

THE CAMBRIDGE
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PLOTINUS

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1 LIFE AND WRITINGS

Among the philosophers of late antiquity Plotinus stands out as a thinker of exceptional depth, subtlety, originality and power. His value was recognized already in his time by a leading critic in Athens, Longinus. Somewhat more than a century later, in the Latin West, Augustine praised Plotinus as a Plato revived and Eunapius testified to the veneration for Plotinus among Platonists in the Greek East.¹ Some decades later, in Athens, Proclus devoted a commentary to Plotinus' work, a treatment he normally reserved for the highest philosophical authorities, such as Plato.² But Plotinus was also something of an outsider. He taught in Rome, in a group that gathered around him, not in a school in one of the major cities for philosophical studies, Athens and Alexandria. He was criticized by Athenian professors. His group dispersed before his death and the strong school traditions which developed in Athens and Alexandria in the fifth and sixth centuries had other roots. Yet even if standing outside the educational institutions of late-antique philosophy, Plotinus' work provided this philosophy with fundamental ideas, in the absence of which, and despite various doctrinal differences, late-antique Platonism is hardly conceivable (see below, 2(e)). This impact was made possible in large part by the mediation of Plotinus' pupil Porphyry. Since it is through Porphyry that we have almost all of what we know of Plotinus' life and of what we have of his work, we might begin by considering the manner in which Porphyry conveyed to us the life and works of his teacher.

It is towards the beginning of the fourth century, some thirty years after Plotinus' death, that Porphyry published a biography of Plotinus (*On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of his Works*³), together with, and as a preface to, his edition of Plotinus' works (the *Enneads*), the edition which became authoritative and

¹ Porphyry, *Life* 19–20; Aug. *Contr. Acad.* 3.18.41; Eunap. *Vit. soph.* 455.

² For surviving fragments of this commentary see Westerink 1959. ³ Henceforth *Life*.

has come down to us. It has been suggested that with this publication Porphyry was reacting to a new challenge which had developed at the turn of the fourth century, the challenge to Plotinus' heritage represented by the successful school founded in Apamea in Syria by Porphyry's former pupil, now a determined critic both of himself and of Plotinus, Iamblichus.⁴ If this is so, then the way in which Porphyry presented Plotinus' life and work was conditioned to some extent by the demands of his polemic with Iamblichus. We feel this perhaps in the portrait Porphyry gives us in the *Life* of Plotinus as an ideal sage, possessing every virtue, a paradigm of philosophical perfection, living the divine life which might be reached by those who read the Plotinian texts which follow the *Life*. Plotinus' divine-like nature is attested by various anecdotes (*Life* ch. 10) and by a lengthy oracle delivered (*post mortem*) by Apollo (ch. 22), testimonials as impressive as anything Iamblichus could come up with in his portrayal of his ideal sage, Pythagoras, in *On the Pythagorean Life*. It is perhaps in this light that we might read Porphyry's opening words in the *Life* that Plotinus 'seemed ashamed of being in the body', an attitude which hindered him from speaking about his origins, parents and native country, which made him refuse the making of a portrait or bust of him (a refusal curiously betrayed by his faithful pupil Amelius) and which eventually led to a neglect of his body such that sickness followed and death. In all this we might feel some hagiographical exaggeration on Porphyry's part: shame and gross neglect of the body, the instrument of the soul, are not what Plotinus advocates (see below, 2 (d), vi).

It is thanks to another pupil of Plotinus, Eustochius, a doctor who attended Plotinus when, retired on a country estate outside Rome, he died in 270, that Porphyry knew that Plotinus was sixty-six years old at the time. Eustochius also told Porphyry of Plotinus' last words: 'Try to bring the divine in us to the divine in the All.'⁵ If Porphyry says that Plotinus would not talk about his background, he can at least tell us that Plotinus began his study of philosophy in Alexandria at the age of twenty-eight, being disappointed until finding Ammonius, a teacher who made a deep and lasting impression, Porphyry suggests, on Plotinus, but about whom we know very little.⁶ After studying eleven

⁴ Saffrey 1992.

⁵ 2.26–7. The precise wording and interpretation of Plotinus' last words are controversial; cf. d'Ancona 2002.

⁶ For a collection and critical assessment of ancient reports on Ammonius, see Schwyzer 1983. Longinus puts Ammonius in the group of philosophers who contented themselves with oral, rather than written, transmission of their doctrines (Porphyry, *Life* 20.25–36). Much of what is reported about Ammonius (for example in Hierocles and Nemesius) seems to be Porphyrian in origin and sometimes reflects Porphyry's own views. However, Porphyry did not know Ammonius. It is thus very difficult to be sure about what really were Ammonius' views, even if it seems clear that Plotinus' philosophy, in some doctrinal aspects and in its general philosophical approach, must owe much to Ammonius (*Life* 3.33–5; 14.15–16). It seems that Ammonius attempted to unify the philosophy of Aristotle with that of Plato.

years with Ammonius, in 243 Plotinus joined the young Emperor Gordian III's military expedition against Persia, in search, Porphyry says (3.16–17), of Persian and Indian philosophy (we would expect nothing less from an ideal sage comparable to Pythagoras and Plato). The expedition was a failure, the emperor killed, but Plotinus managed to escape to Antioch and then settled in Rome in 244.

An unofficial philosophical school developed around Plotinus in Rome, including close pupils and collaborators such as Amelius (from 246 to 269) and Porphyry (from 263 to 268), a group of devoted and regular members of the school such as Eustochius, and, since the school was open, more casual visitors. The devoted and regular members included senators, doctors, men of literature and women, in particular Gemina (perhaps the widow of the emperor Trebonian) and her daughter who were Plotinus' hosts. Porphyry tells us that texts from Platonist and Aristotelian commentators of the second century were read in the lectures of the school (including Numenius, Atticus, Aspasius, Alexander of Aphrodisias) and that sometimes philosophical questions, such as that of the relation between soul and body, could be discussed for days. This suggests that the activities of the school may have resembled those, for example, of Epictetus' school, which combined the study of authoritative texts (in Epictetus' case, those of Chrysippus, in Plotinus' case, those of Plato) with discussion of various philosophical problems. The reading of Platonist and Aristotelian commentators may have been done in connection with the interpretation of passages in Plato and in Aristotle. Plotinus' teaching style, to the irritation of some (3.37–8), was very open and undogmatic, very different from the highly structured programme followed later in the schools of Athens and Alexandria. Plotinus was also assisted by Amelius and Porphyry in dealing with the criticisms of him coming from Greece and with the more subversive threat to some members of the school represented by Gnosticism (chs. 16–17).

These activities did not distract Plotinus, in Porphyry's portrayal of him, from his concentration on a transcendent life. Always 'there', living the life of *theōria*, knowledge (8.6 and 19–24), Plotinus was also 'here' (in the realm of *praxis*, action), acting as a respected arbiter and as a guardian attentive to the education and material interests of orphans left in his care (9.5 ff.). This domestic activity might have extended itself, had he been able to realize a project he proposed to the Emperor Gaius (both Gaius and his wife held Plotinus in honour) to develop an abandoned city in Campania into a city to be called Platonopolis and to be governed by 'Plato's laws' (12.1–8). Scholars disagree as to what Platonopolis would have been like, but the reference to Plato's laws should not be ignored. At any rate the project was not realized. Most important, however, was Plotinus' activity as a teacher and the attention to others which this teaching implied.

