

# “We Too Are Kings”: Plotinus on the Self and God

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*We... who are we?*  
ἡμεῖς δέ – τίνας δὲ ἡμεῖς;<sup>1</sup>

## I. THE PLATONIC HERITAGE OF PLOTINUS' INVESTIGATION INTO THE 'WE'

At the entrance to the temple at Delphi was inscribed the famous dictum, “Know thyself.” Socrates, whose philosophical quest was so intimately tied to these words, informs us not only that “wisdom belongs to God,” but also that our very understanding of ourselves as humans is tied up in the recognition of this. When the Delphic Oracle said that none was wiser than Socrates, he understood this paradoxical statement to mean that the god “appears to say this of Socrates and to have made use of my name for the sake of making of me a pattern, as if to say, ‘the one of you, human beings, who is wisest, who, just like Socrates, realizes that in truth, he is worth nothing in regard to wisdom.’”<sup>2</sup> To know oneself as a human thus requires that we recognize our distinction from the gods, and acknowledge that we humans are bereft of divine wisdom.

Yet there is another Platonic tradition of self-knowledge that stems from the *Alcibiades* and permeates through the Neoplatonic tradition. The premise of such a tradition is that the gods are indeed properly wise, but they are not jealous

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1 Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. A.H. Armstrong, 7 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1966-1988), VI 4 [22].14.16. Although I have relied upon the Loeb edition of the *Enneads* for English translations of Plotinus, I have often modified Armstrong's translations for accuracy. For Plotinus' original Greek text I have consulted *Plotini Opera*, ed. Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolf Schwyzer (Oxonii: E typographeo Clarendoniano, 1964-1982).

2 Plato, *Apology*, in Plato and Xenophon, *Apologies*, trans. Mark Kremer (Newburyport: Focus Philosophical Library, 2006), 23a-b.

and do not begrudge us sharing in their wisdom.<sup>3</sup> To know oneself, Socrates says, requires knowing the most divine part of another's soul, which is also the locus of wisdom:

So, my friend Alcibiades, if a soul is to know itself it must look into a soul, and particularly into that region of it in which the excellence of the soul, wisdom, resides, and to anything else that this is similar to... So it is to God that this aspect of the soul is similar, and one looking to this and knowing all that is divine, both God and thought, would in this way also most know himself. <sup>4</sup>

While this is Socrates' conclusion, it is worth dwelling for a moment upon the problem that leads Socrates to this point. Socrates instructs Alcibiades that if he is to cultivate himself in order to be in a position to counsel others, he must first discover what he is himself: "what art makes *oneself* better – could we ever know this if we were ignorant of just what we ourselves are?"<sup>5</sup> Importantly, Socrates leaves open the question of what we are. Are we humans? Bodies? Souls? Subjects? Consciousnesses? Transcendental unities of apperception? Spirits coming to recognize themselves in history? For Socrates, there is no pre-given answer to this question. Any possible response must be determined in the course of the conversation, guided only by the reference to the 'we' that ought to be cultivated. I shall argue below that Plotinus follows a very similar line of thought.

As Alain de Libera has shown with impressive philological rigour, Plotinus has an important contribution to this history of what we today call the 'subject' by providing Augustine with a means for understanding how the intellect could be eternally united with intelligibles. The two are indissociable, according to Augustine, just as colours are indissociable from bodies, as Plotinus

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<sup>3</sup> See also Aristotle, *Metaphysica: recognovit brevique adnotatione critica instruxit*, ed. Werner Jaeger (Oxonii: E Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1957), A2 982b29 ff.; Wayne Hankey, "Selfhood in Hellenistic Antiquity: Background ambiguities, paradoxes, problems" forthcoming in *International Journal of Decision Ethics*.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Alcibiades*, in *Socrates and Alcibiades: Four Texts*, trans. David M. Johnson (Newburyport: Focus Philosophical Library, 2003), 133c.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Alcibiades*, 128e.

says.<sup>6</sup> Although Plotinus at times seems to entertain the idea that what we are is a something like a subject (subjectum, ὑποκειμένον) which possesses various attributes,<sup>7</sup> this is not his final word on the matter. Plotinus returns to the question of the *Alcibiades* – what are we? – but he does not definitively draw the same conclusion that we are to be identified with the soul. At the end of his treatise ostensibly devoted to this question, one of the last he wrote, Ennead 1.1: “What is the Living Being?,” Plotinus is strikingly non-committal:

What is it that has carried out this investigation? Is it ‘we’ or the soul? It is ‘we,’ but by the soul (τῆ ψυχῆ). And what do we mean by ‘by the soul?’ Did ‘we’ investigate by having soul? No, but in so far as we are soul (ἡ ψυχῆ).<sup>8</sup>

We are thus not the soul, but rather conduct philosophical investigations *by* the soul or *in so far* as we are soul.

