indirect realism becomes problematic because Plotinus’ position represents a compromise between these two. The Forms as they are expressed in nature are in their essence the same Forms as are actual in Intellect. Therefore, there can be no sceptical worries concerning whether our perception of the world may differ radically from the external world as it truly is, the phenomenal from the noumenal. We have direct access to the Forms in Intellect by means of intuition engaging the “higher” aspect of our souls; since all of nature is comprised of nothing other than these very Forms instantiated in matter, nothing in nature can be ultimately mysterious or hidden from us: “if one means ‘things in the universe’, including soul and the things in soul, all the things are here below which are in the intelligible world” (*Enn.* V.9.13). In this regard, Plotinus does retain an important feature of direct realism, which neutralises the kind of sceptical concerns that bedevil indirect or representational realisms.

But if we are detecting Form in perception, we nonetheless do not detect it with clarity. We detect it only unclearly and vaguely. Sense-perception only presents a “blurry” image of the Forms, unlike the direct apprehension of Intellect. Plotinus writes:

And for this reason this man here has sense-perception, because he has a lesser apprehension of lesser things, images of those intelligible realities; so that these sense-perceptions here are dim intellections, but the intellections there are clear sense-perceptions (*Enn.* VI.7.7).

By this means, Plotinus incorporates an important element of indirect realism, positing that our perceptions do not present us with an exact replica of the external object we are perceiving, but only with an “approximation” to it, an unclear and fuzzy picture. This allows him to avoid one of the major pitfalls of direct realism, namely, if we directly perceive the Form of objects in the external world, how could we ever be mistaken in our perceptions? For example, consider Gautama’s famous example of the man who sees a rope on the path on a dark night and mistakenly sees it as a snake (King, 1999, p. 151). In the instant, he is convinced that he is perceiving a snake, and he steps back in fear. It is only on closer inspection that he determines that it is only a rope. If direct realism is true, and we apprehend Form as Plotinus clearly insists, then how would such a mistake be possible? How could we apprehend something as having the Form of a snake, when in fact it has the Form of a rope? Wouldn’t the Form of the rope simply “transfer” via our sense organs to our soul?

Plotinus avoided this problem because he argued that the Forms in nature are themselves only marred lesser images of the Forms in Intellect, and our perception of these flawed images is itself also “dim”. Therefore, in the process of perception, misidentifications and mischaracterisations of Form can occur. Plotinus occupies a middle ground between direct and indirect realism which allows him to avoid sceptical concerns about the external world on the one hand, while at the same time allowing for perceptual misidentification of Form on the other. Plotinus sees two possible ways by which the data about Form provided by sense-perception can be analysed and, if necessary, corrected. These can be distinguished as a temporally immediate eidetic intuition, and the temporally delayed employment of discursive reason. Each of those will be considered here in turn.

In relation to immediate eidetic intuition, Emilsson describes a commonly held view by interpreters of Plotinus, which he himself also previously held:

The general idea is that when for instance vision recognises something it sees as a tomato, the soul unfolds the intelligible form of the tomato into the power of representation and notes that the image that has arisen through the senses fits the image derived from the intelligible tomato (2017, p. 281).

However, Emilsson now rejects this view because he argues, and as we have seen above correctly so, that the Form of the object perceived is “settled at the level of sense-perception” (2017, p. 281). Therefore, he argues that the Form is presented by sense-perception and is then evaluated by discursive reason enlightened by apprehension of the Forms in Intellect. Emilsson thus rejects anything that could rightly be called an eidetic intuition in the process of sensation and instead holds to what might be called eidetic perception. There is no question that Emilsson is correct that Plotinus believes that the imaging power (the power of representation) can be subject to critical analysis after the perception has occurred. It seems, however, that he has fallen into the trap of assuming a false dichotomy between what has been called here an eidetic intuition and an eidetic perception. Plotinus’ view seems to be more subtle. In the process of perception giving rise to a mental representation in the soul (i.e., conscious perception), both an imperfect image of the Form of the external object is conveyed by the senses, *and also*, “the soul unfolds the intelligible form ... into the power of representation”. This provides a direct, immediate, non-discursive link between sense-perception and Intellect. This can be seen in the following passage:

For how could there be a musician who sees the melody in the intelligible world and will not be stirred when he hears the melody in sensible sounds? Or how could there be anyone skilled in geometry and numbers who will not be pleased when he sees right relation, proportion and order with his eyes? For, indeed, even in pictures those who look at the works of art with their eyes do not see the same things in the same way, but when they recognise an imitation on the level of sense of someone who has a place in their thought they feel a kind of disturbance and come to a recollection of the truth; this is the experience from which passionate loves arise. (*Enn.* II.9.16).

