

Living Body, Soul, and Virtue in the Philosophy of Plotinus

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According to Plotinus, soul is the offspring of the Intelligible World¹ and, to a certain extent, reflects its structure. However, soul displays a more attenuated kind of unity, since each soul does not properly contain in itself all, or any, of the rest, but is merely connected with them in such a way as to form a unified plurality.² Each member within this plurality has its own position and is affiliated with the intelligible Beings in its own particular way, thus exhibiting qualities and predispositions which amount to a special, individual “view” of the world.³ Thus it becomes aware of the things surrounding it both at the intelligible and at the sensible level of reality, but also, one might say, at its own intermediate level, which forms a kind of bridge between the other two, thus enabling the intelligible Forms to act upon the material substructure and to inform it as to produce the world of appearances.⁴ The soul can, by activating its corresponding cognitive powers, come to formulate beliefs on the basis of such awareness, and furthermore to process these beliefs in accordance with certain rules of association—not always, perhaps, of a purely rational character. It, thus, engages itself in what is considered to be the activity which is most peculiar to human beings, namely, ratiocination or discursive reasoning. By means of such reasoning it

1. See *Enneads* III 5.2.30–3.5, V 1.6.45–47, 7.36–48, V 2.1.13–17, V 3.9.15–23. In all the following references to the *Enneads* the text used is that of P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzler, *Plotini opera* I–III (Oxford, 1964–1982).

2. The unity corresponding to the ontological level of the soul is usually designated in Plotinus by means of the formula *έν τε και πολλά*, derived from the third hypothesis in Plato's *Parmenides* (155e5): see, e.g., IV 2.2.40–41, where this is related also with the constitution of the soul as described in the *Timaeus* (35a1–4). Cf. B. Darrell Jackson, “Plotinus and the *Parmenides*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 5 (1967): 325–27.

3. On this see my study “Forms of Individuals in Plotinus: a Re-examination,” *Phronesis* 42 (1997): 225–26.

4. See, e.g., IV 2.2.42–48, IV 3.10.35–42, IV 7.10.1–19, V 1.2.1–40. The formative and organizing power of the soul on the sensible world is exercised, according to Plotinus, by means of *logoi*: on that see my “*Logos* and the Sensible Object in Plotinus,” *Ancient Philosophy* 17 (1997): 407.

can draw inferences, make distinctions, perform acts of assent or dissent, compare, and thus indicate analogies and similarities, and, more generally, accomplish all sorts of tasks which presuppose the application of the mind to different objects, in most cases involving also the use of language.⁵

Awareness, however, although an activity characteristic of the level of reality corresponding to the soul, in no way embraces all the activities of the soul itself. As already noted, in its ratiocinative form it is peculiar to the human and, presumably, the demonic varieties of living beings, and one can perhaps think of other versions of it that might correspond to the lower levels of, say, the animal kingdom. But soul, for Plotinus, is a much more pervasive sort of reality. Its presence and its activity can be discerned in every kind of living organism, but also in several cases where we might think that all there is is inanimate body like, e.g., the earth.⁶ The soul is regarded as the main reason for every kind of display of life, movement and change in the world perceived by our senses, and as responsible for all sorts of organising activity within it, such as the formation of minerals and crystals.⁷ It is enabled to perform these activities by the fact that its scope extends from the intelligible realm all the way down to the fringes of matter itself. But, as we shall see, its presence within this vast area is by no means uniform.

What has been described so far reflects the dual conception of the soul throughout the tradition of ancient Greek philosophy. As a seat of consciousness or awareness, it is prominent in the earlier beliefs about the shadow-like image that continues to subsist, usually in a dark place like the Hades, after the demise of the body.⁸ Such shadows, like the ones encountered by Odysseus during his famous visit into the Underworld, retain some of the characteristic traits of the person to whom they correspond, and even some—although by no means all—of his affections and his feelings. They display a capability of awareness of the confided surroundings in which they pursue their miserable semblance of life, and they even possess some memory of their previous radiant and lively existence. The conception of such awareness as the characteristic function of the soul is also prominent in the early works of Plato, where Socrates is usually represented as particularly preoccupied with its proper attention and development in such a way as to

5. See H.J. Blumenthal, *Plotinus' Psychology* (The Hague, 1971) 104–11, and J.H. Heiser, *Logos and Language in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (Lewiston, NY: 1991) 44–47.