Socrates sought to answer the question of ‘what are we?’ by distinguishing the *we* (ἡμεῖς) from what is merely *ours* (ἡμέτερον).<sup>9</sup> He highlights this difference by pointing to the difference between the user of something and the thing that is used. A cobbler uses various tools to make shoes, and so a cobbler (*we*) is different than their tools (*ours*). So too, Socrates argues, the soul uses or ‘rules’ the body, since we use our hands in order to use other tools. Thus, *we* properly speaking are the soul, while the body is something that is merely *ours*. The soul is what is capable of using and directing things, while our body and all other sensible things yield to its directions. The same basic idea is the basis of Socrates’ rejection of the conception of the soul as a harmony in the *Phaedo*: “One must therefore suppose that a harmony does not direct its components but is directed by them.”<sup>10</sup> Whatever the soul may be, one basic characteristic of it is its ability to exercise control over bodies – both its own and others.

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6 Alain de Libera, *Archéologie du sujet I: Naissance du sujet* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2007), 229–257. Cf. Plotinus, IV 3 [28]. 20.

7 Cf. Plotinus, I 1 [53].1.

8 Plotinus, I 1 [53].13.1–3.

9 Plato, *Alcibiades*, 128d.

10 Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977), 93a.

The peculiarity of Plotinus' claim in *Ennead* 1.1 is that it is not the soul that investigates, but rather we who investigate *by* the soul or *in so far* as we are soul. For this implies that there must be some other principle that is not entirely reducible to the soul and that actually directs the soul. Plotinus thus returns afresh to the fundamental question of the *Alcibiades*, 'what are we'? Though undeniably writing under the influence of that dialogue, Plotinus' answer to its question deserves to be treated as an original one. To ask what we are is not necessarily or exclusively reducible to a question of psychology, or anthropology, or any other -ology. For the domain of this question is not defined in advance.

So then what are we? And how can we come to know what we are? As Plotinus was intimately aware, to be able to pose such questions is indicative of a certain station within the order of the universe. Rocks and rivers, plants and other sorts of animals do not pose such questions. They rather adhere rigorously – but unconsciously – to the rational order of nature, its *logos*, its silent contemplation.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the gods are not ignorant in such a way that they would need to pose such questions.<sup>12</sup> To seek to know oneself is thus a kind intermediary state, proper to us as human beings. When we ask 'who are we?' we want to give an account of the sort of being that poses such questions: a being that engages in discursive reasoning; a being that is capable of knowledge, but is not immediately known to itself; a being that acquires self-knowledge step-by-step. Plotinus took the explication of our own powers for reasoning and investigation as propaedeutic to all philosophical inquiry. He writes in an earlier treatise: "for that which investigates is the soul [*pace Ennead* I 1 [53]!], and it should know what it is as an investigating soul, so that it may learn first about itself, whether it has the power to investigate things of this kind, and if it has an eye of the right kind to see."<sup>13</sup>

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11 See Plotinus, III 8 [30].3 & 4.

12 See Plotinus, V 5 [32].2.

13 Plotinus, V 1 [10].1.31–34.

The knowledge of oneself thus comes prior to all others, for we would not even know whether we are able to acquire knowledge unless we knew ourselves. At the most basic level, this form of self-knowledge would take the form of a sort of inventory of our faculties. Plotinus writes, “Since also ‘know thyself’ is said to those who because of their selves’ multiplicity have the business of counting themselves up and learning that they do not know all of the number and kind of things they are, or do not know any one of them, nor what their principle is or by what they are themselves (κατὰ τί αὐτοῖ).”<sup>14</sup> The starting point ought therefore to be a sort of enumeration of oneself in all one’s kinds and varieties.

