

# *Enneads* IV and V: A Puzzle about Perception

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*Enneads* IV.6.1-2 and V.5.1 present a puzzle for the interpreter of Plotinus because, taken together, they seem to show Plotinus claiming both that perception relies on impressions and that perception involves unmediated contact with its objects. I suggest that this apparent inconsistency can be resolved through a close reading of V.5, one that uncovers a hidden story behind the apparent claims made there. This interpretation relies on the careful reading of key terms. I begin with an overview of Plotinus' apparent rejection of a sense-impression theory of perception in *Ennead* IV and a consideration of H.J. Blumenthal's claim that despite the appearances here, Plotinus was a perceptual representationalist.<sup>1</sup> This is one way that some commentators have reconciled the conflicting assertions in *Enneads* IV and V. The other way to do this is to read V.5.1 in a context that shows that we can—and if we want to make sense of the two *Enneads*, we must—reject the superficial or apparent sense of a key passage there. This approach (as well as reasons to support it) is detailed in the second part of this discussion.

In *Ennead* IV.6, Plotinus argues that perception does not operate with impressions that mediate between the perceiver and the object perceived: "Sense-perceptions are not impressions or seal-stamps on the soul" (IV.6.1).<sup>2</sup> Plotinus' central objection to a construal of perception as operating with impressions

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1 I use the term representationalism throughout this paper to refer to any epistemological theory that makes use of impressions, images, representations, or any other mediational element to explain either the process of perception or the process of coming to know something.

2 Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. by A. H. Armstrong with the Henry-Schwyzler text, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). All quotations from the *Enneads* are taken from this translation, as are all reference to the Greek text of the *Enneads*.

is that on this model we will not be able to account for the way we actually experience perception and memory.

Beginning with perception, Plotinus observes that in the act of perceiving, "the soul looks outwards" (IV.6.1) and that this counts as evidence that no impression is involved in perception, since if it were, the mind would have the object in the impression and would not need to look outward. He also notes that if we had the object as an impression within the mind, we would not be able to perceive the distance between ourselves and the object of perception, since in such an impression there is no interval between the mind and itself. He points out, too, that the theory of impressions cannot account for how we perceive very large objects, such as the sky, since these would constitute impressions too vast to be contained in the mind. Most convincing of all for Plotinus is that if we accept the Stoic account of perception we would never see the things themselves, only their shadows, and that the things themselves would be divorced from the images we see. However, it is not clear why this counts as an objection to the Stoic theory of perception. That the Stoic theory leads to a representationalism in which we never have the object itself in our perception is not grounds for dismissing it. The final consideration against the theory of perceptual impressions is that if an object impresses itself on the mind such that the mind is stamped with its imprint, there will be no distinction between seer and seen. Visual perception on this account would not be possible, then, since vision requires a separation between what sees and what is seen.

Plotinus also points to the difficulties of explaining how memory works if perception involves an element mediating between perceiver and object. In such a scenario, memory would have to be a matter of ever-present impressions retained by the mind. But then "if the impressions remained, their multiplicity would not make memories less. Further, if impressions remained, there would be no need for us to consider in order to remember; nor should we forget before and remember afterwards if the impressions were lying ready to hand" (IV.6.3). Moreover, the fact that the memory can be strengthened through training shows that it is an active

faculty or power of the mind and not the passive retention of impressions. The stronger or more powerful the faculty of memory (or, the more effort one exercises) the more vividly the object being remembered will be present. The power of the memory is also affected by the capacity for attention or concentration that a person possesses. Plotinus observes that children have such good memories because, unlike adults, their limited experience means that their attention is not widely dispersed over a variety of things. His conclusion is that the basis of memory is "a calling out of the power of the soul by which we remember, in that this is strengthened, either in a general way or for the specific art of remembering" (IV.6.3). The suggestion here is that the faculty of memory is so tied up with the faculty of perception that whatever account of perception we offer must also make sense of what our experience reveals to us about the way memory actually operates.