This attention extended to writing texts for the members of the school, an activity for which Plotinus was not particularly well disposed: he had poor eyesight, jumbled words and took no interest in literary form (8.1 ff.). At first, in Rome, Plotinus wrote nothing. Porphyry associates this in his narrative (3.24 ff.) with a mysterious pact made, he says, by Ammonius' students, Plotinus, Erennius and Origen, not to divulge Ammonius' teaching (echoes again of Pythagoras!). However, the pact was broken and in 254 Plotinus began composing treatises (at first relatively brief) in connection with his school lectures. When Porphyry arrived in Rome in 263, twenty-one treatises had been written. Porphyry suggests that their circulation was restricted (4.13–14), to the extent that at first he was not given access to them (18.20). He credits himself with stimulating Plotinus to write more, and indeed the treatises which Plotinus then composed gained considerably in extension, depth and freedom of expression. When Porphyry left Rome for Sicily in 268 on Plotinus' advice (Porphyry was contemplating suicide), he received there two batches of treatises written before Plotinus died.

In describing these circumstances, Porphyry provides (chs. 4–6) a chronological listing of the treatises which seems generally correct: total precision is scarcely possible here. The study of the treatises in this chronological order has not revealed convincing evidence of major doctrinal development or change in Plotinus' thought. The treatises reflect the work in Plotinus' school. They sometimes concern questions or problems which are standard in Platonist schools of the period (see for example 5.9 [5].10ff.; 1.8 [51].1), or issues raised by contemporary concerns (the threat represented by Gnosticism, for example; see 2.9 [33]), or relate more to the interpretation of passages in Plato (for example 3.9 [13].1), these matters being connected in that the solution of a problem may be confirmed by a passage in Plato, or the correct reading of a passage in Plato amounts to the solution of a philosophical problem. Although the treatises are not written as dialogues, they frequently develop as a dialogue of views, one view opposing or answering another (perhaps sometimes echoing discussions in Plotinus' circle) in an evolving treatment of the theme. This can become quite complex and the direction Plotinus wishes to take and his position may not be clear in an aporetic exploration reminiscent of parts of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.⁷ Or the discussion can be quite scholastic, polemical and dialectical in dealing with other philosophical schools (for example, the Stoics).⁸ Or the mood can

⁷ One of Plotinus' favourite expressions, $\bar{\epsilon}$ (which might be translated as: 'Or is it not rather the case that . . .'), indicates a new view to be explored, not necessarily his own definitive position (for example, 6.9.1.20; 1.5.5.3; 1.8.4.14).

⁸ It is thus quite hazardous to abstract Plotinus' 'doctrine' from passages taken in isolation from the aporetic or dialectical progression of thought to which they belong.

become protreptic, exhorting us on the way to the Good in passages of great poetry. In short, the treatises reflect Plotinus' view of the function and aim of philosophy (below, 2(d), v).

Plotinus' lectures and texts were preserved in other versions before Porphyry prepared to bring out his edition. Amelius had 100 volumes of notes (*scholai*) of Plotinus' lectures which he brought to Apamea when he left Rome in 269. Eustochius seems to have published the treatises in some fashion. But Porphyry claims that he had been designated by Plotinus as editor of the treatises (8.51; 24.2–3). This claim is backed up by Porphyry's account of his arrival in Plotinus' school in Rome, his conversion to Plotinus' ideas and his important role in the school: Plotinus' biography becomes in some places Porphyry's autobiography; through Plotinus Porphyry asserts himself as Plotinus' representative. In introducing his edition of the treatises, Porphyry refers to Andronicus of Rhodes' edition of Aristotle and Theophrastus as one of his models (24.6 ff.), an edition which had involved an ordering of Aristotle's texts in terms of a division of the sciences, as well as a work on the life of Aristotle and the order of his works. So too does Porphyry write the *Life* and arrange Plotinus' treatise in terms of the sciences, ethics (*Enn.* 1), physics (*Enn.* 2–3), and metaphysics⁹ (*Enn.* 4–6), so that they come to constitute a curriculum leading the mind of the reader through successive levels to the highest Good. Porphyry furthermore broke up some of Plotinus' treatises so as to reach the number 54, i.e. 6×9 , the numbers for perfection and totality. The resulting texts were then arranged in six sets (1–6) of nine treatises each, i.e. six 'nines' ('enneads'). Here again, Iamblichus may be in the background, since he published a Pythagorean curriculum (of which *On the Pythagorean Life* is the first part) in ten books, arranged according to the sciences. Porphyry's edition was published in three volumes (*codices*), as it still is in Henry and Schwyzer's critical edition: vol. I (*Enn.* 1–3), vol. II (*Enn.* 4–5), vol. III (*Enn.* 6).

Porphyry's division and reordering of the treatises has the disadvantage of artificially forcing them into a curricular structure. It also dismembered some treatises, the parts of which, however, usually follow each other in the edition (e.g., *Enn.* 6.4, 6.5), but which, in one case (*Enn.* 3.8, 5.8, 5.5, 2.9), find themselves dispersed in different parts of the edition. However, since Porphyry's edition imposed itself in late antiquity and remains our edition, we conventionally refer to the treatises by their place in the *Enneads* (e.g., *Enn.* 3.8), sometimes adding in brackets the number in the chronological list Porphyry supplies (e.g., *Enn.* 3.8 [30]) or even just giving the chronological number (treatise 30). Despite

⁹ I.e. 'theology', as concerning divine beings, Soul (*Enn.* 4), Intellect (5) and the One (6); on the range of the divine as going from the One down to Soul, see 5.1.7.49.

the violence done to the treatises, Porphyry does not seem to have tampered with the actual text of the treatises – he was sensitive to the particularity of Plotinus' writing, adding perhaps in some places brief glosses (but this is uncertain) and supplying the treatises with titles which were already current in the school or which he composed. The division of the treatises into chapters was made much later, by Marsilio Ficino when he published the first complete translation (into Latin) of Plotinus in Florence in 1492.

2 THOUGHT

It is not possible, in one brief chapter, to do justice to the breadth and depth of Plotinus' philosophy. What might be attempted is to sketch something like a subway plan which provides orientation and indicates major stations from which the reader might emerge (hopefully!) for further explorations in the light of Plotinus' own works. In attempting this sketch, I wish to suggest the movement of thought whereby Plotinus came upon and explored some of the ideas characteristic of his philosophy. A number of these ideas are present already in the first group of treatises that Plotinus wrote, before Porphyry's arrival in the school: I will refer first to these treatises, before passing to the more extensive discussions to be found in treatises composed later.¹⁰

(a) *First principles*

Plotinus regarded himself as simply taking up and explaining knowledge which had already been attained by some of his predecessors, in particular by Plato (5.1 [10]* 8–9). Plato, however, is not always clear in what he says (4.8 [6]* 1.26ff.), and Plotinus took account of the variety of interpretations of Plato developed before him. In an approach ultimately inspired by Aristotle's description in *Metaphysics* 1 of the extent to which his own predecessors had anticipated his theory of first principles (*archai*) or causes (*aitia*), Platonists of the second century sought to identify Plato's first principles, basing this on their interpretation of the making of the world as recounted in Plato's *Timaeus*. A fairly standard approach may be found in Alcinoüs' school-book (*Didaskalikos*, chs. 8–10), where three first principles are listed: God, the transcendent Forms and Matter.