## II. ‘THE SELF ITSELF’ IN *ENNEAD* V.3

*Ennead* V.3 provides one such enumeration. In the first two sections of the treatise, Plotinus tries to consider what sort of thing intelligizes itself (τὸ νοοῦν ἑαυτοῦ; κατανόησιν ἑαυτοῦ), or has knowledge of itself (γνώσιν ἑαυτῆς; ἑαυτοῦ ἐν γνώσει καὶ ἐπιστήμῃ καταστήσεται), or returns or converts upon itself (εἰς ἑαυτὸν στρέφεται; ἐπιστρέφει ἐφ’ ἑαυτὸ).<sup>15</sup> To answer this Plotinus goes through the inventory of our capacities in order to determine which, if any, satisfy these criteria.

Sensation is the first candidate to be treated but is quickly ruled out. Sensation apprehends only external things. It cannot apprehend itself *per definitionem* because it looks only to the outside. Moreover, what sensation does apprehend are only the mere impressions of real things.<sup>16</sup> Sensation is thus shut out from the being of things, and in its outward gaze it knows neither itself nor anything else.

Ratiocination (λογισμός) also does not return upon itself. For ratiocination consists simply in the manipulation of the phantasms of sensation: “ratiocination makes its judgment, derived from the mental images present to it which come from sense-perception,

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14 Plotinus, VI 7 [38].41.22–25.

15 Plotinus, V 3 [49].1 & 2, *passim*.

16 Plotinus, V 3 [49].2.

both combining and dividing them."<sup>17</sup> Though it is true that this power of combination and division depends upon the illumination of the Intellect, Plotinus asserts that ratiocination itself possesses only 'impressions' (τοὺς τύπους) of the intelligibles, not the intelligibles themselves.<sup>18</sup> These impressions are simply what permit ratiocination to pass judgment upon its sense impression: "if it [sc. λογισμός] says whether he [sc. Socrates] is good, its remark originates in what it knows through sense-perception, but what it says about this it has already from it itself, since it has a norm [κανόνα] of the good in itself."<sup>19</sup> In order to evaluate a sensible object, one must draw upon norms and standards that do not derive from the realm of sensation but pre-exist in the mind as illuminations of Intellect. Ratiocination, therefore, is based upon a twin receptivity. It faces two opposite directions: it acquires impressions of sensations from below and impressions of intelligible from above. For this reason, ratiocination does not return upon itself. It is able to manipulate the content that it receives from elsewhere, but it can never turn its gaze backwards upon itself.

Plotinus nevertheless observes that this ratiocinative power is what *we* primarily are: "we are this, the principal part of the soul [τὸ κύριον ψυχῆς], in the middle between two powers, a worse and a better, the worse that of sense-perception, the better that of Intellect."<sup>20</sup> The life of ratiocination is customarily the one that we live, the one that is properly ours. Yet it is a life that, as Plotinus shows, cannot know itself and that is exiled from the truth. Though Plotinus states that this is what *we* are, this claim ought not to be taken as final. It indicates merely our customary, and not pure state.

It is only with Intellect that there is a true self-return or self-reflection. Here what is apprehended is no longer an impression or a phantasm but the reality itself. Plotinus thus concludes that any true contemplation must be a self-contemplation. If there were any division between the contemplator and contemplated, there could not be any truth:

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17 Plotinus, V 3 [49].2.7-9.

18 Plotinus, V 3 [49].2.10.

19 Plotinus, V 3 [49].3.7-9.

20 Plotinus, V 3 [49].3.36-40.

If then the things contemplated are in the contemplation, if what are in it are impressions [τύπτοι] of them, then it does not have them themselves [αὐτὰ]; but if it has them themselves [αὐτὰ] it does not see them as a result of dividing itself, but it was contemplator and possessor before it divided itself. But if this is so, the contemplation must be the same as the intelligible; for if not the same, there will not be truth; for the one who is trying to possess beings [τὰ ὄντα] will possess an impression [τύπτον] different from the beings [ἕτερον τῶν ὄντων], and this is not truth. For truth ought not to be the truth of something else [ἕτερου], but to be what it says.<sup>21</sup>

Self-contemplation, truth, and being are thus inextricably linked. Neither truth nor being are dead realities, so to speak, but can only exist with this active self-reverting, self-contemplating, motionless motion of intellect. There are no intelligibles outside of intellect, according to Plotinus, which is to say that there are no intelligibles that can be sustained without their active and productive union with the Intellect. It is here that for the first time there is the possibility of a 'self' that is not just an impression of some other inaccessible thing; for it is only here that any sort of self-awareness or self-communion occurs. All other modes of apprehension up to this point are receptive and thus *per definitionem* alienated from that which they receive. But in the Intellect thinker and thought are one and the same. If the mind only looked outward into an alien world, it would never be able to say what it really is. Thus the possibility of self-knowledge and the possibility of there even being a self coincide, and both possibilities are found actualized in the Intellect.