To understand how perception actually works, Plotinus' strategy will be to "observe what happens in the case of 'the clearest sense'" in order to "apply the same also to the other senses and find what we are looking for" (IV.6.1). In other words, he will use sight as a paradigm of perception and generalize from this kind of perception to the other sense faculties. He begins by claiming that visual perception is a direct grasping of the object "there where it is." This would seem to suggest that perception occurs without the intermediary of an impression, and that this is the nature of perception in general. He calls this grasping in perception a power of the mind to act in which it affirms something outside of itself (IV.6.2). For Plotinus it would appear that rather than passively receiving impressions, the mind actively reaches out to its objects.

Regardless of whether the contact between subject and object is direct or takes place through a mediating impression, it is important to note that Plotinus rejects the idea that a medium of some kind is necessary for perception since anything interposed between subject and object would weaken or blunt this perception (IV.5.2). Instead he maintains that sympathy between the agent and patient of perception makes possible perception without the use of a medium. Gordon Clark gives as an example of how

this might work the way that what the eyes see produces a sympathetic reaction in the stomach without affecting the teeth or throat, both of which are closer to the eyes.<sup>3</sup> Another example might be the way that a headache can give rise to a stomachache. Just as this kind of action at a distance is possible in the instances above because it involves a relation between the organs of a single organism, Plotinus argues that the subject can be affected by the object of perception in the same way because the world itself is a single continuous being, an All “in sympathy with itself” (IV.5.3). In the last example, the stomach becomes like the head in taking on pain in a sympathetic reaction to it. Likewise, in sensation the organ of perception becomes like the object being perceived. Clark observes that “one is tempted to repeat Aristotle and say that the eye becomes red and the ear sonorous.”<sup>4</sup>

Sympathetic affection explains how the body is affected by and comes into contact with the things it perceives. It also partly accounts for how the soul, which is not material, can make perceptual contact with external material objects since the sympathetic reaction of the organs of perception in becoming like their objects is what mediates between the soul and the object of perception. This clear ontological division between body and soul is reflected in the distinction Plotinus makes between sensation or affection (*πάθη*), which takes place in the body at the organs of sensation, and perception (*αἴσθησις*), which is the activity of the soul in which it is aware of consciously judging (*κρίσις*) these sensations in a concomitant perception of the affection in the body (*συναἴσθησις* [III.6.1; IV.6.2, V.3.2]).<sup>5</sup> The interpretive problem that arises at this point is how to make sense of Plotinus’ claim that perception is not mediated by impressions since the affections in the bodily organs would appear to play precisely this role.

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3 Gordon Clark, “Plotinus’ Theory of Sensation,” *The Philosophical Review* 51 (1942): 364.

4 Clark, “Plotinus’ Theory of Sensation,” 372.

5 See Todd Stuart Ganson, “The Platonic Approach to Sense Perception,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 22 (2005): 2.

Some scholars view this apparent inconsistency as evidence that Plotinus actually advocated a kind of perceptual representationalism. H. J. Blumenthal, for example, maintains that we can understand Plotinus' claim at IV.6.1 that perception takes place "there where it [the object] is" to mean that perception takes place in us since we have the object in a mental representation, but that this representation is of *the object as lying out there*. In other words, we perceive things as external, although these perceptions are internal mental representations. He thinks only that Plotinus should have been more exact in his language here. Nevertheless, this only accounts for one of Plotinus' objections to a sense impression theory of perception, and there are several other places where Plotinus appears to reject perceptual impressions altogether.

To overcome this difficulty, Blumenthal makes two suggestions. First, he thinks that we should view sensation and perception as parts of a single process, and that there is a stage in this process in which perception is external, viz., at the moment that the organs are affected by the object. On this reading, Plotinus could then legitimately speak of the perception as being external. Second, Blumenthal claims that "instead of being stamped the soul receives a kind of translation of the impression by which the body is affected: today we should think in terms of electrical impulses traveling along nerves. It is these impressions in the body and its organs that the soul perceives."<sup>6</sup> In other words, we can interpret Plotinus' rejection of impressions to be an objection to a certain kind of impression, namely, an imprint like that which a seal makes in wax, but not the rejection of a mediational element altogether.