¹⁰ Plotinus' treatises will be cited according to their enneadic numbering (e.g., 5.1), to which will be added, on first mention, their chronological numbering in brackets (e.g., 5.1 [10]) and an asterisk (e.g., 5.1 [10]*) for those treatises for which at present a detailed commentary is available (see Bibliography). It is best to read Plotinus' treatises as wholes, a task made easier today by the availability of commentaries on individual treatises, of which a list is given in the Bibliography below.

What this involves, as a reading of the *Timaeus*, is that the world is constituted (eternally) from *matter* formed by a World Soul following the model provided by a transcendent *god*, an Intellect whose thoughts are the transcendent *Forms*. However, in 5.1, Plotinus identifies as first principles, which he takes to be those of Plato: Soul, Intellect and the One.¹¹ This list, we note, does not include matter. Furthermore, Plotinus' principles do not function as co-ordinate constituents of the world, as they do in Alcinoüs, but the world eternally derives from Soul, which derives from Intellect, which derives from the One. We may consequently wonder how Plotinus reached his particular list of first principles and how it represents what he must regard as a correct interpretation of the cosmology of Plato's *Timaeus*.

(1) SOUL Beginning with the lowest of first principles, Soul,¹² Plotinus describes it in 5.1.2 as that which gives life, structure, unity and value to the world, to body. Without it, body would be dead, or rather just darkness, the darkness of matter (2.26). Plotinus evokes here Plato's description in the *Timaeus* (30b, 34b) of the world as a living organism, animated and ordered by a World Soul, a description taken up also in the Stoic theory of the cosmos as structured and driven by an immanent divine life-force. Plotinus notes that this conception of soul also concerns *our* soul, we who think about the world (2.49–51), and he affirms that Soul, as cosmic principle or cause, is not a body: it acts as one and entire throughout the world and is not spatially divided and fragmented as are bodies (2.28–40).

This last point had been argued a little before, in 4.7 [2]*, where Plotinus discusses the question of the immortality of the soul, a theme this time evoking Plato's *Phaedo*. Plotinus notes that to answer the question of immortality we need to know what is the nature of soul and he then argues (against materialist views such as those of the Stoics and Epicureans) that soul is not a body, and (against Aristotle) that soul, as incorporeal, does not depend for its existence on body. The arguments are often fairly traditional, coming from the *Phaedo* and from Platonist and Aristotelian criticisms of Stoicism. But they help bring out the distinction Plotinus wishes to make between body and soul, a distinction which implies not only that soul is not body, but that body depends on soul for whatever unity, structure and life it might have. For Plotinus, body is composite, having

¹¹ Modern studies sometimes refer to Soul, Intellect and the One, in Plotinus, as 'hypostases'. However, Plotinus uses the term *hypostasis* to refer, not to the One, but to the realities it produces, and a better term for all three would be 'principles', as suggested by Gerson 1994: 3.

¹² For convenience of reference I capitalize soul (and intellect), when referring to the nature of this first principle as a whole, a nature which includes a gradation of different souls (World Soul, individual souls), just as Intellect contains a gradation of different intellects.

mass and occupying space. As composite, it is subject to constant change and, as quantitative and spatial, each part of it occupies a particular space such that it is divided by space from other parts. But if body is composite, what composes it? What organizes it into a functional unity? Neither itself (as what is composed), Plotinus claims, nor its constituent parts (also composed, ultimately of the elements, themselves composed of matter and form) can act as the organizing power (4.7.2). Furthermore, if soul is understood (as it is in Plato's *Phaedo* and in Aristotle's *De anima*) as the cause responsible for living functions such as growth, sense-perception and thought, its power of recognition, for example, suggests an identity over time which body, in its constant changing, does not possess (4.7.5.20–4). Furthermore, soul's power as *one* subject perceiving a multiplicity of quantitatively and spatially separated objects is not that of which body (alone) is capable (4.7.6). Plotinus is pointing to the idea he develops elsewhere (4.9 [8]; 6.4–5 [22–3]*) that the concepts of one/many, whole/part, as they apply to bodies, work quite differently in regard to soul: soul is not one or many, a whole or parts, in the way body is. Since it is not quantitatively and spatially determined like body, soul can be both one and many, both a whole and parts in a way impossible for body.

(II) INTELLECT The distinction between soul and body becomes, in 4.7.9–10, a more general distinction between corporeal reality and the transcendent intelligible being of which Plato speaks, not only in the *Timaeus* (27d), but also in the *Phaedrus* (247cd). In 4.2 [4]*, prolonging the discussion in 4.7, Plotinus proceeds to refine this two-level structure by subdividing it into four, on the basis again of the *Timaeus* (35a): Soul is divisible in its capacity to be present in quantitatively and spatially divided bodies, whereas Intellect (*nous*) remains entirely indivisible; yet while being divisible as present in bodies, Soul remains one in its substance, thus undivided, whereas forms in matter are divided over bodies and lose this unity, but not to the point of becoming completely divisible as are bodies.

If we return to 5.1.3–4, the distinction between Soul and Intellect is described in terms of the knowledge possessed by Soul (which manifests itself in the ordering of the world), but which it receives from Intellect. Like earlier interpreters, for example Alcinous, Plotinus identifies the god who makes the world in the *Timaeus* as a transcendent Intellect whose thoughts are the Forms which are the models inspiring Soul's cosmic ordering. Other interpreters, for example Porphyry before he was persuaded to think otherwise (*Life* 18.8–19), had distinguished between the divine Intellect and the Forms, either in the sense that the Forms were exterior to and independent of Intellect, or in the sense that they were thought up by Intellect. However, to secure the truth of Intellect's

knowledge of the Forms (see below (c), ii) and the independent reality of the Forms, Plotinus felt it necessary to maintain the internality of the Forms in Intellect, indeed the identity of the Forms and Intellect. Intellect neither discovers the Forms (with the risks of error this implies), nor invents them (with the dependence this means for the Forms), but it is identical to them. This identity (here also Plotinus is anticipated by Alcinous in his thesis, if not in his explanation of the thesis) is that of Aristotle's divine Intellect, whose activity of thinking is identical with its object of thought (*Metaphysics* 12.7 and 9). Plotinus' Intellect is thus an indivisible unity of the activity of thinking and its object of thought, in act and not in potentiality, whereas Soul *acquires* the knowledge with which it orders the world from Intellect. Yet the unity of Intellect is also a multiplicity, that of the Forms which find their reflection in the determinate structures of the world. Each Form is both thought and thinking, an intellect, and all are Intellect: the unity-multiplicity of Soul, a unity of which spatially divided bodies are incapable, is even more intensive in Intellect, where the greatest degree of unity of any multiplicity whatever is reached in the identity of thinking and its object (5.1.4.26–33; 5.9 [5]*, 7–9).