This passage seems to show that intuition of the Forms in Intellect can be directly enmeshed with perception of the Forms of external objects, so that not everybody sees “the same things in the same way”. An example might be that of a trainee radiologist. On their first attempt at looking at X-rays, they might see only vague shapeless patches that mean little. However, over time and with training, they come to recognise the various bodily organs and their defects in the X-ray images. Thus, one person, an uninformed lay person, may look at an X-ray and be unable to see a heart, but a trained radiologist will see the heart easily in the same image. It is important to emphasise that this is not a delayed process achieved by means of discursive reason. The trained radiologist does not first perceive an unformed image, and then on thinking about it, infer that there is a heart there by means of reasoning. On the contrary, a trained radiologist will perceive the heart in the image in the first moment of its presentation. This is the phenomenon to which Plotinus is alluding in the passage above.

This connection of the dim Form from external objects with an intuited Form from Intellect in the moment of perception constitutes a genuine eidetic intuition. It admits what Emilsson denies, that “the soul unfolds the intelligible form ... into the power of representation”. However, Plotinus is explicit that not everybody experiences these kinds of eidetic intuitions to the same degree. An expert musician, or an expert in geometry, will have differing eidetic intuitions based on how much they have contemplated the respective Forms in Intellect and how much they have therefore remembered of their preincarnate intelligible vision. The key point is that there is no interposition of discursive reasoning or cognitive reflection. The intuition is immediate and unmediated by other cognitive processes.

The adoption by Plotinus of this intermediary view between a direct and indirect realism of Form (which could be called semi-direct realism), provides him with a powerful theory which avoids sceptical worries without regarding perceptual information as being infallible. This means that his theory can handle not only misidentifications of Form such as occurs in the snake/rope example, but also optical illusions such as the duck-rabbit illusion which so intrigued Wittgenstein (2001, p. 166). In this case, the object in the external world is merely a curly line drawn on a page. However, the viewer immediately “sees” this image as either a duck or a rabbit, depending upon which Form unfolds from Intellect into their imaging power. The Form of duck or rabbit cannot derive from the external object, because in this case it is neither. Furthermore, once the observer has been told that it is an optical illusion, and that it can be seen as either a duck or a rabbit, they can start to mentally switch between the two ways of seeing: seeing it as a duck in one moment and a rabbit in the next, even though the external image remains unchanged.

The existence of such eidetic intuitions is crucial to Plotinus because, without them, the world would be uninterpretable. The observer “would neither have understood this world here nor seen that higher world” (*Enn.* II.9.16). A process of reflection by means of discursive reason informed by intellectual intuition, while useful, would not in itself serve to bridge the gap between the sensory world and Intellect. Indeed, the purpose of discursive reason ultimately is to facilitate such eidetic intuition. This is done by guiding the ignorant towards a vision of the real underlying Forms in Intellect and connecting them with the “dim” Forms observed in

the external world, so that reflection is no longer required but the true Form can immediately be seen in perception of the external object. One might think of this as aligning the vision of Intellect with sensory perception, as we might adjust binoculars until the twin images become one clear image. Discursive reason acts “as if showing the way to someone who wants to have a view of something” (*Enn.* VI.9.4). But it is the process of intuitively seeing the true Forms in the world of sense that results in the observer being “carried to that higher world” (*Enn.* II.9.16) of Intellect in which discursive reason is not present nor required. Therefore, discursive reason, or dialectic, is merely a preliminary guide, a tool, to assist the seeker after truth in the apprehension of Intellect and the Forms in and through the sensible world. Without eidetic intuition, the two realms of sensory perception and Intellect would be forever separated and related only indirectly by means of a discursive reasoning which could lead anywhere or nowhere.

It is worth connecting this interpretation of sensory perception with Plotinus’ broader metaphysics since certain general metaphysical principles pervade his thought in all aspects. Emilsson observed that the image of external physical objects presented to the soul’s imaging power by the sensory organs represents the external activity of the object in question (1996, pp. 224-225). Plotinus generally regards the “image” or “imitation” of something as being that thing’s external activity. But the formative principle, the object itself and its internal activity, is itself a part of the external activity of Intellect, in the soul of the All. Therefore, the image presented to the soul’s power of representation by the sense organs is, as it were, a part of the external activity of an external activity of Intellect (or an image of an image of Intellect). The process of eidetic intuition described above represents a “correction” or “refinement” of the mental image, by which means it is transformed into a part of the external activity of Intellect (an image of Intellect), instead of the external activity twice removed. In this way, the external world becomes realised within the soul of the knower. Thus the soul of the individual becomes closer in likeness to the soul of the All.

Turning to discursive reason, language as a means of representation is (according to Plotinus) at a lower level than even the imaging power and represents the imitation or image of this mental power of representation (“the spoken word is an imitation of that in the soul” *Enn.* I.2.3). It is the most fragmentary and disunited form of representation available to the soul (Haig, 2023, p. 27). However, it does provide important advantages: its extremely diverse multiplicity and the fact that it is so easily manipulated at will means that it has greater flexibility in combining and comparing what is presented to the soul by sensory perception and what is intuited from Intellect. Discursive reason can “take to pieces” what the imaging power and Intellect provide, and evaluate them:

... the reasoning power in soul makes its judgement, derived from the mental images present to it which come from sense-perception, but combining and dividing them; and, as for the things which come to it from Intellect, it observes what one might call their imprints, and has the same power also in dealing with these (*Enn.* V.3.2).