Blumenthal's interpretation also seems to find support in an important passage at V.5.1 that appears to suggest that, contrary to Plotinus' earlier insistence on direct perceptual contact with the object, what is actually perceived is an image of the object: "For there is a lack of confidence about even those objects of sense-perception which seem to inspire the strongest confidence in their

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6 H. J. Blumenthal, *Plotinus' Psychology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff), 171-72.

self-evidence, whether their apparent existence may be not in the underlying realities, but in the ways the sense organs are affected, and they need intellect or discursive reason to make judgments about them; for even if it is agreed that they are in the underlying sense-realities which sense-perception is to grasp, that which is known by sense-perception is an image of the thing, and sense perception does not apprehend the thing itself: for that remains outside.”

To understand this passage one has to understand the context of the discussion in *Ennead* V.5. Here Plotinus is discussing the question of truth and whether we can obtain knowledge. For Plotinus, *nous* is that which knows and its knowledge is infallible, certain, never forgotten, direct or immediate rather than second-hand, and does not rely on impressions or demonstration (and so must be self-evident—which the axioms of a demonstration cannot be since we will be faced with the problem of accounting for how we know these). The only way that an object could qualify as knowledge in this sense is if it were not external to the knower. In true knowledge, then, there must be an identity of knower and known (V.5.2). Since the objects of *nous* are the Forms, this will mean that intellect *is* the Forms and in knowing something, thinks itself. For this kind of knowing, truth is not the correspondence between thought and its objects. There is instead a coincidence of being and knowing such that the ideas of the intellect are true because the intellect is its ideas. R.T. Wallis maintains that Plotinus had the Skeptic attack on Stoic epistemology in mind in formulating this conception of knowledge since any object of knowledge external to the knower will be vulnerable to skeptical attack.<sup>7</sup> Before looking more closely at V.5, then, it will be useful to briefly review the Stoic-Skeptic debate in order to see more fully the contours of the particular episode in the history of ideas that Plotinus had in mind as he developed and insisted on the contrast between intellection and sense perception in this key passage.

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<sup>7</sup> See R. T. Wallis, “Scepticism and Neoplatonism,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, vol. 36.2, ed. W. Haase and H. Temporini (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1987) 911-954.

The first thing to note is that Stoic epistemology rests upon an empirical theory of perception. According to this theory, perception takes place when a perceiver's organs of sense perception come into contact with the object of perception through a presentation, which is an impression that an object makes on the soul that is indicative of both itself and the object that produces it.<sup>8</sup> This is a theory of perception that defines perceiving as being affected materially in the soul by the object perceived.

The Stoic theory of knowledge builds on this model of perception by first making a qualitative distinction between accurate and inaccurate impressions, which they term graspable and non-graspable presentations, respectively. A graspable presentation is a stimulus or impression coming from an existing object outside of the subject that is a reliable representation of the object because it is "stamped and molded in accordance with the existing object."<sup>9</sup> A non-graspable presentation either does not come from an existing object, or is not clear and distinct.<sup>10</sup> When a graspable presentation has been received and approved by the subject, i.e., assented to, then it has been grasped. A grasped presentation, because it is accurate and reliable and leaves out nothing about the object that can be grasped through sensible perception, is the criterion of knowledge, but it is not yet knowledge itself. Rather, a grasped presentation lies between knowledge and ignorance; it is one step on the way to knowledge. Zeno illustrated this point with the simile of a hand. A presentation is like an open hand, assent is like a half-closed hand, grasping is like a closed fist, and knowledge is like a hand over a closed fist. Knowledge is a *firmly* grasped presentation that cannot be shaken or reversed by argument.<sup>11</sup>

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8 Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* 7.228 and 7.161. All references to, and translations of, Stoic and Skeptic passages are taken from *Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

9 Diogenes Laertius, 7.46.

10 Laertius, 7.46.

11 Cicero, *Academica* 1.41-42.

The Skeptic response to this theory of knowledge was to claim that there is no such thing as a graspable presentation—and thus no criterion of knowledge.<sup>12</sup> Since there is no criterion of knowledge, nothing can be known. And if nothing can be known, we must suspend judgment. These conclusions are presented in two separate arguments. The first argument can be found in *Academica* 2.40:

1. Some presentations are true, some are false.
2. False presentations cannot be grasped.
3. There is no true presentation such that there cannot be a false one of the same quality.
4. No presentation can be grasped if there is no criterion for distinguishing between true and false presentations.
5. Therefore, there are no graspable presentations.