(III) THE ONE However intense its unity, Intellect remains a united multiplicity. The unity given by the identity of the activity of thinking and its object also involves multiplicity in the duality (constitutive of its unity) of thinking subject and object thought. Plotinus argues from this that Intellect cannot, as Aristotle, Aristotelians, and Platonists such as Alcinous and Numenius believed, be considered as an absolutely *first* principle (5.1.5; already argued in 5.4 [7], 2; see 5.6 [24]): in being constituted as Intellect, in being constituted as a unity/multiplicity, it *presupposes* such a principle, which, as absolutely first, cannot be in any degree multiple, but must be absolutely non-multiple, i.e., 'one'. The 'One' is thus the principle presupposed by the constitution of Intellect as a unity of thinking and its object of thought, the Forms. Since the 'One' is such, it is neither Intellect nor Form. And since it is the principle of the highest degree of composite unity, it is the very first principle.

Plotinus thinks in 5.1.8 that this first principle is that to which Plato refers in the *Second Letter* (312e) and in the *Parmenides* (137c ff.). He identifies it furthermore with the Form of the Good, which Plato says is 'beyond Being' (*Republic* 509b), since Plato identifies the Forms as true primary being. Plato's Form of the Good gives existence in some way to the (other) Forms, but we note that Plotinus' One, as that which makes it possible for Forms to be constituted, is not itself a Form. The One, as the principle which constitutes all else (Intellect, Soul, the world), can be described as the Good, as that on which all else depends, which is self-sufficient in itself, dependent on nothing else, in

no need, yet giving existence, unity, form and value to all else (1.8 [51]*, 2.1–7; see below (c), iv).

This brief sketch of Plotinus' theory of first principles raises many questions, some of which will be considered below. One of these questions concerns the sense and way in which Intellect is constituted from the One, Soul from Intellect, and the world from Soul. We might wonder also in what way this theory can claim to be an interpretation of the cosmology of the *Timaeus*, from which it seems very distant, and what becomes of another of the first principles in the lists provided by second-century Platonists, namely matter.

(b) *The constitution of reality*

In 5.1.6.3–6, Plotinus refers to what he takes to be a traditional and much debated question: how does the multiplicity of things come from the One? In a sense the first Greek philosophers, at least as Aristotle describes them in *Metaphysics* 1, derived the world in all its parts, through various stages, from an original material (water, air, fire). However, in later accounts, in Plato himself, it seems, as well as in Aristotle and in other philosophers, the world is constituted through the combination of various causes. In Plotinus, the question becomes particularly radical and difficult, since he holds that everything, by stages, derives from one single cause. The attempt to answer this question is made all the more difficult in that, as will be seen below, the One is not something which can be known or described: how then can we explain its production of everything? Since we do know and can describe productive processes at a lower, derived level, perhaps these processes might provide an appropriate approach to our question. Thus Plotinus refers to the dynamic productivity of nature – the sun producing light, fire producing heat – to suggest the implausibility of thinking that the power of the One, a power producing everything, could be non-productive. On the contrary, in nature, the more powerful and perfect (i.e., mature) something is, the more productive it is (6.27–39; see 5.4.1–2). The examples of light and heat indeed illustrate what Plotinus takes to be a more general process, which he applies to the question of the productivity of the One, the process whereby a primary activity, for example the activity that is fire, is followed or accompanied by a secondary activity, for example the heat produced by fire.¹³ Plotinus uses this theory of double activity to help with the

¹³ Plotinus also uses the example of water flowing from a source, 'emanating'. 'Emanation' is a term often used by modern scholars to describe in general the constitution of things from the One in Plotinus. However, strictly speaking this is incorrect, since 'flowing' is just one of the natural processes which can serve to exemplify a more general constitutive process. We might prefer to use the term 'derivation' which, in English, may sound less aqueous and be less misleading.

question of how everything, and in the first place Intellect, is produced from the One.

The question as to the sources of Plotinus' theory of double activity has been much discussed by scholars, who have traced it back to Stoicism, to Aristotle and to Plato. Certainly Plotinus uses Aristotelian terminology, in particular that of activity (*energeia*). And the causal process whereby Aristotle's divine Intellect inspires, as an object of love and thought (*Metaphysics* 12.7), imitation in the movements of the celestial spheres, provides Plotinus with a model of causality whereby a transcendent immaterial activity can, without being thereby affected, elicit the constitution of lower activities which are imitations of it, a causal relation which fits well with that required by the way in which Plato's Forms function as paradigms for the many evanescent imitations or images of them in the sensible world. Plato's view that what is good is unstinting in giving of its goodness (*Timaeus* 29e) and that soul becomes fecund in participating in the Forms (*Symposium* 209a) would also support the idea that what is perfect is productive.

Expressed as a general theory of causality explaining how one thing is constituted by another, Plotinus' theory of double activity takes it that an activity which is complete in itself, for example fire as an activity, naturally produces, without changing in its activity or being affected by this, a secondary activity which accompanies it, for example the heat produced by fire, which depends on it (remove the fire, and the heat it produces disappears), and which is a sort of image of it. The secondary activity, once constituted, can, in its turn, function as a primary activity in relation to a further activity secondary to it.

(1) THE CONSTITUTION OF INTELLECT Applying this theory of double activity to the question of the constitution by the One of Intellect, we can try to think of the One as if it were a primary activity from which derives, without any change in its activity, a secondary activity which depends on it and is an image of it, Intellect. Intellect is constituted to be an image of the One in the way in which *thinking* can be an image of something, by thinking it. So there needs to be a potentiality to think, as such indeterminate, actualized or made determinate by its object of thinking, the One, thus becoming an image of the One. However, as we have seen, the One is beyond all form, all determination, all thought, thus not an object that can be the determinate act that actualizes the potentiality to think. Thus in desiring to think the One (for Plotinus, thinking is a form of desire to reach that which one does not have: 5.6.5.8–10), the initially indeterminate potentiality to think the One thinks it, not as it is, but as *it is thinkable*, i.e., as expressed as a determinate multiplicity. This determinate multiplicity, as what actualizes the potentiality to think, is identical with the

thinking: thinking and what is thought are one. Intellect is thus constituted as the attempt to think the One which becomes the self-thought that is Intellect. The unlimited, undetermined power of the One finds determinate thinkable expression in Intellect's thinking of itself.¹⁴

Plotinus' account of the constitution of Intellect involves many difficulties, both exegetical and philosophical. Without going into these here, we might at least remind ourselves that what is at stake is our attempt to understand matters which transcend the domain of discursive reasoning (below (c), iii). It should also be stressed that the process of constitution at issue, despite what might be suggested by the account we attempt to give, is not a sequence of events taking place in time and space (see 5.1.6.19–22). Time and space are constituted *after* the constitution of Intellect and Soul: they are posterior in the causal order. Intellect constitutes itself and is completely constituted from the One, atemporally and non-spatially. Finally, we note that Plotinus believes (5.4.2.8–9) that his account covers the two first principles that Aristotle attributes to Plato (*Metaphysics* 1.6), the One and the 'indefinite Dyad' which Plotinus takes to be the indeterminate potential thinking actualized in Intellect.