Therefore, discursive reason, when employed in philosophical dialectic, plays a crucial role in guiding the soul towards a vision of Intellect. Plotinus sees language, when employed

rightly (in philosophical dialectic) as a tool to guide the interlocuters towards Intellect. The purpose of language is to act “as if showing the way to someone who wants to have a view of something” (*Enn.* VI.9.4). It is possible to fail to achieve such a vision because one has a “lack of a reasoning to guide him and give him assurance about the One” (*Enn.* VI.9.4). For this reason, Plotinus’ concept of philosophical dialectic can be called “ostension towards the transcendent” (Haig, 2023, p. 34). It is a way of pointing out realities that cannot be described literally or precisely, or grasped by means of linguistic concepts. Plotinus does not want anyone to rest content with propositional knowledge, but rather to transcend it and ultimately leave it behind.

Because language is only an imperfect image even of the imaging faculty, let alone higher metaphysical realities such as Intellect and the One, nothing expressed in language can ever be entirely or precisely correct in every respect. Language is always a tool of “approximation” in guiding us towards an apprehension of a reality that is ultimately ineffable. It is worth noting here, however, that Plotinus’ account of language places limits on logical inference, since no premises are ever true in an unqualified sense and it is not possible to tease out in language where the distortion lies. For this reason, logical inference can result in incorrect results if pushed too far:

It may be that a formally valid conclusion we deduce from apparently true premises actually does not hold because it draws upon some undisclosed feature of the premises that is inaccurate, even though we cannot identify the fault in language. This means that two propositions which are, if interpreted literally, contradictory, might nonetheless both be the best possible way to express the underlying reality in their respective contexts (Haig, 2023, p. 30).

Therefore, dialectic “leaves what is called logical activity, about propositions and syllogisms, to another art ... Some of the matter of logic it considers necessary, as a preliminary, but it makes itself the judge of this, as of everything else, and considers some of it useful and some superfluous ...” (*Enn.* I.3.4). The aim is not total logical consistency, but rather, to paint a picture or tell a metaphysical story, which is the best approximation to the underlying reality that can be achieved from the standpoint of those involved in the discourse. Plotinus compares metaphysical theories to myths (*Enn.* III.5.9), and - as in all stories and narratives - an element of suspension of disbelief may be required, until the mystical vision has been achieved. Propositional descriptions of a thing never provide true knowledge but only an apprehension of the thing itself in Intellect, because “seeing and that which has seen are not reason, but greater than reason and before reason and above reason, as is that which is seen” (*Enn.* VI.9.10). Ultimately one must “abandon the verbal signification and grasp the meaning of what is being said” (*Enn.* VI.4.2).

5. The nature of the self, consciousness, and the unconscious

When approaching Plotinus' view of the nature of the self, it is necessary to avoid a tight imposition of the categories of modern philosophy on his thought. Unlike Descartes, Plotinus does not see the subjective self and its mental constituents (such as what modern analytic philosophers would call *qualia*) as simply given and transparent or "self-evident". We can say that Plotinus sees mental content as having conceptual structure, but only if we immediately qualify this by adding that by "conceptual structure" we mean having Form (a transcendent objective reality). His theory is therefore very different from that of Kant, who was an idealist with respect to Form (Redding, 2009, p. 2). For Plotinus, Form as manifested in the mental power of representation is merely an image or imitation of true Form. It is an imperfect "approximation" of the Forms in Intellect. For this reason, that which is present at the level of the imaging power can never be "self-evident" or certain, because it is a flawed reflection of a higher reality and it cannot disclose in itself the nature of the flaws. Hence, the ordinary subjective consciousness is somewhat illusory and distorted. These defects cannot be rectified by anything except by transcending it in a mystical intuition of Intellect. Modern philosophy may not take mystical insight seriously, but for Plotinus, it represents the central pivot around which everything else moves.

Knowledge of the self, then, cannot be achieved either by a phenomenological dissection of the concept of "I", as in Husserl, or by characterising the features of the transcendental unity of apperception, as in Kant. For Plotinus, whatever results from such analyses will necessarily remain only an "approximation" or imperfect image of the actual self. As Rappe writes, "Plotinus is concerned to show that human beings cannot think their way out of a limited point of view, since discursive thinking itself constitutes one such limited perspective" (2000, p. 30). Therefore, at the level of everyday conscious awareness, it is always impossible to truly know the self. One's self-knowledge in any succession of temporal thoughts will always be to some extent an illusion.