6. See IV 4.22.14–41.

7. See IV 4.27.8–11, VI 7.11.24–32.

8. The classic account of the early Greek conceptions about the soul and its afterlife is still E. Rohde's *Psyche: Seelenkult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen* (Leipzig und Tübingen, 1898) 2: Engl. transl. by W.B. Hillis (London, 1925), wherein see especially 24–43; see also F. Cumont, *Lux perpetua* (Paris, 1949) 18, and I.G. Kalogerakos, *Seele und Unsterblichkeit* (Stuttgart und Leipzig, 1996) 1–6 (with copious references).

make one as acutely conscious of his choices and real preferences as possible.⁹ It is epitomised in the famous argument in the *Apology*, where Socrates maintains that nothing bad can befall his soul if, after death, there is no more any conscious existence. And it forms the basis for the theory of the immortality of the soul, expounded at great length in the dialogues of the middle period.¹⁰

But there was also another conception of the soul, which ran parallel to the one mentioned before, and even, sometimes, was confused with it, by being regarded as some kind of correlative to it, although it obviously was understood to account for a much broader field of phenomena. This is the notion of the soul as a life-giving force, which animates the body and endows it with those special functions distinguishing it from the world of inanimate existence.¹¹ This force is displayed by the performance of the several biological functions, such as those of nutrition, growth and movement, and is thought to cease to exist, more or less, at the moment of death. Plato showed considerable interest in this notion of the soul in his later works, and especially in the *Timaeus*, where it is termed as “another form of soul,” namely, a “mortal kind of soul,” which is detached from its “higher,” immortal counterpart, and vanishes, leaving no further trace after death, like the *harmonia* of Simmias’ so-called “Pythagorean” theory in the *Phaedo*.¹² This aspect of the soul, however, attracted especially the interest of Aristotle, who was particularly concerned with the cause, or perhaps better the reason (*λόγος*), accounting for the phenomenon of life in all kinds of living organisms. His definition of the soul, in the *De anima*, as the first entelechy of the organic body, represents accurately the focus of his attention to what we might call the biological aspect of it; and it should come as no surprise that the intellect is eventually viewed by him—at least in its highest, “active” version—as something external to it.¹³

Plotinus was obviously also especially concerned with this life-providing force, for reasons quite different from those of Aristotle, but which for him would appear as far more important. For him, life is a phenomenon not confined to the level of sensible, biological existence.¹⁴ It is the expression of

9. See, e.g., Plato, *Lach.* 185e1–6, *Prot.* 313a1–314b4 and *Apol.* 29d2–30b2, with W.C.K. Guthrie’s commentary in *History of Greek Philosophy* III (Cambridge, 1969) 467–73.

10. See *Apol.* 40c10–e4, *Phd.* 66d7–67b1, 114d2–115d3, *Rep.* 609d4–612a5 etc.

11. It is reflected in the archaic notion of *psyche* as the “life or spirit of the body,” and commonly thought as residing in the blood. See E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1951) 139.

12. See *Tim.* 65a5, 69c7 ff. Cf. *Phd.* 85e3 ff.

13. See Aristotle, *De an.* II 1, 412b16, II 2, 414a13, 27; II 1, 412a27–28; III 5, 430a14–18.

14. As indeed is the case also for Plato (see *Soph.* 248e7) and Aristotle (see *Metaph.* A 7, 1072b26–30).

the fundamental interconnectedness which unifies the intelligible realm,¹⁵ making it a real “perfect living being,” and thus reflecting, at its own level of existence, the absolute unity of the highest principle, the One. In Intellect, unity acquires the status of a multiple unity,¹⁶ aspiring, through its very intimately interwoven and intrinsic affinity between its parts, to emulate, as far as possible, its source. And its designation as “Life” is meant to bring out, on the one hand its organic aspect, according to which each part can only be understood in terms of its place and its function within the whole where it belongs, but also its constitutive importance, since without it, the Intellect would lose its relation with the source of its being, and thus would become unthinkable¹⁷ and non-existent. It is life along these lines which soul is meant to possess and, in some degree or other, to impart to the body it animates. For the primary feature of any living organism is not any of the functions it performs, but its very organic structure, which permits its parts to perform their tasks as members of a well-coordinated whole, each one contributing towards the well-being not of itself or each other, but of the overall complex entity.