Intellect is united determinate multiplicity comprising a structure of primary, general Forms (identified by Plotinus with the 'major kinds' of Plato's *Sophist* 254d–255a, i.e., Being, Sameness, Difference, Rest, Motion, 6.2 [43]*), to which are subordinated more specific Forms, whose gradation does not weaken the systematic unity whereby all Forms are linked together and involve each other, in the way, Plotinus suggests, that a body of science involves a network of interconnected truths (5.9.8; 10.11–15). However, in contrast to human science, where the grasp of a theorem may involve potentially, but not actually, the grasp of other theorems and of the whole of the science to which it is linked, on the level of Intellect, all Forms will actually link with each other and with the whole as a unity. How far does the range of Forms extend? This question, a traditional question raised already in Plato's *Parmenides* and made into an acute problem in Aristotle's critique of Plato's theory of Forms, is discussed by Plotinus in 5.9 [5] 10–14, where he briefly considers whether there are, for example, Forms of artefacts, of base things, of individuals. Plotinus returns to the question concerning Forms of individuals in 5.7 [18], where he refers, not only to human individuals, but also to other animals (3.19). Plotinus' position on the question of Forms of individuals is much debated by scholars. It seems to be his view that, in general, that which, in the sensible world, is not due to matter (see below, iii), deficiencies of various kinds, and which corresponds to form, to a determination of some kind, is caused by formal principles,

¹⁴ See 5.1.7; 5.2.1; 3.8 [30].8–11; 6.7 [38]*.15–16; 5.3 [49]*.10–11.

logoi, transmitted by Soul from intelligible reality (see 5.9.10.1–2; 6.7.11.3–4; below, iv).

(II) THE CONSTITUTION OF SOUL Intellect, as activity, produces in turn a secondary activity, Soul, which Plotinus sees as constituted in a way comparable to the constitution of Intellect (5.1.7.36–49; 5.2 [11].1.14–18). Soul is therefore an expression of Intellect, an image of it. Soul, like Intellect, is a united multiplicity, one soul and many souls ordered in a gradation, but linked to each other and linked to what constitutes them, Intellect (5.1.10–11). Soul, as image of Intellect, distinguishes itself, in Plotinus' account, by its tendency to project itself, to express itself and direct things (4.8.3.25–30; 5.2.1.22–8; 3.4 [15].1.1–3; 3.8 [30].5), a tendency giving rise to the production of the world and the presence of soul in the world. Two aspects might be distinguished in the production of the world by Soul: its production of matter, and the constitution by Soul of the world in matter.

(III) MATTER There has been some controversy as to whether Plotinus holds that Soul actually produces matter (*hulē*), or thinks that matter exists independently of Soul and is not produced by Soul (as is the case, for example, in Alcinoüs). However there is good evidence that Plotinus holds that Soul produces matter (1.8.7). Matter is not a first principle, for Plotinus, but the very last product in the causal chain constituting reality. Plotinus describes it as absolute indetermination, incapacity to receive and retain any form (3.6 [26]*.7–19; 2.4 [12]*.6–16; 2.5 [25]*.4–5). It is thus neither Aristotelian matter (which is actualized by form) nor, one could argue, is it the 'receptacle' of Plato's *Timaeus* (which precontains what will be ordered). Its immunity to any form means the impossibility of any actualization of it, or activity. As such, then, it is non-productive, the sterile end to the causal chain. It acts as a counterfoil to form, weakening, hindering, rendering evanescent the product of Soul, the result of which is the world. As absolute 'poverty' of form, Plotinus describes it as absolute evil, since it has nothing of the Good (the One) as manifested in the activities that are Intellect and Soul (1.8.2–3). As the total absence of any good, matter is that in terms of which physical 'evils' arise (e.g., deficiencies such as sickness, 4.19–26) and in relation to which moral evil originates (below, (d), iv). Plotinus' conception of matter as absolute evil was criticized and rejected by his Platonist successors, in particular by Proclus in his *De malorum subsistentia*.

(IV) THE CONSTITUTION OF THE WORLD Soul's tendency to project and express itself means that it seeks to fill the negativity of matter with form. It does this by

projecting itself as a descending gradation of souls (5.2.2), the lowest level of this being Nature, which brings formal principles (*logoi*) to expression in (or rather on) matter (3.8.4–5). In describing how Soul produces the world, Plotinus is careful to insist that this is not done by a process of fabrication similar to human fabrication. Plato's image, in the cosmological account of the *Timaeus*, of god as an artisan, or craftsman ('demiurge'), of the world, modelling it after the pattern of the Forms (28c–30a), had been ridiculed by his critics: could the world really be the product of a laborious, toiling, calculating god? This literal reading of the *Timaeus* took a sinister turn in the version of it found in a religious movement of Plotinus' time, Gnosticism, which saw this world as the botched product of an evil and ignorant god, a world from which we, as humans, must escape to return to another higher world and a god of goodness. Against Plato's critics and against what he thought of as Gnostic perversion of Plato's ideas, Plotinus insisted that Soul does not need to labour or calculate in producing the world. The world is rather that which effortlessly accompanies the knowledge possessed by Soul. We can sense here, at work again, the principle of double activity. In the first part of his work directed against Gnosticism (3.8), Plotinus explains this in terms of the thesis that action (*praxis*) and making (*poiēsis*) are what either accompanies or substitutes for knowledge (*theōria*). In the human sphere, Plotinus argues (3.8.4), our actions and productions externalize and express our knowledge or are ways in which we seek a knowledge that is lacking (4.31–43). Similarly, in nature in general, all action and production accompany (as a secondary activity, we can add) the knowing activity which is Soul, as the diagrams drawn by the geometer accompany his geometrical knowledge (4.4–10). The world is the expression of knowledge, not of error or ignorance, and is therefore the expression of the Good (3.8.2–3).

What this involves is that Soul, at its lowest level of self-projection, Nature, provides a basic formal structuring in matter on which supervene in bodies, as contributing to the ordering of things, individual souls (4.3 [27]*.6.10–17), the whole being linked and directed by World Soul in an order that can be described as 'providence', a providence expressing through World Soul the knowledge or order of Intellect (3.2–3 [47–8]). Bodies, at the lowest level, are heapings (*sumphorōsis*) of qualities in matter (6.3 [44]*.8.20; 15, 24ff.; 2.7 [37].3) expressive of the formal principles (*logoi*) mediated by Soul inspired by the Forms in Intellect.¹⁵ The order given the world by soul is not only spatial, it is also temporal: time is conceived by Plotinus as successivity in the life of soul, which images the non-temporal, eternal order of Intellect (3.7 [45]*.11).

¹⁵ In 6.1 [42]*, Plotinus provides an extensive critique of the Aristotelian and Stoic categories as applying to the sensible world.

(c) *Knowledge*

Knowledge, as can be seen from the above, is not something which merely concerns humans: it characterizes all of reality, ranging in the causal order from a sort of 'pre-thinking' in the One,¹⁶ through Intellect, as the highest knowledge of the One, and Soul, as knowledge of Intellect/Forms, down to forms in matter, the last expressions of soul's knowledge. There are therefore different stages of knowledge linked together in a descending series such that lower levels of knowledge depend on and are images of higher ones. We, as humans, are integrated in this series, on the one hand, as souls in bodies which connect us through sense-perception to the order given to the world and its contents by Soul, and, on the other hand, as individual souls which are connected as images to individual Forms/intellecets in Intellect. The latter connection means that, as souls, we remain permanently linked to Intellect; a part of us (a claim much contested by Plotinus' successors) stays 'there', in Intellect (4.8.8), a part to which we always have access, even if, in our conscious lives, we are often unaware of this, being distracted by the cares of material existence.