Plotinus gives a relatively clear statement about how he conceives of the self in *Enn.* I.1.13:

What is it that has carried out this investigation? Is it "we" or the soul? It is "we", but by the soul. And what do we mean by "by the soul"? Did "we" investigate by having soul? No, but in so far as we *are* soul ... And intellectual activity is ours in the sense that the soul is intellectual and intellectual activity is its higher life, both when the soul operates intellectually and when intellect acts upon us. For intellect too is a part of ourselves and to it we ascend.

Fundamentally, according to Plotinus, we are souls - but our souls reach to Intellect. Although we are not our bodies, sometimes we may speak as if we were:

Yes, but we said that the joint entity [the body and soul together] is part of ourselves, especially when we have not yet been separated from body: for we say that we are affected by what affects our body. So "we" is used in two senses, either including the beast or referring to that which even in our present life transcends it. The beast is the

body which has been given life. But the true man is different, clear of these affections; he has the virtues which belong to the sphere of intellect and have their seat actually in the separate soul, separate and separable even while it is still here below. (For when it withdraws altogether, the lower soul which is illumined by it goes away too in its train) (*Enn.* I.1.10).

The “lower soul” here refers to all aspects of the soul below the higher, or undescended soul. This includes both the middle soul which underpins our ordinary stream of consciousness with its every-changing temporality (i.e., the imaging power), and the vegetative soul which makes the body alive (Emilsson, 2017, pp. 229-235). Our higher soul, of which we are normally unaware, maintains an atemporal and eternal apprehension of Intellect. The middle soul only persists so long as we are “fastened to a dying animal”, as Yeats famously wrote in *Sailing to Byzantium*. Ultimately, the only way to truly know the self is to ascend to a vision of Intellect, and that requires a mystical vision that is non-discursive. It is this intuition of Intellect that provides infallible knowledge of the self and the world. Unfortunately, this knowledge is only infallible so long as it is present. Since, in our present life, we only obtain “glimpses” of Intellect and then fall back into the ordinary consciousness of the middle soul, infallibility eludes us. We can only do the best we can to paint as accurate a picture as possible in dialectic that will guide us towards Intellect.

As has already been noted, Plotinus presents us with two components of the self which are generally unconscious, a lower aspect connected with bodily sensation, and an upper aspect connected with Intellect. As we have seen, Plotinus states that only knowledge of more “extreme changes” in sensory information make their way to the soul; “if the changes are not extreme, they [the associated souls] know nothing of them” (*Enn.* III.6.19). Much sensory information does not reach the soul “since the difference is not of concern to it either because it meets a need or is of benefit in some other way” (*Enn.* IV.4.8). The features of the world to which our attention is drawn – the picture of the world that reaches our soul – are selected based on criteria that relate to our own interests and survival. It is a “filtered” picture of the world, and that filtration has prioritised our own concerns. This is another reason to believe that Plotinus did not adopt a naïve realism about the world.

No discussion of the self in Plotinus could be complete without noting that the ultimate objective of his philosophy is not to merely encounter the true self in Intellect, but to transcend even that in a vision of the One. It is here that the language of self becomes problematic. In one sense of the word “self”, Plotinus sees the self as dissolving in expansion in a mystical union with the One. He refers to ego-abandonment and ego-dissolution in achieving mystical realisation: “... when he has nowhere to set himself and limit himself and determine how far he himself goes, he will stop marking himself off from all being ...” (*Enn.* VI.5.7), and, “Now it is because you approached the All and did not remain in a part of it, and you did not even say of yourself ‘I am just so much’ ...” (*Enn.* VI.5.12). As the One is absolutely infinite and has no boundaries, it cannot be apprehended in a subject-object manner which places a boundary between these two. Only through the disappearance of these boundaries of the self can the One be known. This results in an actual identity with the One, since it was always only these limiting boundaries that kept the self imprisoned in finite

subjectivity. Spiritual realisation requires a loss of self-awareness and the “divisive alienation of ... [the] conscious self” (Hadot, 1993, p. 32), and a transcendence of the subject/object distinction. Granted this, what then happens to the soul when spiritual realisation is achieved? There cannot be an extinction of the soul along with the self because the soul is eternal.

We should recognise first that in attempting to describe this ultimate mystical realisation, we are staining the limits of language almost to breaking point. Therefore, verbal descriptions should not be taken too literally, as Plotinus himself repeatedly urges (Haig, 2023, pp. 21-25). Plotinus describes the person who has achieved mystical realisation as one who “everywhere abides by himself and in himself and has from himself being and the things which really are down to soul and life depending on him and moving to an unbounded unity by his sizeless unboundedness” (*Enn.* VI.5.12). It seems that in mystical realisation it is not that one’s soul is annihilated, but that it is alienated from ego – it is seen merely as one part of a unified whole. It is now “a soul”, not “my soul”. It is the ego that has been annihilated, not the soul in which the ego formerly dwelt. The ego itself (the “I”) is defined by its limits, by its boundaries. When those boundaries disappear, the ego disappears also. Insofar as the self is identified with the ego, the self dissolves and is abandoned in mystical union. The soul that was the seat of the self remains eternal. Perhaps the best literary expression of this state is that of Borges:

And at that, something occurred which I cannot forget and yet cannot communicate – there occurred union with the deity, union with the universe (I do not know whether there is a difference between those two words) ... He who has glimpsed the universe, he who has glimpsed the burning designs of the universe, can have no thought for man, for a man’s trivial joys or calamities, though he himself be that man. He *was* that man, who no longer matters to him. What does he care about the fate of that other man, what does he care about the other man’s nation, when now he is no one? (1998, pp. 253-254).

