

ASGER OUSAGER



PLOTINUS
ON
SELFHOOD, FREEDOM
AND POLITICS



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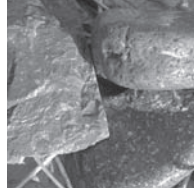
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Plotinus on Selfhood, Freedom and Politics

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Introduction

Selfhood

What is an individual according to Plotinus, and is the individual (pre)-determined or free?

My investigation tries to answer these essential questions by first analysing what distinguishes persons from each other. Plotinus raises this issue several times and it is also presented as a peculiar Plotinian problem by several scholars, for instance, Étienne Vacherot, Henry Blumenthal and most recently Gabriela Carone and Richard Sorabji. The difficulty has three subsections:

- A. If particular souls are all parts of Soul and are, in one phase of their mystical ascent at least, to be identified with the Soul as such, what still differentiates them from each other?
- B. If human souls with their particular intellects are all parts of Intellect and are, in a following phase of their mystical ascent at least, to be identified with the Intellect as such, what still differentiates them from each other?
- C. Again, if they all in some way participate in the One and may possibly, as an end stage of their mystical ascent, be identified with the One as such, what still differentiates them from each other?

In a loose manner of speaking, the body is the answer to the first question, since particular bodies both demand and presuppose particular souls, which are prior to the bodies. Particular human souls, which, *as* human, will all have particular intellects, originate *as* intellects from Intellect as such.

The fact that these souls have particular intellects is the answer to the second question, because the particular intellect is at the same time a Form of the particular soul, no matter when or where it is embodied. This criterion is, for instance, what fundamentally distinguishes “identical” twins, even if we suppose they have apparently identical bodies and, in the same vein, apparently identical souls. The Form of the particular, which is at the same time an intellect, has its particular angle of intentionality within Intellect and upon the One. This Form determines the descents and ascents of the particular person in the cycles of reincarnation.

Ascent is, ultimately, directed towards unification with the One, because the One is the only thing that can really unify the soul. Plotinus considers this premise a tautology. Only in so far as the human soul becomes the One is a human being really an individual in the literal sense. The One is therefore the real Self of any human being. Against the interpretations of Jean Trouillard, Pierre Hadot and Dominic O’Meara and in support of a previous view put forward by John Rist, I will provide plausible evidence that the autobiographical sketch of Plotinus in IV.8.1 indicates unification with the One, and not only with Intellect. In the less autobiographical speculations, especially in VI.9, these stages of unification are generalised as options for the whole of mankind. Against the “theistic” interpretations of René Arnou, Rist, Arthur Hilary Armstrong, Blumenthal, Gerard O’Daly and Hadot among others, it is shown that duality cannot be preserved at this stage.

Instead, in support of Plato Mamo’s “monistic” thesis of unification in Plotinus, it is shown that in ultimate unification, particularity must be completely dissolved by unification with the One. The text indicates that such complete unification is possible. It does not let the particular intellect, the particular soul and the particular body disappear at once, for the One continuously recreates particulars. Not the particular soul, but only its previous selves have been obliterated and replaced by the Self of the One.

Just as the text indicates a stage of indistinguishability of the human self and the One, it also indicates the stages of ascent before and descent right after ultimate unification as stages of vision involving an object outside the subject. This kind of vision is superseded by ultimate unification.

Since ultimate unification is possible, there must be some element corresponding to the One inherent in the human soul. In fact, Plotinus says that all three original “natures” are within the human soul, i.e. encompassing the One. The One is potentially within everything, but the human soul can also actualise this potentiality by ascent. The probability that such a doctrine is present in Plotinus is strengthened by its occurrence in Proclus, a late Neo-

platonist follower of Plotinus, and by the probable Christian transformation of the original Plotinian doctrine into Augustine's doctrine of the image of the whole Trinity within the human soul.