As this driving force of the whole organism is bound to accomplish an enormous variety of tasks, it itself displays a considerably complex structure. Plotinus envisages it as extending over a considerable area of his hierarchical metaphysical system. Although its summit, which is also the core of its being, is located within the intelligible realm, as an integral part of it, it reaches as far as the material level of reality, to which it imparts imprints derived from the Intellect. It can accomplish this mediating role in virtue of its twofold consistency, which, according to the description of the contents of the mixing bowl in the cosmogonical myth of the *Timaeus*, comprises an “undivided” ingredient, as well as one “divisible in respect with bodies.”¹⁸ The first of these ingredients associates it with intelligible nature, which is characterized by its unified and indivisible constitution since, although it has an internal structure involving parts, these parts are related with each other in such a way that each of them contains—in some sense—the whole.¹⁹ On the other hand, the divisible ingredient allows the soul to establish some kind of relation with an individual body, separated from other bodies in space, without

15. See III 7.3.8–20, VI 4.14.8–21, VI 7.13.15–47, 17.11–26.

16. *ἐν πολλὰ* according to another formulation derived from the *Parmenides* (144e5): see, e.g., V 1.8.26, V 3.15.21–22, VI 2.15.14–15, and Jackson, *art. cit.* 322–25.

17. As it seems to be the case with the so-called “intelligible matter” which, because of its inchoate nature and its lack of structure, is described by Plotinus as “dark” (*σκοτεινόν*; see II 4.5.13), i.e., inaccessible to the “light” of the intellect.

18. Plato, *Tim.* 35a1–4: cf. IV 2.2.49–53, IV 1.10–15, IV 3.19.1–8.

19. See, e.g., III 7.4.12–16, V 8.4.4–8, 9.1–7, V 9.6.1–10, VI 2.20.10–23, VI 5.6.1–6.

however becoming itself extended or actually divided.²⁰ It is one of the peculiarities of the soul that it never loses contact with the fundamental unity which encompasses all the souls and relates them to one another in such a way as to form a multiple but, at the same time, unitary nature. This unity is, as we shall see, of crucial importance for understanding the way any soul performs its functions.

It appears that the most proper function of the soul is, according to Plotinus, discursive reasoning (*διάνοια*).²¹ However, as this is, mainly, a processing operation, involving handling, administering and assessing input from various sources, such as sense perceptions or noetic imprints (*ἐννοια*),²² it has to rely on other functions for its operation. It certainly has its own, characteristic way of performing these activities, in which a crucial role is played by its movement from one object to the other,²³ a process which, among other things, is considered as responsible for the emergence of time.²⁴ But, of course, this movement implies that there is some thing undergoing or engaging in it. The result is that we can observe in his psychological theory the emergence of a notion of consciousness, shifting its focus of attention from one concept to the other, or even across different levels of reality, and representing the aspect of the soul as a seat of awareness which has been introduced above. This is regarded as the primary area with which the soul tends to identify itself, and this is the reason why Plotinus, in some cases at least, refers to it by the personal pronoun (*ἡμεῖς*), "us," used in an almost technical sense. It is this extraordinary versatility which induced E.R. Dodds to describe it, in a famous phrase, as a "fluctuating spotlight of consciousness."²⁵ Furthermore, this seat of awareness displays a remarkable tendency for attuning itself with the objects it perceives, and thus to regard itself as belonging to the level of reality these objects represent. This accounts for the apparent waverings which the individual perceives as alterations in the position he occupies within the framework of Plotinus' metaphysical

20. It must be emphasised here that this "divisible" constituent is an element of the soul itself, and so the predispositions for the faculties associated with it, such as the so-called vegetative or appetitive, are connate with it: see J. Igal, "Aristóteles y la evolución de la antropología de Plotino," *Pensamiento* 35 (1979): 321–23.