6. Mind, body, substance, and free will

There is a commonplace belief that Plato and his successors were mind-body dualists. This is perfectly understandable, and not entirely inaccurate, given the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. The problem is that “dualism” is, in this and nearly every other context in which it is employed, a vague and indefinite term, until precisely in what respect a theory is dualistic is specified. In modern philosophy, mind-body dualism is most famously associated with Descartes, but the theory of Descartes and that of Plotinus, as we will see, are very far apart indeed.

There are three main issues to resolve in approaching Plotinus’ theory of the mind-body relationship. The first is to decide, granted the theory is dualistic, how this can be characterised in terms of substance. Is Plotinus’ theory a form of substance dualism, or attribute dualism, or something that does not quite fit either category neatly? The second issue is one of causality. Is there causal interaction between mind and body, and if so, is it bidirectional, or unidirectional? Finally, we need to decide if Plotinus held that our actions are all causally determined, or if he held to some form of contra-causal free will.

In answering the question related to substance, it is necessary to analyse Plotinus' view of substance itself in general. In critiquing Aristotle, Plotinus rejects the idea that there are sensible substances. Sensible substance is "a conglomeration of qualities and matter" (*Enn.* VI.3.8). That is, objects in the physical world are not true substances, but just bundles of attributes. True substance is found only in Intellect. He refers to sensible substance as "so-called substance" (*hē legomenē ousia*, ἡ λεγομένη οὐσία): "It was said about the qualitative that, mixed together with others, matter and the quantitative, it effects the completion of sensible substance, and that this so-called substance is this compound of many ..." (*Enn.* VI.3.15). The true substance that stands behind a sensible object is a Form, but that is located in Intellect, not in the sensible world. Thus, the sensible object does not stand by itself, but is dependent upon a Form in Intellect, of which it is an image.

In addition to true substance being located only in Intellect, Plotinus also upholds the so-called Eleatic Principle, by virtue of which a substance must be causally efficacious (Colyvan, 1998, p. 313). There can be no causally inert substances. This principle, originating in Plato's *Sophist* (1921, 247e), is assumed by Plotinus in various contexts. He states it outright on several occasions, such as: "It is certainly not possible for it, since it is a substance, not to possess along with its being desires and actions and the tendency towards its good" (*Enn.* II.3.15), and "It would be absolutely absurd for something to exist in reality but not to have any power which it could exercise" (*Enn.* IV.4.35). Furthermore, Plotinus holds not only to the Eleatic Principle, but also to its converse: "just as it is not possible to have substance without power, so it is not possible to have power without substance" (*Enn.* VI.4.9). In other words, whatever is not a substance, does not have causal power. This principle, the converse Eleatic Principle, combined with the idea that there are no sensible substances, thereby entails that there is no true causation in the physical world.

It has already been argued that Plotinus is not a subjective idealist like Berkeley. However, he is clearly not a Cartesian or substance dualist, since he holds that substance exists only in Intellect, not in the physical world. Neither is he an attribute dualist or a parallelist like Spinoza, since the course of physical events does not run independently of Intellect. Given this background, it seems that Emilsson's insightful characterisation of Plotinus' position on the mind-body question as an "inverted epiphenomenalism" or non-reductive idealism (2017, p. 218) is accurate. Epiphenomenalism ("non-reductive materialism") holds that mind is real but supervenes on the physical, so that there is unidirectional causation from the physical to the mental, but not vice-versa. Plotinus holds the reverse position: physical reality supervenes on the mental, and there is unidirectional causation from the mental to the physical, but not vice-versa. While it is difficult to closely align Plotinus' view with inverted versions of specific contemporary forms of epiphenomenalism, due to their very different broader metaphysical contexts, Emilsson writes, "What at any rate seems beyond doubt is that the physical sphere has an entirely dependent existence, parasitical on the intelligible causes and really a kind of epiphenomenon" (2017, p. 218). This characterisation of the physical world fits with Plotinus' description of it as being somewhat illusory, a mere image in a mirror, and in itself lifeless (a "decorated corpse", *Enn.* II.4.5).