Before considering this in more detail, a further general point should be stressed. Plotinus accepts, as regards knowledge, a principle widely followed in Greek philosophy which goes back as far as Empedocles and which Aristotle attributes to Plato (*De anima* 1.2, 404b13–18) and himself accepts with the appropriate distinctions, the principle that like is known by like, i.e., that a subject attains knowledge of an object by becoming 'like' it in some way (6.9 [9]*.11.32), the most radical example of which, representing the strongest form of knowledge, being the identity of subject and object in Intellect.

(1) PERCEPTION If we start from sense-perception, in Plotinus' view we do not know perceptible things *passively*, i.e., as being subjected to imprints (*tupoi*) physically caused in us by exterior objects and representing, as images, these objects (4.6 [41]). Rather, the soul is active: it comes into contact, through sense organs, with the forms in things and the souls or World Soul that mediate forms. Thus, for example, in the experience of physical beauty, we, as souls, are moved by the sight of beautiful things in that we recognize form in them: form, for Plotinus, is what makes perceptible things beautiful (1.6 [1]*.2–3). We recognize things as beautiful, we judge them to be beautiful because we already know Forms, as souls linked to the Forms in Intellect. Souls rediscover themselves and the Forms in Intellect through the perception of beauty. Since

¹⁶ On this see 5.4.2; 6.9.6.52; 6.7.37; 6.8.16.32.

matter compromises the beauty that is form (5.8 [31].1), form known free from matter, in its original state as Form in Intellect, is pure and primary beauty, the beauty of intelligible reality explored by Plotinus, in the second part of his anti-Gnostic treatise, 5.8 [31], as being the source of the beauty of the world. But to reach knowledge of intelligible beauty, soul must become like this beauty: it, too, must be purified of the corruption of materiality so as to know intelligible beauty as it is (1.6.5). The beauty of soul is moral and intellectual, as it is in Plato's *Symposium* (210bd).

(II) INTELLECT In the third part of his anti-Gnostic treatise (5.5 [32]), Plotinus wishes to show how Intellect, as source of the world, is not subject to error or unreliable, as alleged by Gnostic descriptions of the Demiurge of the world, but possesses knowledge in a way excluding any possibility of error or imperfection (1.1–6). To introduce this view of Intellect as total and perfect knowledge, Plotinus evokes arguments which can already be found in ancient Scepticism's attacks on dogmatic philosophy. These arguments distinguish between external objects, as they are, and the way we are affected by them, the images we have of them in knowing them.¹⁷ Following this distinction, it seems that we know things, not as they are, but as they affect us, as they appear to us, as the images which we have of them. Consequently, we do not know things as they are, contrary to the claims of dogmatists. Plotinus evokes these sceptical arguments (although, as seen above, he himself does not hold that we know merely images of things), in order to show that true knowledge of something must dispense with intermediaries, affections (*pathē*) and images, coming between the subject which knows and the object known. Rather than being external to the knowing subject, the object known must be internal to it. The internality of the object means that the subject's knowledge of it is immune to sceptical arguments. Intellect is the strongest, purest level of knowledge, total knowledge, in that it is an identity of thinking subject and object thought (5.5.1–2). Sceptical arguments reappear later, in treatise 5.3 [49]*, where they serve to put into question the possibility of self-knowledge.¹⁸ Here again, Plotinus takes advantage of these arguments in order to show that self-knowledge is only possible if the knower and the known are identical, if the self known is not other than the self knowing. Total and perfect knowledge, as exemplified by Intellect, is thus self-knowledge (5.3.5). All forms of knowledge must depend, to the extent that they are knowledge, on the primary and most intense form of knowledge, Intellect's knowledge of itself.

¹⁷ 5.5.1.12–19; see Sextus Empiricus, *PH* 1.19–20 and 94; 2.51.72.

¹⁸ 5.3.1.1–12; 5, 1–48. See Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 7.310–12.

(III) DISCURSIVE AND NON-DISCURSIVE THOUGHT It is clear from Plotinus' account of the perfect thought characterizing Intellect that it is quite different from the thinking which we exercise as humans who live in the world and think about it. Indeed Plotinus can be understood as elaborating his description of Intellect's thought by taking human thought and removing from it whatever causes it to be deficient, to be lacking in knowledge or to be mistaken (5.8.4–8; 5.3.2–9; 1.8.2.9–11). What makes human thinking deficient is the externality of the objects of thought, the recourse to images or impressions and the dependence on discursivity, i.e., reasonings, inferential sequences which may introduce error.¹⁹ To ensure the absolute truth of Intellect's knowledge, the externality of its objects and discursivity must be removed in our description of it. However, if Intellect's thought is non-discursive in the sense of not depending on fragile conclusions inferred from premisses concerning external objects, it nevertheless constitutes a system of truths in the sense that Intellect is a unified gradation of Forms/intellects interconnected in such a way that each truth in the whole entails every other truth in the whole, a discursive image of which is the systematic structure of a science.

(IV) THE UNKNOWABILITY AND INEFFABILITY OF THE ONE If by starting from our way of thinking and negating its deficiencies we might reach a concept of the higher way of thinking characteristic of Intellect, we cannot know the One over and above the way in which the One is known in Intellect's self-knowledge (above (b), i). For the One, as prior to any form or determination, is not such a reality as to be an object of knowledge: as it is in itself, it is beyond even the highest form of knowledge (6.9.3.36–45). How then can it be known? And if language, as Plotinus believes (following Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics), is the externalization of thought, then the unknowable One cannot be spoken: it is ineffable. How then can we speak of it?

These questions concerning the limits of thought and language, in relation to a reality which goes beyond them, are posed by Plotinus with unprecedented clarity. His response to them might be summarized as follows. If the One cannot be known and spoken *as it is*, it can be known and spoken *as it affects* us, as it manifests itself to us in its presence in us.²⁰ The structure of the causal chain constitutive of reality means that when something is constituted, what is constitutive of it is somehow present in it, while not being part of it. So the

¹⁹ We should distinguish between the discursivity characterizing soul in its relation to the physical world (external objects, inferential sequences) and the discursivity of soul's thinking prior to, and independently of, its descent to body (soul's thinking as an image of Intellect's knowledge).

²⁰ See 6.9.3.49–54; 5.3.14, on how Plotinus takes advantage here of the sceptical distinction between things as they are and things as they affect us.

One, as constitutive of Intellect and of Soul, is present in us, to the extent that its causal power affects us. Thus when we speak of the 'One', we are speaking of *ourselves* as a multiplicity dependent in its existence on something non-multiple. And when we speak of the 'Good', we speak of our own deficiency, our lack, and of what could remedy this deficiency or lack, what is good *for us* (6.34–42). To mark these limits in the scope of thought and language as regards what lies beyond these limits Plotinus uses the expression 'as if' (*hoion*) when speaking of the One (see 6.8 [39]* 13.50).

(d) *The Good*

It has been noted above that in conducting discussions about what produces the world, Plotinus keeps in mind the fact that it is *we* who conduct these discussions. These inquiries concern us: knowledge of the world is also knowledge about ourselves; in discovering our nature and seeing our position in the structure of reality we learn things which matter for the way we conduct our lives in this structure. Plotinus may not have been interested in talking about his *physical* genealogy, his physical *genos* (Porphyry, *Life* 1.3–4), but he feels that knowing one's *metaphysical* genealogy, one's *genos* in Intellect (5.1.1.28), is of the greatest importance to us, as souls, to the extent that we have forgotten 'where' we have come from, who our metaphysical 'father' is, what we are and what our purpose is (1.1–29). It is for this reason that Plotinus elaborates in 5.1 his account of first principles. This account is a remedy for our self-forgetfulness and our consequent confusion about ourselves and about what is of value to us.