Yet Plotinus questions to what extent this self-reversion of Intellect can belong to us. As we noted above, he says that we are the ratiocinative middle point between sensation and intellection. To address this uncertain relation between the Intellect and the soul, Plotinus returns explicitly to the language of a user and a thing used that stems from the *Alcibiades*:

But we shall not say that it [sc. Intellect] belongs to the soul, but we shall say that it is our Intellect [ἡμέτερον νοῦν], being different from the reasoning part and having gone up on high, but all the same ours [ὅμως δὲ ἡμέτερον], even if we should not

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21 Plotinus, V 3 [49].5.21–25.

count it among the parts of the soul. Yes, really, it is ours and not ours [ἡμέτερον καὶ οὐχ ἡμέτερον]; for this reason we use it and do not use it – but we always use discursive reason – and it is ours when we use it, but not ours when we do not use it [ἡμέτερον μὲν χρωμένων, οὐ προσχρωμένων δὲ οὐχ ἡμέτερον].<sup>22</sup>

Although Plotinus here returns to the distinction between *we* and *ours* from the *Alcibiades*, he deploys it to a very different effect. First there is the distinction between the Intellect and the soul, which is not to be found in the *Alcibiades*. *We* are not intellect, nor does it belong to the soul, but it is nevertheless ‘ours’ (ἡμέτερον) in virtue of the fact that we use it. In the case of the *Alcibiades*, it was the inferior term, the body, that is used by the superior term, the soul. By distinguishing the two, Socrates sought to encourage us to care for the higher term, which is what *we* truly are. In the Plotinian case, though, the situation is reversed. The user is the inferior term, the soul, while the the thing used is the higher term, the intellect. This use that we can make of intellect thus indicates a relation that we have to the higher world, which ultimately shows that we are not confined to our station as souls. Plotinus thus concludes that “sense-perception is our messenger, but Intellect is our king.”<sup>23</sup>

Yet the regime of Intellect is not despotic because, as Plotinus says in the very next sentence, “we too are kings, when we are in accord with it,” and he explains: “we can be in accord with it in two ways, either by having something like its writing written in us like laws (νόμοις), or by being as if filled with it and be aware of it as present.”<sup>24</sup> The laws in the mind, as we have already seen, provide the standards by which it is possible to make judgments upon sensible objects. When we want to evaluate an impression that we have received from sensation and say whether it is ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ ratiocination must draw upon some standard received from the Intellect above. Such laws are integral to ratiocination, to what *we* normally are. But they also serve as a kind of evidence

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22 Plotinus, V 3 [49].3.23–29.

23 Plotinus, V 3 [49].3.45.

24 Plotinus, V 3 [49].4.1–4.



for the presence of the Intellect within the soul. They disclose a realm that is higher than the ratiocinative soul. Although the laws themselves are distinct from 'filled' presence of Intellect, they would seem to offer the promise of such a 'filled' presence:

What then prevents pure Intellect from being in the soul? Nothing, we shall reply.<sup>25</sup>  
Intellect therefore makes soul still more divine by being its father and by being present to it; for there is nothing between but the fact that they are different.<sup>26</sup>

Ratiocination requires and thus discloses a connection between the soul and Intellect. To achieve this filled presence, the soul must relinquish itself and unite itself with the Intellect:

the one who knows himself is double, one knowing the nature of reasoning which belongs to soul, and one up above this, who knows himself according to Intellect because he has become that Intellect; and by that Intellect he thinks himself again, not any longer as human [οὐχ ὡς ἀνθρώπων ἔτι], but having become altogether other [παντελῶς ἄλλον] and snatching himself up into the higher world, drawing up only the better part of the soul, which alone is able to winged for intellection, with which someone there keeps by him what he sees.<sup>27</sup>

To know oneself as Intellect, which means to truly revert upon oneself, one must forsake one's humanity and become Intellect. To be a human is to be entrenched in that middle space between the sensible and Intellect, to receive impressions from both of these, but to possess no real truth about them inasmuch as one has only their impressions. If the Socrates of the *Apology* were to interject at this point and say that wisdom belongs to God, we could imagine Plotinus would respond, 'Yes, but we too can become God.' Indeed, to know oneself requires that one be a god.<sup>28</sup>

Paulina Remes, however, here draws the limits of the Plotinian self. According to her interpretation, "to be a self is to be an awareness, something that directs its gaze to other things, as

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25 Plotinus, V 3 [49].3.21–22.