It is important to distinguish Plotinus' view of the mind-body problem from the occasionalism of Malebranche, and before him of some medieval Islamic thinkers, since there are certain apparent similarities, if the world-soul took the place of God in the occasionalist system. Occasionalism holds that there is only one true cause, God (Malebranche, 2013, pp. 51-61). Everything that happens in the physical world is caused immediately by God; there are no secondary causes. The apparent regularities that we consider to be the laws of nature are just reliable consistencies in God's actions. However, although Plotinus does delegate a great deal of the activity in the physical world to the world-soul, he is quite explicit in rejecting the idea that it is responsible for all change in nature. The individual souls of humans and animals also effect change in the sensible realm. For example, "the ruling principle [the human soul] itself is what immediately moves the leg", because "each separate thing must be a separate thing" (*Enn.* III.1.4). Similarly, "Providence ought not to exist in such a way as to make us nothing", otherwise, "There would be nothing but the divine" (*Enn.* III.2.9). We should also remember that Plotinus held that many natural objects which we would consider to be lifeless are actually ensouled and alive. For example, the sun, the moon, and the planets all have souls ("the sun also is a god because it is ensouled, and the other heavenly bodies", *Enn.* V.1.2). Therefore, the world-soul is by no means responsible for every movement in nature.

This rejection of occasionalism in favour of a non-reductive idealism or mentalism, however, does lead into the next important point: the question of human free will. Plotinus makes several different claims on this subject which are, on the face of it, difficult to reconcile with each other. He does not explicitly attempt to reconcile them himself, although he clearly assumes that they can all be held together. This leaves it somewhat to the reader to speculate how he might have seen the pieces of the puzzle fitting with each other. On the one hand, Plotinus insists that there is a single over-arching providence that governs the world, and that everything, even bad things such as suffering and evil, have their necessary place within this scheme - they "... are essential to the completeness of the All and are important parts of the All" (*Enn.* II.9.13). Similarly, he states, "... what piety is there in denying that providence extends to this world and to anything and everything?" (*Enn.* II.9.16). So, there is an overarching necessity to things, and, like Leibniz, Plotinus believes that we live in the best of all possible worlds.

On the other hand, Plotinus wants to maintain that people are genuinely the agents of their actions and are morally responsible for their choices. They are free when they act virtuously from themselves in accordance with reason. However, even when people do evil, although though they do not act freely, they are still responsible for their actions since they had the capacity to act in accordance with reason. A person who does evil acts under the dominion of bodily affectations, but (at least in general) this is not something which is outside of their voluntary control. He writes, "So the evil deeds ... come from us (i.e. we cause them), and we are not compelled by providence but we connect them, of our own accord, with the works of providence or works derived from providence ..." *Enn.* III.3.5. This seems to require contra-causal free will.

In reconciling these apparently contradictory claims about providence and contra-causal free will, there are several possible interpretations. Some commentators have argued that Plotinus is a compatibilist (Emilsson, 2017, p. 357). This is possible, although some qualification would be necessary since his form of compatibilism would be different to its typical modern expression. Contemporary compatibilists generally hold that our actions having physical causes is nonetheless consistent with us also being free. However, Plotinus would deny this. For Plotinus, an action done freely must be in accordance with rational principles, not determined by physical causes. Nonetheless, insofar as rational principles themselves determine a particular course of action by means of logical entailment, our actions would still be both necessary but also free. So, Plotinus might be a compatibilist. However, this theory would involve Plotinus in an apparently unsolvable logical dilemma. What is it that determines in any given instance whether we are governed by physical causes or by rational principles – that is, whether we act wrongly or rightly? It cannot be rational principles, since they would always have us choose the good. If it is physical causes, then that puts our acting rightly down to the whims of nature. So, while compatibilism is a possible interpretation of Plotinus, it involves serious difficulties and seems to weigh too heavily on the side of determinism, at the expense of what he has to say about human freedom.

A second possible interpretation would be that Plotinus is, at least implicitly, a Molinist. This view holds that providence has access to “middle knowledge” - exhaustive counterfactual conditional knowledge about how any given free agent would act under all possible circumstances which did not actually obtain (Perszyk, 2011, p. 5). Providence “sees” how a particular free agent would act in all possible worlds, even if those worlds are not actual. This would enable providence to arrange things to obtain the optimal outcome, without impinging on free will. While the Molinist option might perhaps superficially appear to be an improvement over the compatibilist one, it also has difficulties which are well-known (Perszyk, 2011, p. 7). If an agent is contra-causally free, it is not clear that there could be true counterfactual conditional statements about how they would act under specified possible circumstances that do not actually obtain. Such counterfactual truths must have some ontological grounding - something that makes them true. So, doesn't the Molinist claim amount to saying that there are ontological grounds which necessitate that given circumstances X, the agent must choose Y? This seems to amount to determinism. Hence, Molinism appears in the end to collapse into compatibilism. While the debate over Molinism in the analytic philosophy of religion is ongoing, it appears questionable whether this view adequately protects human freedom as Plotinus maintains it.