Against widespread Aristotelian prejudices concerning the interpretation of Plotinus in this connection, most succinctly exhibited by Carone and Sorabji, I conclude that in Plotinus, the point of distinction between human souls from each other is not plurality within the sensible world, but the very opposite. The point of departure for this distinction is not even Intellect but rather the indistinguishability within the One. The One within the particular human soul is derived directly from the One Itself.

Freedom

Given that human souls have their origin directly in the One, what, then, distinguishes them from each other? There has to be a sufficient reason for the distinction. The One itself is not only the ultimate cause (*aition*) of everything, but also the ultimate reason (*aitia*) for everything including itself, according to Plotinus' interpretation of Plato, which he formulates as a response to the problem surrounding the relation between arbitrary will and modal necessity in the *Euthyphro*. I argue that Hadot's thesis of the One in Plotinus as a cause of itself (*causa sui*) on the other hand, is unwarranted.

Providence is the name of the sufficient reason that governs everything flown from the One towards the best, i.e. towards unification. In order to avoid indistinctness with the resulting identity of human souls in only one human soul, it would be necessary for the preference (*proairesis*) of each soul to be different from that of any other soul from the very beginning. Consequently, the series of resulting choices and dispositions of souls will be quite different from each other. The series and the decisive beginning of the series are contained within the Form of the particular soul. Providence also determines which human souls will ascend to ultimate unification with the One. Human unification with the necessary determinant, namely the One as "absolute freedom", must have indeterministic causal consequences for the whole causal hierarchy. In particular, such indeterministic causal consequences will follow for the human soul attaining ultimate unification, as the determinism of Providence again determining the Form of the particular is disrupted by this intervention. This Form will, however, be recreated and adjusted to the new state of affairs generated from ultimate freedom, as the human soul

must descend again. Here, Plotinus is probably giving what he believed to be the Platonic answer to the problem surrounding the relation between self-determination and determinism discussed by the Stoics and Alexander of Aphrodisias – a discussion most recently scrutinised by Susanne Bobzien. Plotinus denies self-determination of the One and consequently the One as a *causa sui* because this premise would restrict the One's absolute measure of freedom. Instead he affirms human self-determination as derived from that absolute freedom.

Politics

These views on ascents into and descents out of absolute freedom have political implications for exterior freedom as well. Against the still pervasive traditional view of Plotinus as apolitical, I set out to present all existing evidence and indications for a political philosophy in Plotinus.

The benevolent Providence consisting of material conditions and political circumstances behind the development of Plotinus' quite comprehensive philosophy is discussed first. According to Plato's broad definition of politics as the art (*technê*) of the soul, Plotinus' philosophy is no doubt political. It implies references to the One as the king and to Providence as the general and the legislator, all of which are presented as ideals for human social conduct and legislation in a sensible world at war with itself. Although it is not straight away manifested in the social order, there is an order relying on the basic inequality of the merits and value of persons according to their descents and ascents. Plotinus' views on the acquisition of power and wealth are likewise spiritualised but indicate, after all, some conservative and libertarian values against, for instance, the abstract egalitarianism of the Gnostics. These conservative values encompass an adherence to the rule of law and opposition to tyrannical imperialism. He presents the ideal of a mixed constitution with elements of kingship, aristocracy and democracy.

The basic element that distinguishes the political philosophy of Plotinus from that of Plato as well as Aristotle is the emphasis he places on natural authority, mutual cooperativeness and the immense potential of everybody, even slaves. His political philosophy deals with the theoretical relation noted in previous parts of the book between determinism and freedom as manifesting itself in the corresponding practical relation between oppression and liberation. A tension pointed out within Plotinus' system is, in the end, the opposition

between the pressure for historical development on the one hand, and the eternal, ahistorical structure of the henological hierarchy on the other.

On the basis of different suggestions to interpretation of the so-called Plotinus sarcophagus, the book closes with a brief survey of the archaeological evidence for the direct social and political impact of Plotinus' thought in his own age.

* * *

The study describes an arc beginning in the particular bodily self, with its apex in the ascent to the absolute and culminating in the consequences of enlightened descent.