26 Plotinus, V 1 [10].3.20–22.

27 Plotinus, V 3 [49].4.8–13.

28 Of course Plotinus also considers the soul to be a divinity albeit a lesser divinity. See Plotinus, V 1 [10].2.

well as a subject of thinking which reasons about and reflects on its experiences of objects."<sup>29</sup> Remes thus gives pride of place to the ratiocinative and noetic selves, with a strong emphasis on the former. Although she does grant that non-ratiocinative and non-noetic union with the One is possible and is perhaps even our ultimate end, such a union would seem to be irrelevant to the Plotinian self: "Plotinus points out that it is tiresome and difficult for human minds to approach the One since the One is formless and not delimited, but, by nature, soul is such that it grasps things through limits and definitions – through rational or intellectual activity. *The proper nature of the self lies in that activity.*"<sup>30</sup> It is difficult to see what would motivate Remes' claim aside from adherence to a more conventional model of the self that has become prevalent in modern philosophy. But Plotinus is hardly a conventional thinker on this point. Though Plotinus does speak of the perplexities and difficulties when trying to approach the One as Remes mentions,<sup>31</sup> these ought not to be taken as indications that our 'proper' nature is to be a ratiocinative being. For whenever Plotinus brings up the difficulties involved in conceiving the One, it is usually to admonish us to practice virtue and dialectic in order to overcome those difficulties. Plotinus acknowledges these difficulties in order to exonerate us to get beyond them.<sup>32</sup> The normative impulse to self-transformation, rather than our customary way of living, is what discloses our 'proper' self.

There is, though, a more rigorous reason why the self cannot stop at Intellect. The Intellect is something derivative for Plotinus. The self-reflection that constitutes it depends upon another principle that is so simple and so united that it does not even reflect. Although the intellect does not exhibit the sort of division and externality that characterizes the sensible world, because it

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29 Paulina Remes, *Plotinus on Self: The Philosophy of the 'We'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 252.

30 Remes, 253 (emphasis added).

31 For example at Plotinus, VI 9 [9].3 & 4.

32 Cf. Plotinus, V 5 [32].10; V 3 [49].13.

reflects upon itself or ‘sees’ itself (to borrow Plotinus’ frequently metaphorical terminology), there must also be some difference in the Intellect between the knower and the known or the seer and the seen: “There must, then, be more than one, that seeing may exist, and the seeing and the seen must coincide, and what is seen by itself must be a universal multiplicity. For what is absolutely one has nothing to which to direct its activity but since it is ‘alone isolated’ it will remain absolutely immobile.”<sup>33</sup> Thinking requires that something be thought, so that even if Plotinus posits an identity between thinker and thought in *nous*, he also recognizes that such an identity also includes difference. Consequently, the One, if it is truly to be one, must be beyond thought.

What is true of the One *vis-à-vis* the Intellect also holds true of the ‘self’ that is proper to the One and the noetic self. Plotinus makes this clear in a remarkable passage that was, however, poorly translated by Armstrong and has received surprisingly little attention in the scholarship.<sup>34</sup> After recalling the Platonic teaching that the One is beyond knowing, Plotinus remarks:

For knowing is one thing, but that is one without the thing; for if it were one thing it would not be the One-itself: for “itself” comes before “thing.

ἔν γάρ τι καὶ τὸ γινώσκειν· τὸ δὲ ἔστιν ἄνευ τοῦ ‘τί’ ἔν· εἰ γὰρ τι ἔν, οὐκ ἂν αὐτοῦ· τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ πρὸ τοῦ ‘τί.’<sup>35</sup>

Armstrong misleadingly translates τὸ αὐτὸ in this passage as ‘absolute’ and αὐτοῦ as ‘absolute One.’ This translation completely obscures the connection between τὸ αὐτὸ and Plotinus’ search for the ‘self itself’ (τὸ αὐτὸ ἑαυτό), which concerns him throughout the treatise, and whose somewhat peculiar

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33 Plotinus, V 3 [49].10.14–18.