(1) THE SELF Plotinus refers sometimes to 'us' (*hēmeis*), using this word in a quasi-technical sense suggestive of a developed philosophy of the self. If, according to Plato's *Alcibiades* (129ce), humans are souls using bodies as instruments, then 'we' are primarily soul. In Plotinian terms, soul informs body, making it into an organic composite, a body ensouled, endowed with a trace of the soul producing it (2.3.9; 1.1 [53]*.7). The producing soul may be Nature as what produces the basic organism on which supervenes the individual soul (4.9.3; 4.3.6; 6.7.4–5; 7). 'We' are then this individual soul, prior to and independent of the body, which comes to the body and governs it. Plotinus does not regard the presence of individual soul in body as something negative: soul descends in a body following its natural tendency to express what it has, its knowledge, to organize what is inferior to it through its inherent goodness, its divinity (4.8.5.24–7; 3.2.7.23–7). As individual souls present in a body, we can, however, in our care for bodily affairs, become so engrossed in these affairs that we come to identify ourselves with them, to forget our metaphysical origins and stature,

taking corporeal things as of primary value, as Narcissus became infatuated with his image and sought to unite himself with it (1.6.8.8–16; 5.8.2.31–5). Our self is thus multiple and ‘mobile’ in Plotinus (3.4 [15]), as has been noted by scholars: like a cursor moving on a screen, it identifies itself with different things, including things far inferior to it, acting as if it were these things and as if they were of primary value. Or it can return to its original self as soul and act as such, even to the point of focusing its activity upwards towards that of Intellect and living as Intellect, a state Plotinus describes in the famous opening lines of 4.8.

(II) THE GOOD LIFE What does the self desire? What will respond to its need and give it rest, self-sufficiency, completion? These questions correspond to a central issue discussed in ancient Greek ethics, the issue of *eudaimonia*: in what consists the good life, the best life for humans? In 1.4 [46]*, Plotinus defines the good life as the highest or most perfect kind of life. Life itself can range (3.18ff.) from its lowest biological expression, up through different levels of soul, to the life of Intellect (1.4.3–4). To the extent then that the human self is soul, rational soul as constituted by Intellect, the best life for it is sharing in the life of Intellect, living the life of Intellect. In certain respects this concept of *eudaimonia* corresponds to what Aristotle describes as the highest happiness, the life of *theōria*, which is a sharing in the life of the gods (*Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7) which in Aristotle is the life of divine Intellect’s self-thought (*Metaphysics* 12.7). But Plotinian *eudaimonia* evokes also aspects of the perfect life of the Stoic sage, who is immune to all passions and the vicissitudes of bodily existence, who is complete in the perfection, independence and freedom of his reason. Like Aristotle’s man of practical wisdom (*phronimos*) and the Stoic sage, Plotinus’ good man (*spoudaios*) is a model of how to lead the good life, a life in which Plotinus even finds the pleasure at rest of Epicurean *eudaimonia* (1.4.12). Such a model was provided, Porphyry seems to be suggesting in the *Life*, by Plotinus in his own life.

(III) VIRTUE It is commonly assumed in Greek ethics that to live the good life is to live virtuously, i.e., to live a life characterized by moral and intellectual excellence (*aretē*). This excellence can be described as regards Plotinus as the virtue manifested by the good man (*spoudaios*). However virtue is also required in order to *become* such a *spoudaios*. Plotinus discusses the latter aspect in the early chapters of 1.2 [19]*, distinguishing between levels of virtue in a gradation leading up to the life of Intellect. The lowest level of virtue in the gradation is that of the four cardinal virtues defined by Plato at the end of *Republic* 4. These virtues, the ‘political’ virtues (or ‘civic’ virtues, in Augustine’s Latin

version) – practical wisdom, courage, moderation and justice – Plotinus regards as giving measure, limit, to our desires and passions (1.2.2–3). What is involved is soul to the extent to which it directs itself towards bodily concerns and allows itself to be drawn away by the unlimitedness, lack of measure, that matter induces in these concerns. Limit and measure, as forms coming from Intellect, are in any case what should characterize soul's relation to its activities in the body. Soul is then brought nearer to the life of Intellect by higher virtues, the purificatory virtues mentioned in Plato's *Phaedo* (69bc). These virtues are wisdom, courage, moderation and justice acting now, not as what gives measure, but as what concerns soul in itself, purifying it so that it comes nearer to the life of Intellect (3.11–21).

(iv) VICE As virtue concerns the correct relation of soul to body ('political' virtue) and the turning away of soul towards the life of Intellect ('purificatory' virtue), so, on the contrary, is vice a disorder in soul's relation to the body in which it identifies itself with, and allows itself to be dominated by bodily passions and desires, to the extent of being infected and drawn to the lack of measure, the total indetermination of matter that underlies these passions and desires (1.8 [51].4.5–34; 13.18–21). Plotinus believes, however, that soul cannot destroy itself in its moral degradation and descent into the complete obscurity of evil/matter (1.8.9). Soul remains, in its original self, good and incorruptible: it is in its self-projection downwards at its lower levels, in association with the body, that vice appears (4.14–32; 14.27–49).

(v) PHILOSOPHY The return through the grades of virtue to the life of Intellect presupposes habituation and practice (Plato, *Republic* 7.518e; 1.3 [20].6.6–7; 2.9.15.14–17). We can imagine that to the extent that philosophical schools in late antiquity could function as places of moral education, where members found a community aiming at the moral transformation of their lives, Plotinus' school may have had the effect of moral habituation in the lives of its members. However, the return of soul to the life of Intellect also involves, more importantly, soul's discovery of its origins and its nature. Indeed the reaching of self-knowledge *is* a return to the life of Intellect: to *know* oneself and one's origins is to *live* otherwise. The intellectual instruction practised in Plotinus' school can thus be regarded as aiming at bringing souls to self-knowledge, nearer to the life of Intellect. Plotinus' treatises reflect this: in exploring philosophical problems, in reasoning through puzzles about the world and about soul, in providing arguments leading towards knowledge, Plotinus' texts help rational soul to set aside its confusion and error and reach a better understanding of itself and its origin (5.1.1.27–8). His arguments, in his texts, can function as a 'leading up'

(*anagōgē*) of soul (1.3.1.1–6) and his teaching and writing as a ‘road’ and a ‘way’ (6.9.4.15) to the Good. The arguments in Plotinus’ texts can take the form of discussions, questions, answers, objections, new answers, in an evolving dialogue, perhaps originating sometimes in Plotinus’ teaching, but now becoming a dialogue with and in the soul. To the extent that these arguments and these texts are expressions of discursive thinking, they must lead the soul approaching the life of Intellect beyond discursivity to the non-discursive knowledge lived in and by Intellect (above (b), iii).