21. See I 1.9.4–24, V 1.3.7–15, V 3.3.28, 6.16–22, and Blumenthal, *op. cit.* 109.

22. See I 1.9.8–12, V 3.2.2–14, 3.1–15, and J.F. Phillips, "Stoic 'Common Notions' in Plotinus," *Dionysius* 11 (1987): 44–47. Blumenthal, *op. cit.* 100–03, argues convincingly that no distinction is to be made between *διάνοια* and *λογισμός* in Plotinus.

23. See III 9.1.34–37, V 3.17.23–24.

24. See III 7.11.20–43.

25. During the discussion of H.-R. Schwyzer's contribution to the Fondation Hardt colloquium on *Les Sources de Plotin*. See *Entretiens*, tome V (Genève, 1960) 385–86, and cf. E.R. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress* (Oxford, 1973) 135.

hierarchy, but it amounts to no more than subjective variations in the way this reality is envisaged and understood.²⁶

Another important feature of discursive reasoning is its relation with linguistic expression. Although linguistic formulations are by no means a necessary prerequisite for the engagement in such reasoning, they reflect in the most apposite way the mental process implied since, by the use of terms and various combinatory forms, *dianoia* produces propositional statements, which can then be asserted or denied, or even combined by means of syllogistic sequences and thus form series of arguments or demonstrations purporting to reflect soul's insights into whatever it conceives as being reality. But this reality only vaguely reflects the tightly-woven structure that—as we already saw—holds together intelligible reality into a multiple unity. The disparity of the objects commonly referred to or envisaged by the soul is such that only through *logos* they can be brought together as to form “things” bearing the semblance of unity and being.²⁷ And their shadowy instability causes them to appear as continuously changing, either coming to be and passing away or undergoing all sorts of alterations which, again, language is well-suited to describe.²⁸

However, soul itself is, properly speaking, not undergoing any such fluctuation or alteration. By being an immaterial substance (*οὐσία*),²⁹ it is immune to any sort of affection or change,³⁰ and can only retain its status at the level of reality it properly belongs to. As we already have noted, its nature has a firm ground in the intelligible world; its summit forms an integral part of Intellect and thus, given the peculiar structure of that reality, it, in some sense, contains it in itself. This fact provides it with the possibility, on certain extraordinary occasions, to realize itself as being “woken up out of the body ... and living the best life having come to identity with the divine” (*Ennead* IV 8.1.1–6). On such occasions, the conscious aspect of the soul comes to realize that its proper “self”—which, obviously, must be distinguished from the “us” mentioned above—far exceeds the limits of everyday experience and extends as far up as the world of Intellect itself. This realization may help her understand better the provenance and the background of certain of her insights, and thus to secure her conviction about their truth, but it can only be temporary, since she must, sooner or later, return to her ordinary undertakings, “coming down from Intellect to discursive reasoning” (*loc. cit.* 8).

26. This has been perceptively observed by P.O. Kristeller, *Der Begriff der Seele in der Ethik des Plotin* (Tübingen, 1929) 16–20.

27. See my article, referred to *supra*, note 4, 403–06.

28. There exists, however, a group of statements (e.g., definitions) which reflect the structure of Being in a much more straightforward way. I examine them somewhat more extensively in a forthcoming paper entitled “Plotinus on Evidence and Truth.”

29. See IV 7.8^a.14, IV 9.4.25–26.

30. See III 6.1–4 with Blumenthal, *op. cit.* 46–54.

How then does the soul, being of the immaterial nature we just described, come to be associated with a material body? This question had presented Platonism, throughout its history, with all sorts of extremely difficult and intricate problems. Some of the answers given to it had led some philosophers to adopt a very negative attitude towards this association, which thus came to be regarded sometimes as a singular misfortune, amounting to the incarceration or the "engagement" of the soul in a hostile and dangerously turbulent dwelling place, so that her only concern should be her deliverance from it and its escape to her own distant homeland.³¹ This attitude found its most radical exponents among the Gnostics, who were Plotinus' main intellectual opponents in Rome.