There is, however, another possibility, which we might call a variety of mysterianism. Concepts such as causation, determinism, contra-causal free will, and so forth, are linguistic concepts. We have already seen that Plotinus is at pains to argue that language is only a limited and inadequate “approximation” or imitation of a reality which is, strictly speaking, ineffable. It may be that human language is too inadequate as a medium of representation to coherently systematise an explanation of human choice. This interpretation relates to larger-scale metaphysical issues in Plotinus which derive from his Platonic heritage and are reflected in the fact that he has two primary names for his first principle, namely, “the Good” and “the One”. Why are there two primary descriptors for the absolute? It has been argued by

Benitez that for Plato the first principle could be approached using reason by two primary pathways, the ethical and the cosmological. If we take the ethical pathway, as in the *Republic*, the absolute appears to us as “the Good”. But if we take the cosmological pathway, it appears in Plato as the Demiurge (as in the *Timaeus*) and in Plotinus as “the One”. However, these two approaches, the ethical and the cosmological, may not be completely logically reconcilable with each other, due to the inadequacies of language. To quote Benitez:

It is possible to see Plato as taking two different approaches towards a single ultimate reality: first, from the point of view of ethics (in which case the Good is ultimate), and second, from the point of view of metaphysics (in which case God is ultimate). Thus, the *ens realissimum* will look different to observers approaching it in different ways. But there do not need to be two really distinct beings, the Good and God. Instead there may be only one most real being, which we are unable to conceive of in only one way (1995, p. 116).

We know that the terms “the Good” and “the One” are both regarded by Plotinus as only inadequate half-truths. They are not to be taken completely literally, because he says so explicitly and repeatedly. It may be, then, that the idea of contra-causal free will is the best approximation to the underlying ineffable reality concerning human choice, when we are speaking in an ethical context. Moreover, the idea of determinism may be the best approximation to the underlying reality of human choice when we are speaking in a cosmological context. But there is no way of reconciling free will and determinism in language in a single overarching theory. Only when we achieve a non-discursive mystical vision of Intellect, will we apprehend how this all fits together. Even then, we will still be unable to perfectly translate that vision into language, once it is achieved. Given Plotinus’ attacks on the idea that language can exactly represent reality and given that he ends with two different primary descriptors of his first principle, “the Good” and “the One”, it seems that this mysterian theory is most likely to be the correct interpretation.

7. Plotinus and contemporary understandings of cognition

How should we view Plotinus’ thought in the light of contemporary neuroscience, psychology, and philosophy? To begin with the neuroscientific and psychological dimensions, the nature of the unconscious (an important aspect of Plotinus’ thought) has contemporary relevance. Schwyzer and Dodds suggested that Plotinus was the discoverer of the unconscious; however, this seems to have been an exaggeration, since the concept of unconscious cognition itself is found in many ancient thinkers (Emilsson, 2017, p. 276). What may be original in Plotinus, and perhaps marks his greatest scientific contribution, is the idea of sensory gating. Plotinus is quite clear that there are unconscious sensations and that sensory perceptions only reach the level of conscious awareness if they exceed some threshold (if they represent “extreme changes”, *Enn.* III.6.19), or “because it meets a need or is of benefit in some other way” (*Enn.* IV.4.8). This insight has come to have major significance in contemporary neuroscience and psychology. While Plotinus is not the

discoverer of the unconscious, he may well be the discoverer of the phenomenon of sensory gating.

In modern form, sensory gating refers to the fact that stimuli which are judged to be irrelevant or redundant are filtered at an unconscious level and never even reach the level of consciousness (Cromwell et al., 2008, pp. 69-70). Such unconscious or automatic cognitive processing is vastly superior to conscious or controlled processing for most routine tasks. For example, in learning to play the piano, initially conscious attention must be directed to every movement of the fingers. However, with repetition and practice, the movement of the fingers occurs without any conscious thought being directed towards it at all. The resulting movements are far more reliable and less prone to mistakes than when directed by conscious awareness. Conscious perception comes into play only when a mistake occurs, and it is necessary to override the automatic, unconscious processes in order to correct them. Similarly, we often realise after we drive from one place to another that we have no recall of what happened on the journey. The processing of sensory input and the motor output in response was done entirely unconsciously, while our conscious attention was focussed on other things.

Sensory gating plays a crucial role in contemporary explanations of cognitive processes. It also is important in relation to various forms of mental illness. For example, abnormalities of sensory gating have been demonstrated in schizophrenia by means of electrophysiological measurements (event-related potentials) and are thought to play a role in the production of delusions and hallucinations (Jones et al., 2016, pp. 33-35). Given Plotinus' clear statements of the basic idea, he can be regarded as having discovered a significant neuroscientific phenomenon.

In terms of psychology, Plotinus held that, in addition to this "lower" unconscious involving sensory perception, there is a "higher" unconscious in ordinary cognition that derives from Intellect. While it would be misleading to overstate the parallels, there are similarities here to Freud's concept of human cognition as being based on the id, ego, and superego, with the id representing a "lower" unconscious connected to instinctual desires and the bodily "beast", and the superego being a "higher" unconscious related to morality (Meares, 2000, p. 227). Similarly, there are obvious parallels between Jung's concept of the collective unconscious with its archetypes and Plotinian Intellect.