The entire argument turns on the third premise. The point of this premise is that whatever one might say about the reliability of a graspable presentation—e.g., that it compels assent because it has a vivacity or “a distinctive kind of clear statement to make about the objects of presentation”<sup>13</sup> that is, as Charlotte Stough phrases it, “of such a nature as to have originated necessarily in that object of which it is in fact the exact replica,”<sup>14</sup>—there are many presentations that come from non-existing objects that also meet these criteria such as hallucinations, dreams, mirages, and impressions that are caused by our limited sensory powers rather than by the object itself.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, there are also presentations that appear to come from existing objects that seem to meet the criterion of being

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12 Cicero, *Academica* 2.77.

13 Cicero, *Academica* 1.41.

14 Charlotte Stough, *Greek Skepticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 39.

15 Stough, *Greek Skepticism*, 43-44. This summary overview of the Stoic theory of perception was first set out in David W. Johnson, “What Does Academic Skepticism Presuppose? Arcesilaus, Carneades, and the Argument with Stoic Epistemology,” *Lyceum* 10, no. 1 (2008): 44-54.

graspable, but that are illusory in nature (and so do not actually stem from the object) such as the yellow objects of perception that appear to one suffering from jaundice, or the case of twins who are indistinguishable from one another. The only way to know whether a presentation is false would be to inspect the object and its image in such a way as to determine whether there is a correspondence between object and image. Since we are not able to step outside of our minds in this manner, the only thing we have are the impressions that objects make on our minds, and this gives us no justifiable ground to suppose that the objects resemble their impressions.

Now, it is just this possibility that the object I perceive might be merely the object-for-me rather than the object-in-itself that Plotinus acknowledges as a flaw fatal to sense-impression theory. We can see this if we look again at the first part of the key passage at V.5.1: "For there is a lack of confidence about even those objects of sense-perception which seem to inspire the strongest confidence in their self-evidence, whether their apparent existence may be not in the underlying realities, but in the ways the sense organs are affected [...]." This passage also appears to suggest that Plotinus assumes that sense perception necessarily involves impressions or mental representations and that the way to escape the skeptical critique of representationalism is to demonstrate the identity of knower and known.

At this point it would seem that the context of *Ennead* V.5, in which sense perception is being contrasted with the knowledge of *nous*, when combined with Blumenthal's reading of *Ennead* IV, might lead to the conclusion that Plotinus was indeed a representationalist about sense perception. But I want now to look more closely at the second part of the passage at V.5.1: "for even if it is agreed that they are in the underlying sense-realities which sense-perception is to grasp, that which is known by sense-perception is an image of the thing, and sense perception does not apprehend the thing itself: for that remains outside." Eyjólfur Emilsson maintains that we can reconcile this passage with other remarks that Plotinus makes that seem to clearly indicate a strongly realist stance with regard to the objects of perception by seeing that the

distinction made here between the image and the thing itself is not intended to represent that which in perception is internal to us (i.e., impressions) versus that which is external to us (i.e., the object of perception).<sup>16</sup> Rather, the object of sensation, as a bundle of qualities in matter, is itself a representation of the essence of the object, an essence that is not accessible to perception. It is this essence that is meant by “the thing itself” that is never grasped by sensation.