Plotinus' view came in sharp contrast with it. In fact, one of the main concerns of his philosophy is to vindicate the world, and sensible reality as a whole, as an appropriate, if not congenial, place to live in, modeled and governed by the World Soul and the other souls in such a way, as to reflect, as its most perfect possible image, the excellence of the intelligible realm. But this, according to him, is achieved not by the direct presence of the soul in the world, nor through its deliberate engagement in activities which would be necessary for its maintenance and its administration. The soul, and this means every soul, remains always in its own proper place, preoccupied only with those activities which are appropriate to her, namely, the contemplation of the higher realities and the communion with the rest of her sister-souls, whereas she performs her providential governing activities by projecting an image of herself upon bodily nature. This image, sometimes designated as its "power" (*δύναμις*),³² is the product of her secondary activity and, therefore, a by-product of her primary activity described above.

The doctrine of double activity is one of the cornerstones of Plotinus' metaphysics, and encapsulates what is usually—and somewhat misleadingly—referred to as his doctrine of "emanation."³³ We need not embark here in any detailed examination of this doctrine, as that would necessitate a thorough

31. Platonists adopting this attitude might appeal to some of the images employed by Plato himself in his dialogues, such as the ones referred to by Plotinus in IV 8.1.28–41. On this "pessimistic" trend of Platonism see further A.J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, tome III: *Les doctrines de l'âme* (Paris, 1953) 77–96.

32. See IV 8.2.33, 53, V 1.2.28, 40, VI 2.22.29–32: the term is probably taken from [Aristotle's] *De mundo* 397b24–398b20. More common is the use of the term "nature" (*φύσις*), in the sense of *natura naturans*, of course: see F. Romano, "Natura e anima in Plotino," in M.O. Goulet-Cazé et al., eds., *Σοφίης Μαιήτορες: Hommage à J. Pépin* (Paris, 1992) 278–94.

33. On this doctrine see A.C. Lloyd, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism* (Oxford, 1990) 98–107. The best discussion I know, however, is contained in an unpublished paper by E.K. Emilsson, bearing the (provisional) title "Remarks on the Relation between the One and Intellect in Plotinus." I shall here concentrate on some aspects of the doctrine which are not emphasised in Emilsson's analysis.

discussion of issues which are not at all related with the subject that occupies us here. So, I shall only briefly indicate some of its aspects which bear some pertinence on the derivation of this image of the soul.

I believe that the best way to approach this issue is by appealing to the parallel model, provided by Aristotle in his distinction between action (*πρᾶξις*) and production (*ποίησις*).³⁴ It has to be noted that Plotinus consistently uses the term *ποίησις* in order to refer to his secondary activity (*ἐνέργεια*),³⁵ whereas the primary activity of the soul is sometimes understood in terms of contemplation (*θεωρία*), which for him is the prototype of *πρᾶξις*.³⁶ Like *πρᾶξις* in Aristotle, Plotinus' primary activity is a realization and actualization of a being's nature in a way which implies the presence of the aim of this act within itself, so that it can be considered as being perfect and complete at any particular moment. It is an expression of what this being properly is and, therefore, it is intrinsically self-centered, albeit directed towards not what is perceived as being its subject, but rather towards its real self. In the case of the soul, this means that its primary activity is directed towards the Intellect as a whole since, as we saw, the foundation and the core of its being lies there and, moreover, comprises—in a way which is peculiar to all intelligible beings—all the rest of the intelligible realm. This amounts to saying that the proper, primary activity of the soul is its contemplation, its theoretical engagement in what constitutes the whole of real Being, including itself.

Another characteristic of all primary activities and, more precisely, in the case of the soul, of contemplative activity, is that, apart from being self-centered, it is also, to a certain extent, self-constituting, since it is only by exercising this particular activity that the soul performs its proper task and, therefore, is really what it is. Only while engaged in the contemplation of the intelligible is the soul really a soul, in the proper sense of the term. An immediate consequence of this is that the soul, being an eternal and unyielding nature itself, must be always engaged in this activity, without ever diminishing or relaxing its grasp of Being. This, of course, allows for a great deal of variety

34. See, e.g., Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* VI 4, 1140a1–17. This distinction is closely related to the one between *ἐνέργεια* and *κίνησις*; see *Metaph.* Θ-6, 1048b18–35 and J.L. Ackrill, "Aristotle's distinction between *energeia* and *kinesis*," in R. Bambrough, ed., *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle* (London, 1965) 121–41.