(VI) THE LIFE OF THE *SPOUDAIOS* If soul reaches the life of Intellect, what does such a life imply, in particular for individual soul to the extent that it remains in charge, so to speak, of a body? If Plotinus did indeed consider himself to be such a soul (4.8.1.1ff.), then, to judge from Porphyry’s description in the *Life*, while remaining in Intellect, living the life of Intellect, Plotinus also exercised ‘political’ virtues such as moderation and justice in his relations with others in the limited circle of his school and Gemina’s household, and he may have planned to extend this in his project of Platonopolis. Plotinus himself suggests, not only that the progress from ‘political’ virtues through the ‘purificatory’ virtues towards the life of Intellect means that the lower virtues are presupposed for access to this higher life, but also that the lower virtues remain potentially in the soul’s possession, being activated as circumstances require (1.2.7.10–12 and 19–21). These circumstances include presumably what is involved by soul’s relation to the body, to its own body, to others as bodies ensouled and to other parts of the life of the world. Porphyry is perhaps overdoing it when he portrays Plotinus as being ashamed of and neglecting his body (*Life* ch. 1), for Plotinus recommends rather taking care of one’s body, as is necessary, as the instrument of the soul (1.4.4.25–6; 14.19–22; 16.17–19). This can hardly mean misuse and mistreatment of the body. The desire to exercise good governance which is part of soul’s natural goodness may explain why this care for one’s own body extends further. Soul prior to body and free of body exercises a providential action in conjunction with the providential governance of the world by World Soul (4.8.2.19–26). If so, then the perfected individual soul, in control of its bodily affairs, will also tend to extend its care for lower things, as circumstances permit. A further relevant aspect is the original ‘sisterhood’ of souls, as members of the same transcendent community (4.3.6.13; 4.8.3.14–19; 4.9.3.1–9). The predicament of souls misdirected and in perdition must concern the good soul in a position to act. More generally, applying the principle of double activity, we might say that a soul which is good will realize good actions. This aspect of Plotinus’ ethics might be called an ‘ethics of giving’. It is an aspect that has been occulted in modern studies through an exclusive emphasis on the otherworldly,

religious or mystical side of Plotinus' thought (his 'ethics of escape'). The most concrete example of this ethics of giving is Plotinus' own writing, a work surely intended as a contribution for the benefit of souls.

The good soul may undertake good actions, but the occasion and outcome of these actions are conditioned by the larger world-context in which these actions take place (4.4.43.16–24; 6.8.5.1–27). As in the case of the Stoic sage, Plotinus' good soul may find that things turn out otherwise, since the actions take place in a domain governed by other causes, in particular and above all by the providential order brought about by World Soul. This providential order can be understood as a 'law of nature' which ensures cosmic justice. An exemplification of this justice is found in the reincarnation of souls through which souls find the just consequences of their actions. Matricides, for example, will be born again as mothers who will be murdered by their child (3.2.13.14–15).

(VII) UNION WITH THE GOOD If the life of Intellect represents the closest relation to the absolute Good, the One, that can be reached through knowledge, the desire of this Good can only be fully satisfied by a union with it going beyond knowledge. Porphyry placed at the end (and culmination) of his edition, the *Enneads*, three treatises which lead the reader to the Good, 6.7, 6.8 and 6.9. In these texts Plotinus describes ways of thinking which may serve to lead us to the One and in so doing must be surpassed, as must all thought and discourse. In following these ways, we remove what separates us from the One, waiting in silence on an ultimate union with it which does not seem to involve our annihilation (6.9.7; 11.38–42; 6.7.34; 36.6–21).

Now leaving behind all learning, educated up and established in the beautiful, in which he is, up to this stage he thinks. But carried out by the wave, as it were, of Intellect itself, lifted up high by it as it swells, so to speak, he suddenly saw, not seeing how, but the sight, filling the eyes with light, does not make him see another through itself, but the light itself was the sight seen. (6.7.36.15–21)

The concepts and language which Plotinus uses in evoking the ascent of the soul to union with Intellect and then with the One would become very influential in the mystical traditions of the Islamic world and of medieval Byzantine and Latin Christianity. Plotinus himself was interpreting and developing the descriptions of the ascent of the soul to the vision of the Forms, of the Form of Beauty and the Form of the Good, given by Plato in the *Symposium*, *Phaedrus* and *Republic*. Plotinus considered that the means for the ascent of the soul are provided by philosophy, which, in leading us to knowledge, leads us to a higher level of life. Thus 'theory' and 'experience' are not separated in the soul. The ascent of the soul through philosophy is a return to where soul, in its higher

part, always is and lives, in Intellect and in its source in the One. In evoking this ascent and this higher life, Plotinus does not give the impression that he is merely speculating, or guessing.

(e) *Plotinus and later Platonism*

Platonism after Plotinus, as a philosophical movement, was shaped by many different influences, by the work of Platonists earlier and later than Plotinus, for example by Numenius, Porphyry, Iamblichus, as well as by changing political, social and cultural circumstances such as the increasing Christianization of the institutions of the Roman Empire. On a number of issues, later Platonists did not accept Plotinus' views, his views, for example, on part of the soul as remaining in the intelligible world, on matter as absolute evil and the primary cause of evil, on time, on Aristotle's categories. Yet we might nonetheless identify some areas where Plotinus' contribution was of fundamental importance. Among these we might count Plotinus' radical claim that there is one unique first principle, the One, constitutive, mediately or immediately, of the existence, order and form of all else in reality. The difficulties which this radical claim involved – how indeed could the diverse multitude of things come from one cause? – provoked the development in later Platonism of theories entailing increasing complexity in the structure of reality, the recourse to more and more mediating levels of being, the use of mathematical concepts of order so as to facilitate the transition from the One to the manifold world. And Plotinus' rejection of artisanal (demiurgic) accounts of the way in which things are constituted by a first principle was decisive in later Platonism, stimulating the elaboration of other concepts of constitutive causality.

In Christian theology, if Plotinus' claim that there is only one truly first principle could appear to fit with the belief in God as sole creator, yet this creator involved inner complexity, as the Trinity, and the act of creation was not that whereby the Plotinian One gives rise to what comes from it, as a secondary activity accompanying the primary activity which it is. Nevertheless, the Plotinian pattern of the constitution of things from the One by a process of derivation from (*proodos*) and return to (*epistrophē*) the transcendent first cause provided Christian theologians with a way of understanding the relation between creator and creation.

Another area where Plotinus may be considered to have made a fundamental contribution is that concerning the transcendence of the first principle. The metaphysical transcendence of the One, its unknowability and ineffability, would also be emphasized in later Platonism, to the extent that it would lead to the negation of any structure of co-ordination linking the One with other levels of

being. Yet in pushing this transcendence to its limits, Damascius, for example, still stays close to Plotinus' view that in thinking and speaking about the One, we are thinking and speaking about ourselves in our deficiency. Both the radical transcendence of the Plotinian One, and the recourse to mediating levels in later Platonism, would be taken up by Christian thinkers, in particular in the Greek-speaking East.

Finally we might mention Plotinus' practice of philosophy as a way of leading the soul to the Good which it desires. Here Plotinus brought the powerful inspiration of Plato to bear on the practical orientation characteristic of philosophical schools in the Hellenistic and imperial periods, thus giving considerable impetus to the teaching of Platonism. In later Platonism, however, the formalism of scholastic structures and the recourse to other means of ascent, such as theurgy, considerably reshaped Plotinus' approach. And, of course, the way for the soul to reach the Good in Christian theology would follow other paths than those afforded by the study of Plato and the practices of pagan religion.