Emilsson reminds us that this is standard Platonism, and that Plotinus can be found to explicitly subscribe to it in II.4.9, II.8.2, IV.4.29, VI.3.15. He finds direct evidence that it is this Platonism rather than a suddenly inexplicable representationalism that underlies the talk of images and “objects themselves” in V.5.1. He sees this in “the beginning of chapter 2 of V.5, where Plotinus summarizes the main points established in chapter 1. It becomes clear here that the ‘representation’ which sense-perception is supposed to grasp, is the quality of each thing as opposed to its essence or quiddity.”<sup>17</sup> What Emilsson is here calling “representation” is translated by Armstrong as *image*. Regardless of the translation, Emilsson’s interpretation finds textual support in the original Greek term, which is εἶδωλον. This is important to note because the Greek term that Plotinus uses in IV.6 when he says that “sense-perceptions are not impressions” is τυπώσεις. That is, Plotinus seems very clearly to be talking about two different things in these passages, namely, impressions in IV.6 and images in V.5.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, one might still be inclined to ask how we can tell that Plotinus is not simply using different terms for the same phenomenon. Emilsson’s response to this is to show that Plotinus also uses the term εἶδωλον in other places to refer to images in the

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16 Eyjólfur Kjalar Emilsson, “Cognition and its object” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 217-249.

17 Eyjólfur Kjalar Emilsson, “Plotinus on the Objects of Thought,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 77 (1995): 26.

18 Thanks to Christopher Long for drawing my attention to this important point.

Platonic sense. For example, Plotinus affirms the Platonic doctrine of sensible objects as a bundle of qualities in matter at VI.3.15 and uses the word εἶδωλον (translated below as image) to refer to such qualities: "It was said about the qualitative that, mixed together with others, matter and the quantitative, it effects the completion of sensible substance, and that this so-called substance is this compound of many, and is not a 'something' but a 'something like'; and the rational form (λόγος), of fire for instance, indicates rather the 'something', but the shape it produces is rather a quale. And the rational form of man is the being a 'something' but its product in the nature of body, being an image (εἶδωλον) of the form, is rather a sort of 'something like'." Or again, here is Plotinus at V.9.5 on the composition of sensible objects: "for the form on the matter in the things of sense is an image (εἶδωλον) of the real form."

Emilsson also notes that his claim can be illustrated with the Plotinian metaphysical doctrine of the inner and outer acts of an object. The inner act is the essence of the object, while the outer act is what is produced by the object in something else. The outer act, moreover, is often described by Plotinus as the representation of the inner act. It follows from this that insofar as the essence of an object corresponds to the inner act, the qualities or images of Forms in an object would correspond to the outer act. Emilsson observes that we can see how this works with the phenomenon of fire. The inner act, or essence, of fire is the burning of an entity that takes place. The outer act of the fire is the heat that is given off that is felt by whatever is near the fire. Although we identify fire with the flame that we see and the heat that we feel, these are merely representations, or outer acts, of the inner act of the fire itself, the process of burning. Just as we can never have the essence of fire as burning in the heat we feel and the flames we see, we can never have the essence of an object in its qualities.

Emilsson thinks that this metaphysical background also helps to explain the contrast between sense perception and intellection that Plotinus makes in V.5.1. As we have already seen above, this comparison between the knowledge possessed by an intellect whose objects are internal to it and the failure of a sense

perception to attain knowledge whose objects are external to it should count in favor of an anti-realist interpretation of Plotinus' epistemology. But given the background of what Plotinus says about the inner and outer activity of objects, another explanation for the comparison of sense perception with the intellect becomes possible. And this is that the intellect can know its objects because insofar as they are internal to it, it possesses their inner activity and thus their essence. Sense perception, on the other hand, is external to its objects and so "does not possess the internal activity that constitutes the intelligible essence of these objects."<sup>19</sup>

The apparent contradiction between the passages in V.5.1 and IV.6.1-2, then, seems to have been resolved by understanding the term *image* in V.5.1 to refer to the qualities of the object rather than to its essence. Yet advocates of perceptual realism are still faced with the broader problem of an apparent entity, namely the affection in the sense organs, which mediates between the soul and the perceptual object. We can turn for help in overcoming this difficulty by looking to the work of Lloyd Gerson, who offers a powerful and nuanced defense of Plotinus as a perceptual realist.