35. See V 3.7.15–25, VI 1.22.22–34 and cf. IV 3.6.17–25.

36. See III 8.1.15–18, 5.17–6.10, V 3.7.30–34. R. Arnou, *Πρᾶξις et θεωρία* (Paris, 1921) 24–25, 40–42, 54–64, 75–78, has tried to relate *θεωρία* with *ποίησις* and to contrast it with *πρᾶξις*, on the basis that they belong to different ontological levels. But this should not obscure the fact that *πρᾶξις* is an act parallel to *θεωρία*, being a faint image of it (III 8.5.21–25; cf. Aristotle, *Metaph.* Θ-6, 1048b22–4), while both are having *ποίησις* as their by-product (*ἀποτέλεσμα*: see III 8.3.12, 21, 7.14) and not as their achievement (*pace* Arnou, *op. cit.* 57).

in the way contemplative activity is being perceived or realized by the conscious element of the soul.³⁷ It is perfectly understandable that “we” (*ἡμεῖς*) might in several occasions, perhaps for the greater part of our earthly living or even for the whole of it, not be at all aware of the fact that our soul has its eye continuously fixed upon true Being, nor, for that matter, be able to conform to the standards provided by this reality, which would surely lead us into an unshakable and undisturbed life of true happiness (*εὐδαιμονία*).³⁸ But this is only an accidental consequence of our misapprehension of our real nature, which is a soul directed always and exclusively towards the Intellect.

Another, perhaps less obvious, result of soul’s primary activity, is its causing another, secondary activity which, while depending on the former, is not as immediately germane to its nature. This procession is often described as being in some sense “necessary,”³⁹ although the precise nature of the necessity involved is not altogether clear. The commonest way for giving some sort of explanation for it is by appealing to what looks as a principle underlying the whole structure of Plotinian metaphysics, and which has come to be known nowadays as the Principle of Plenitude.⁴⁰ In *Ennead* IV 8.3.27–30, for example, it is explicitly stated that:

everything could not be stationary in the intelligible, when it was possible for something else as well to come to exist next in order to it, something less, but something which must exist if that before it exists.

This important passage illustrates in a striking way some of the main features of the procession postulated by the doctrine of double activity.

1. The very existence of a possibility at the level of immaterial and, therefore, eternal existence necessitates its fulfillment or its implementation, presumably because a possibility, which is going to stay a mere possibility for ever, would be no possibility at all.

2. The entity produced by such a process must be, in some important sense, inferior in respect with the one which produces it,⁴¹ and thus to belong

37. See I 4.10.10–24, IV 8.8.3–9.

38. Cf. I 4.11.1–3, 13.1–12.

39. See, e.g., IV 4.39.25–26, V 1.6.30–34. Cf. I 8.7.21–23, V 4.1.37–39.

40. A.O. Lovejoy, who has introduced the terminology in his book *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, MA & London, 1936), duly acknowledges Plotinus’ contribution in its inception (61–66), but does not attempt to relate it with his views about the soul and its relation with the body.

41. Cf. V 5.13.37–38. It should be noted, of course, that, though inferior, the product must also be the best possible reflection of its originator, since it comes “next in order to it” (I owe this point to a suggestion communicated to me by A. Falcon).

to a lower ontological level. Its inferiority is reflected not only in its metaphysical status, but also in its diminished “power,” that is, its increasingly attenuated productive activity, which reduces the scope of its possible effects. An important postulate of this is that, within this scheme, vertical causal relations can only be understood as working in the direction of the procession itself, since each new product can only have an effect on what comes after it, never on what precedes it.