Turning to philosophy, we have seen that Plotinus' thought anticipates various themes that are found in modern thought. During the Renaissance, Plotinus' writings were rediscovered in Europe and were translated into Latin by Marsilio Ficino. In the seventeenth century, the Cambridge Platonists drew heavily on his work and developed the modern sense of the word "consciousness" from the Plotinian *sunaisthēsis* (Emilsson, 2017, p. 376). It has been argued that Descartes' inward turn away from the senses and towards one's soul represents a legacy of Plotinus (Rappe, 2000, p.67). However, Descartes was a thorough-going nominalist and the soul for him was simply an independently existing substance, not a component of a larger chain of being. Overall, therefore, Descartes represents a turning away from Plotinus and the Platonic tradition, which has characterised much modern thought. Of the classical continental rationalists, it is Leibniz who drew most heavily on Plotinus and who has the greatest affinity

to his work. Of the classical early modern empiricists, it was only Berkeley who was significantly influenced by Plotinus.

Kant's distinction between the sensible world (the phenomenal) and an intelligible world (the noumenal) is a legacy of the Platonic tradition and Plotinus in particular. However, Kant rejected the heart of Platonism, the theory of Forms, as his transcendental idealism was fundamentally an idealism concerning Form (Redding, 2009, p. 2). Furthermore, he explicitly rejected the idea of intellectual intuition, and held that the noumenal was unknowable, both contentions which contradict Plotinus. German Idealism after Kant was more influenced by Plotinus, especially regarding its conception of an Absolute lying at the core of manifested reality. However, there were also significant differences. For Plotinus, the transcendent intelligible realm cannot be adequately known by means of concepts, but only by mystical intuition. This contrasts with Hegel, for whom concepts can "expand" through synthesis with their opposites so as to eventually encompass all of reality, as one mode of absolute knowing (the "absolute Notion" or "absolute Concept") – (Findlay, 1977, p. xxix). For Hegel, the Absolute was "thought thinking itself" (Desmond, 1995, p.85), but for Plotinus, the One does not think at all. Therefore, the path to enlightenment for Hegel was philosophical dialectic from start to finish, but for Plotinus philosophical dialectic was only a preliminary guide towards a non-discursive vision of Intellect. Thus, Hegel was ultimately a rationalist, whereas Plotinus was ultimately a mystic.

Continental philosophy from Hegel to the present has generally had little interest in Plotinus. However, there was a Neoplatonic revival in France during the twentieth century, inspired by Henri Bergson, which had some broader influence (Hankey, 1999, pp. 135-136). In terms of the phenomenological tradition, Plotinus anticipates Husserl's description of "eidetic intuition". Heidegger showed little interest in Plotinus, and Hankey has argued that he significantly misunderstood him (2004, pp. 429-430). Somewhat ironically, aspects of Heidegger's thought have unintentional parallels to that of Plotinus. This is especially evident in relation to Heidegger's rejection of ontotheology, since Plotinus' metaphysical system represents a henology in which Being is relegated to a secondary position.

In terms of analytic philosophy, there has been scant engagement with Plotinus. Bertrand Russell's famous distinction between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance has some similarity to the difference between discursive knowledge and intuition of the Forms in Plotinus. However, this parallel should not be pushed too far, since Russell held that knowledge by acquaintance is still propositional in character, whereas for Plotinus, apprehension of the Forms is non-propositional. There is also some resemblance between Plotinus' idea that philosophical language is fundamentally a tool to direct the hearer towards Intellect, rather than a literal representation of reality, and the idea that persisted throughout Wittgenstein's life that philosophy is not a set of doctrines to be taken as literal truths, but rather is "elucidative nonsense" (in the early Wittgenstein) or "therapy" (in the later Wittgenstein). Unfortunately, Wittgenstein was always unable to break out of the mutually exclusive binary of univocity versus equivocity which pervaded the modern era with its reliance on discursive reason. He wrote:

Thus in ethical and religious language we seem constantly to be using similes. But a simile must be a simile for *something*. And if I can describe a fact by means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it. Now in our case as soon as we try to drop the simile and simply to state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts. And so, what at first appeared to be a simile now seems to be mere nonsense (2006, p. 256).

Between the world of Plotinus and that of Wittgenstein “a great gulf [is] fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence” (Luke 16:26, KJV). Despite the many echoes of Plotinus to be found in modern thought, there is a fundamental incommensurability between them, because for Plotinus language can never be either univocal or equivocal but must always be something in between. Indeed, Plotinus held that language is nothing *but* similes. Moreover, he argued that is not possible to drop the similes and state the facts which stand behind them, because these “facts” are ineffable and not expressible in language. Therefore, it is necessary to be open to the mystical as a guide. It may be worth considering whether Plotinus’ position, rather than representing an archaic and outmoded form of belief, offers us the only possible pathway out of the morass of modernity.

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