Gerson maintains that we should not view the Plotinian account of perception in terms of an initial event in which the object affects the body, and a second event in which the soul cognizes that impression. Perception can be understood as a relation between two terms rather than three if we see that sensation—instead of being the *cause* of perception—is the *instrument* whereby the soul perceives the object (IV.4.25) such that what is intelligible (the soul) can make contact with what is material (objects in the world). To see how this might work, we can begin with Emilsson's description of the content of sensation as "a non-conceptual, phenomenal presence of the external quality to the senses."<sup>20</sup> This phenomenal quality is in some way identical to, and in some way different from, the quality in the object. This is because the quality in the senses

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19 Emilsson, "Cognition and its object," 225.

20 Emilsson, "Cognition and its object," 219.

is the same quality in the object of the senses, though without the material bulk that is part of the latter. But this does not mean that the quality in sensation is purely intelligible, either, since we do, after all, perceive such qualities as features of things extended in space.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, there is also another sense in which the quality of the object as content of sensation is sensible, viz., the sympathetic taking on of the qualities (and thus Forms) of the object by the bodily organ of sensation means that the content of sensation is a sensible image of a Form (IV.4.23). In other words, by the time the content of sensation is available for judgment by the soul, it is already intelligible: "And soul's power of sense-perception need not be perception of sense-objects, but rather it must be receptive of the impressions produced by sensation on the living being; these are already intelligible entities" (I.1.7). This intelligible content is, as Gerson says, "information for an entity capable of decoding it. The affection in the organic composite is a mean between the intelligible structure in the sensible object and cognitive activity."<sup>22</sup> The quality in sensation thus stands between the sensible and the intelligible.

It is this intelligible content of sensation as the image of a Form that becomes identified with the perceiver in the act of perception, since judging or cognizing and the reception of the form of the object are, as Emilsson puts it, different descriptions of the same act.<sup>23</sup> We are now in a position to see why Gerson claims that "sense perception is identification with forms using the animate body as an instrument."<sup>24</sup> Since for Plotinus as for Aristotle, the form of something is what a thing is actually, we can say that the soul directly perceives the object itself (although not, as we noted earlier, the essence of the object) by means of the body. Any distinction we might thus make between affection and perception can only be the result of conceptual analysis rather than a description of the actual process of perception in which affection and perception are each

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21 Emilsson, "Cognition and its object," 219.

22 Lloyd Gerson, *Plotinus* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 168.

23 Emilsson, "Cognition and its object," 218.

24 Gerson, *Plotinus*, 169.

aspects of a single event of the direct apprehension of an object.

We have now seen two very different approaches to reconciling the apparently conflicting claims in *Enneads* IV and V. Blumenthal thought that the rejection of impressions in IV could be explained a) if Plotinus had been more precise in his language, b) if we understand sensation and perception as elements of a single process, and c) if we read Plotinus' rejection of impressions as a rejection of the Stoic theory of material impressions (in which impressions resemble the imprints made by a seal on wax) but not the rejection of impressions *per se*. I think one can respond to this by noting that a) it is usually somewhat hazardous (besides being difficult to prove) to think that we know better than they themselves do what ancient philosophers wanted to say, or should have said; b) as we have seen, if sensation and perception are elements of a single process, there is a way of understanding perception as purely external (rather than consisting of external and internal stages) given the instrumental role of the body in sensation; c) it seems like too important an oversight for Plotinus not to have specified that he was only rejecting a materialist impression theory rather than all impression theories.

Rather than seeing Plotinus as a representationalist it seems to me best to understand him as holding a view of perception as involving a kind of qualified, yet direct, perceptual contact with the world. This is a position that seems justified in light of the evidence of the original Greek text in V.5. It is supported, too, by the fact that we can understand the contrast between sensation and intellection on the metaphysical background of inner and outer acts and by the sheer number of places in the *Enneads* where Plotinus rejects sense impressions as compared to the single passage at V.5.1 in which Plotinus seems to advocate a version of representationalism.