3. Finally, whatever emerges as a product of some higher reality must necessarily depend for its existence upon it, and cannot attain any kind of independence from it. It is eternally related to it by means of an unseverable causal link, and must perish at the very moment the entity producing it ceases to act or to exist. This is the main reason why it is usually described as an “image,” a “shadow,” or a “trace” left by the higher reality.⁴²

Now, again, in the case of the soul, the image projected by it onto the body retains some of the characteristics of its antecedent cause, although displayed in a much less unified and coherent way. First and foremost, it possesses a semblance of animating, vivifying power, which endows the body with functions allowing it to sustain itself, to operate and to move as a living organism, being also capable to reproduce itself and to have some perception of its surroundings. Furthermore, it gives the body unity, making of it a self-consistent whole, where each part contributes and guarantees the well-being of the whole without, under normal circumstances, antagonizing or interfering with the functions of the other parts. Lastly, it furnishes the body with drives which are necessary for its sustenance, such as desires and pains, which normally should guide it in its way to self-preservation and self-maintenance, so that it does not get destroyed or fall apart due to the impact of its own natural needs or of external blows.

As this image is projected onto the body, it, in some sense “blends” with it as to produce a complex entity, usually called “the living being” (τὸ ζῶον) or, simply, “the complex” (τὸ συνιστάμενον). This entity amounts to what we understand as the living organism, and is the subject which performs or undergoes the various lower functions or affections of our psychological experience, which involve the participation of the body, such as the perceptual, the emotive, the nutritive, the reproductive and the locomotive. The higher functions, such as discursive reasoning, belief and intellection, belong to the

42. See Igal, *op. cit.* 324–26.

43. The expression derives probably from Plato’s *Phaedrus*, 246c5, where it is defined as “the composite of soul and body (ψυχή καὶ σῶμα παγείν)”. Cf. *Tim.* 87e5–6 and *Epin.* 981a7–9. Even Plotinus is sometimes speaking as if the soul was one of the compounds making up this complex structure; but this should always be understood as merely a concession to traditional Platonic terminology.

soul itself and, being proper to it, are felt as being most intimately related to "us."⁴⁴ The term Plotinus normally uses in order to refer to the functions of the organism is *δυνάμεις*, which helps to indicate that these are not proper activities, but rather propensities capable of being actualized in different ways at the presence of the appropriate input. They provide the organism with the ability to respond in a certain way to stimuli or other occurrences which might affect it, and thus supply it with the means to react in accordance with its needs. The presence of a red object, for example, is perceived by the function of sight, and thus the corresponding sensation of redness occurs. Different sets of phenomena serve to activate different functions in the corresponding way, but these, by themselves, are unable to perform any specific act. So, it is through these functions that the organism interacts with the material universe that surrounds it and thus comes to perceive it and affect it in its turn.

It is crucial to realize that in all these procedures the soul itself is not directly involved. She stays outside and oversees the organism engaged in them.⁴⁵ Some complications may arise, however, by the fact that, as we mentioned before, the soul, in its cognitive aspect as conscious subject, has a tendency to identify itself with the level of reality upon which it concentrates its attention. Thus, there is some danger, if it becomes concerned about what may happen or is actually happening to the organism, if it gets carried away by her interest or her compassion with it, or anxious about the hazards that threaten it from the outside, that it might then come to believe that these feelings pertain to herself, that the passions experienced by the organism are affecting her. In this way, the soul may lose sight of her proper nature and mistake the image undergoing these experiences as part of her own identity. This, of course, can have no real impact on her or her ontological status, which is determined by her nature alone, but may nevertheless entangle her in a turmoil of bothersome concerns, being seized "in the grip of poverty" and continuously in need of even more troublesome engagement.⁴⁶ Being in such a state of mind can be considered or experienced as being in a state of fall, but this in no way reflects the actual condition of the soul. It may even lead one astray as to perform all sorts of unlawful acts or indulge in contemptible pursuits or behaviour, however the soul itself bears no real responsibility for this and can suffer no punishment for it.⁴⁷ In fact, it is

44. See I 1.7.13–24.

45. This is the reason why, for Plotinus, there can be no real "fall" or "descent" of the soul. On this see A.N.M. Rich, "Body and Soul in the Philosophy of Plotinus," *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (I), ed. J.P. Anton & G.L. Kustas (Albany, 1972) 622–23.