34 An exception to this is Beierwaltes, Werner, *Das Wahre Selbst: Studien zu Plotins Begriff des Geistes und des Einen* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2001), 118 ff.; Beierwaltes, Werner, *Selbsterkenntnis und Erfahrung der Einheit: Plotins Enneade V 3 Text, Übersetzung, Interpretation, Erläuterungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1991), 146.

35 Plotinus, V 3 [49].12.50–52.

formulation traces back to the *Alcibiades*.<sup>36</sup> Plotinus would not use the reflexive pronoun *ἑαυτό* to refer to the One inasmuch this would introduce the sort of duality proper to Intellect. Instead he uses simply the non-reflexive pronoun *αὐτό*, ‘the self.’<sup>37</sup> He thus implicitly posits *αὐτό*, the non-reflexive self, as the principle of *ἑαυτό*, the reflexive self. One can compare a similar usage at the end of *Ennead* VI 8[39], where Plotinus writes that the One,

is alone and free in truth, because it is not enslaved to itself, but is only itself and really itself, while every other thing is itself and something else.

μηδὲ δουλεῦόν ἐστιν ἑαυτῷ, ἀλλὰ μόνον αὐτό καὶ ὄντως αὐτό, εἴ γε τῶν ἄλλων ἕκαστον αὐτό καὶ ἄλλο.<sup>38</sup>

Here the reflexivity (*ἑαυτῷ*) implied in a relation of servitude is contrasted with the unadulterated self of the One (*μόνον αὐτό καὶ ὄντως αὐτό*). The One is purely itself, while every other thing has accrued something else. What is remarkable about this particular formulation, though, is that Plotinus indicates that at the core, so to speak, of each thing (*ἕκαστον*) there is a self (*αὐτό*), even if it stands alongside something else (*ἄλλο*).

Plotinus ascribes a similar function of ontological grounding to the One *qua* *αὐτό* in *Ennead* V.3: “For all that is not one is kept in being by the One, and is what it is by this One: for if it had not become one, even though it is composed of many parts, it

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36 Plato, *Alcibiades* 129b. Beierwaltes’ German translation expresses well what is lacking in Armstrong’s: “Etwas Eines nämlich ist auch das Erkennen; Jenes aber ist Eines ohne das ‚Etwas‘; denn wäre Es etwas Eines, so wäre Es nicht das ‚Eine selbst‘; das ‚Selbst‘ nämlich ist vor dem ‚Etwas,“ in Beierwaltes, *Selbsterkenntnis und Erfahrung der Einheit*, 53. In a different work, Beierwaltes sees the formulation ‘*τὸ αὐτό ἑαυτό*’ as a response to the sceptical arguments that Plotinus engages at the beginning of the treatise, see Beierwaltes, *Das wahre Selbst*, 90–94.

37 See Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984), §328. When *αὐτό* is in the attributive position it means ‘the same.’ Plotinus, however, uses *αὐτό* in the predicative position, which means that it should be read as the intensive personal pronoun: (my/your/his/her/its)self.

38 Plotinus, VI 8 [39].21.31–33.

is not yet what someone would call 'itself' [αὐτό]."<sup>39</sup> The One, of course, is the ultimate source of oneness for everything else, and it therefore preserves all beings in their being. Plotinus adds, though, that the reason for this is that if something were not one, we would not be able to call it 'itself,' αὐτό. It would seem, therefore, from this passage and others already cited that *Plotinus does not merely conceive the One to be the self, but also considers these two terms to be essentially synonymous*. To be a self or to be a being is to be one in some way. The source of oneness and thus the source of selfhood is nothing other than the One itself. Everything else that may be called a self is so-called only in a derivative sense.

### III. A SELF UNITED?

We have briefly sketched several aspects of ourselves: we sense, we engage in ratiocination, we intelligize, at bottom we may be nothing other than the pure simplicity of the One. *We* would thus seem to be extended across all of the orders of the totality. The obvious question thus arises: can all of these be said to be one 'self'?

Each order, each aspect of the self corresponds to a different degree of unity. The Plotinian universe is divided into these various orders categorized according to their degree of unity: the One as pure unity, the Intellect as unity between thinker and thought, the soul as a unity within a spatio-temporal world. To unite these selves into one would be no less than to collapse the totality into one. E.R. Dodds instead described the Plotinian self as a "fluctuating spotlight of consciousness,"<sup>40</sup> but the metaphor is somewhat inadequate. What can consciousness be when there is no distinction between the knower and the known in the One? What is consciousness when one is not speaking of an immediate intuition, but rather a step-by-step deductive reasoning that belongs to the ratiocinative soul? It is indeed true that *we* fluctuate across the Plotinian universe, but to unify this fluctuation into a single consciousness would seem to betray some of Plotinus' most careful distinctions.

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39 Plotinus, V 3 [49].15.11–14.

40 E.R. Dodds, "Comment on H.R. Schwyzer," in *Les sources de Plotin*, ed. E.R. Dodds, Entretiens Hardt 5 (Genève: Fondation Hardt, 1960), 385–386.

Instead I would propose that the Plotinian 'self' is no more and no less unified than the totality. The Plotinian cosmos is segmented into various orders, and yet each lower order is sustained by and remains tied to the order above it. Plotinus' doctrine of the higher soul, much criticized by his successors, is based upon the simple principle that the cause does not abandon the caused:

The first part of the soul, then, that which is above and always filled and illuminated by the reality above, remains there; but another part, participating by the first participation of the participant goes forth, for soul goes forth always, life from life... But in going forth it lets its prior part remain where it left it, for if it abandoned what was before it, it would no longer be everywhere, but only at the last point it reached.<sup>41</sup>

There is thus an impulse for a maximum of diffusion and a maximum of differentiation that is sustained by the higher principle remaining in place, thereby allowing the lower orders to unfold. Plotinus elsewhere writes of a similar connection between us and the First:

we are not cut off from him or separate, even if the nature of body has intruded and drawn us to itself, but we breathe and are preserved because the Good has not given its gifts and then gone away but is always bestowing them as long as it is what it is.<sup>42</sup>

To belong to a lower order is not to be exiled from the Good. The Platonic myth in the *Phaedrus*, which depicts embodiment as a falling towards hard earth and the loss of the soul's wings, can only be metaphorical. In reality, for Plotinus the soul is never truly alienated from its divine source. The passage of the soul into the corporeal realm does not entail its departing the incorporeal. For these two orders overlap, and are not separated like one physical location at a distance from another:

For bodies are hindered from communion with each other by bodies, but incorporeal things are not kept apart by bodies; nor are they separated in place, but by otherness and difference; when therefore there is no otherness, the things which are not other are present to each other. That One, therefore, since it has no otherness is always present, and we are present to it when we have no otherness.<sup>43</sup>

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41 Plotinus, III 8 [30].5.10–16.

42 Plotinus, VI 9 [9].9.7–10.

43 Plotinus, VI 9 [9].9.29–35.

The link between us and the divine is thus always preserved thanks to the pure simplicity of the One, which tolerates no otherness and thus no boundary that would limit its presence. We, on the other hand, are only present to it, when we too set aside our otherness.

To set aside our otherness, to “take away everything,”<sup>44</sup> always remains a possibility in virtue of this permanent connection to our principle. The principle of all things is not something that determines us from without, but rather a principle of liberty with which we are always in latent communion. *We* are as infinite and indeterminate as the One itself, and yet we take on all of the determinations of the lower orders. We traverse the totality in each of its orders. Bréhier still seems right to say that Plotinian self is the Odyssean wanderer seeking its homeland:

We shall put out to sea, as Odysseus did, from the witch Circe or Calypso... and was not content to say though he had delights of the eyes and lived among much beauty of sense. Our country from which we came is there, our Father is there. How shall we travel to it, where is our way of escape? We cannot get there on foot; for our feet only carry us everywhere in this world, from one country to another. You must not get ready a carriage either, or a boat. Let all these things go, and do not look. Shut your eyes and change and wake another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use.<sup>45</sup>

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44 Plotinus, V 3 [49].17.38.

45 Plotinus, I 6 [1].8.17–26; Cf. Émile Bréhier, *La philosophie de Plotin* (Paris: Boivin, 1928), v–vi.