46. See IV 8.2.7–14. Cf. V 1.1.11–22.

47. See I 1.9.1–4, 12.1–12.

these very activities which constitute all the punishment deserved, since they lead astray the individual's consciousness into believing that he is identical with the wretched, confused and vulnerable creature which this organism, in the last resort, is⁴⁸—especially when it is not guided according to the guidelines contained in the Intellect. In such a state the individual is no more aware of the impassible nature of its soul and, furthermore, of the intimate association which relates it with the other souls, and so feels vulnerable and isolated⁴⁹—and therefore neglected and selfish. Although it in no way implies any real sin on the part of the soul, it produces a state of distress which can cause even more serious trouble.

Virtue is the way which can lead from such a miserable condition back to the natural state of *εὐδαιμονία*. It re-directs man's consciousness towards his real self and thus brings him back into realizing his immediate grasp of intelligible truth. It requires its purification from the concerns and the distractions caused by the body, and re-establishes the communion and the sense of community and affinity with the other souls, which allows it to realize and perform better its role as a governing principle of the cosmos, but also to maintain a more detached and sober stance towards it.⁵⁰ Its exercise is not driven by any real fascination or disquietness about what is happening in the world, but rather by the aspiration of the soul for its origins and for the fulfillment of her own task by activating those of her powers which make her be what she most truly is. Thus she can attain the highest state of freedom possible at her level of reality, and she can also participate in the implementation of the divine project undertaken by the demiurgic powers of the universe, namely, to bring about a sensible universe which would be the most perfect possible image of intelligible reality. Virtue is, for Plotinus, not outward-looking and so not altruistic. Its motivation is not controlled by any desire to save, or even to help other people to bear the burden of their bodily existence, or to evade the inevitable sufferings brought about by the entanglement into an intrinsically imperfect material world. The virtuous man, the *σπουδαῖος*, remains undisturbed, even indifferent for the misfortunes of others, as for those he himself undergoes.⁵¹ His attention is directed inwards, towards what he realizes to be his real self.⁵² Thus he comes to understand that this real self, namely his soul, apart from being grounded on the reality of Being, is also intimately and inseparably related to the other

48. See IV 8.5.16–35.

49. See IV 4.3.1–6, IV 8.4.10–24.

50. See I 2.2.13–8, 3.11–21, 5.5–24, IV 8.2.19–26.

51. See I 4.7.8–8.22.

52. Cf. J.M. Rist, "Integration and the Undescended Soul in Plotinus," *AJP* 88 (1967): 419–20.

souls; in fact, the other souls are, in a sense, part of himself. So his communion with them acquires a new meaning. It expresses his discovery of the unfathomable complexity of his own true nature which, however, is harmoniously organized by the commands of the governing Intellect. The sage realizes that his and every other person's real self never descends to this world, nor can it ever suffer any misfortune. It is only our conscious "we" which undergoes all the sufferings and the adventurous engagements with the body and its passions. The soul remains always aloft and, even after death, that is, after its final disengagement from the concerns of the body, it will continue to exercise undistracted its providential power.

Plotinus' doctrine of the soul and, even more, his ethical doctrine of purification and detachment, is an austere, fundamentally un-Christian view, and so is not easily appreciated or even understood by modern audiences. However, it is perhaps the last great synthesis of doctrines with a long history in the ancient Greek philosophical tradition, where the urge for the amplification and the dissemination of life and the ideal of moral uprightness held a commanding position.⁵³

53. The present study is the by-product, one might perhaps say the outcome of the "secondary activity," of a seminar conducted in Oxford during the Michaelmas term of 1998 by Michael Frede and myself, whose primary aim was to read and analyse treatise IV 8 [6] of the *Enneads*. It is difficult for me to assess my indebtedness to the participants in this seminar as well as to occasional visitors, such as E.K. Emilsson and R. Sorabji who, by their comments and suggestions, provided a perfect example of stimulating intellectual co-operation. Even more formidable is to estimate exactly how much I owe to Professor Frede who, apart from inviting me there, spent a great deal of time in discussing with me most of the issues treated in this paper. Although he should in no way be regarded as responsible for its shortcomings, nor should he be held as agreeing with all—or even any—of its conclusions, I believe that he would not disavow his contribution as the *Erzieher* of its delivery. I also wish to express my gratitude to Cristina D'Ancona Costa who gave me the opportunity to study the same treatise with her group in Padua and has kindly communicated to me some valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.