With references, I argue that Plotinus is presenting an updated, systematic interpretation of certain patterns in Plato's thought, an interpretation that is neither unintelligible nor unintelligent. A few sharp logical principles traditionally ascribed to Leibniz are shown to be valid in an interpretation of Plotinus, simply because these principles established so pedagogically by Leibniz in modern philosophy were ingenuously deduced from Plotinus. An understanding of this quite simple but far-reaching logic is essential if the systematic concerns of Plotinus are to be properly understood.

In this study, I draw upon extensive research already carried out by other scholars, without which the conclusions of the present book would have been that much harder for me to draw. A treatment of some remaining thorny issues in present Plotinus scholarship has proven indispensable in order to reach well-founded conclusions. Another related reason for me to consult many researchers is that, within any branch of knowledge, any criticism is more useful than neglect.

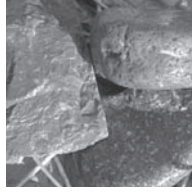
While appreciating the decisive advice of my domestic mentor, Professor Karsten Friis Johansen at the University of Copenhagen over the years, my thanks go also to Professors Mary Margaret McCabe and Richard R.K. Sorabji for their comments on previous editions of the last part, but most of all to Doctor Peter S. Adamson, who emerged from the mist in time to become my supervisor for the whole PhD thesis. It was revised for re-presentation, freely drawing on the constructive recommendations of both my examiners, Doctor Peter Gallagher, Heythrop College London, and Professor Dominic J. O'Meara, University of Fribourg, Switzerland. Publication of the treatment of mainly political and social aspects of Plotinianism was encouraged by Professor Peter Brown, Princeton University, New Jersey. Subsequently, the manuscript was obligingly commended for publication in the series of Aarhus Studies of

Mediterranean Antiquity by Professor Per Bilde and Doctors Anders Klostergaard Petersen and Jens Krasilnikoff, Chairman of the Centre for the Study of Antiquity. Concurrently, it was accepted into the series of Acta Jutlandica by the Learned Society under guidance of its president, Professor Niels Henrik Gregersen. Professor Niels Hannestad, also at Aarhus University, brought a needed critical stance to the last, archaeological chapter.

For essential contributions to revising my English I am furthermore indebted to David Levy, Anne Harrow, Devin Henry and, last but definitely not least, Julian Thorsteinson, the principal linguistic reviser of the book. To ease reading, all Greek (and Russian) words, including quotes and titles of modern publications, have been transliterated and all Greek and Latin words, except for common expressions and titles of sources, have been translated.

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PART I



SELFHOOD

There can be no doubt that Plotinus suggests some sort of unification of the self with Soul, with Intellect and at a third stage, with the One. The conceptions of these unifications have varied, however, mainly as to whether unification with the One should be conceived of in theistic or monistic terms. A consequence of the first option will be that the human self is preserved during and after unification, while in the second instance, it appears that the self will be annihilated. In the following analysis of what distinguishes human selves from each other and what ultimately makes them selves, we do not need to imply any connotations by using the convenient terms “theistic” and “monistic” beyond this essential distinction.¹

In Plotinus, we should not expect that the choice between these two widely different interpretations is a matter of arbitrary, mystical inclination only. We must therefore reconsider the controversial texts where unification is suggested in order to place them in their philosophical context. While Plotinus naturally discusses different issues in different passages, in the following I make what I take to be a fairly fertile assumption, namely, that his philosophical concerns are essentially the same throughout his work. If a consistent interpretation of his views based on that hypothesis is possible, it will confirm, if not prove, the hypothesis. This approach implies that none of his treatises will be considered as standing apart from the others, and that suggestions drawn from elsewhere

1. By adopting this approach, we circumvent the reluctance expressed by Bussanich (1988) 192, Bussanich (1994) 5326-28 and Bussanich (1997) 364-65 to use these terms due to worries over traditional, but in this context extraneous, connotations.

in the corpus can be assumed to shed light on any particularly difficult passages. This was the way Plotinus read Plato in his efforts to systematise Platonism. We should try to interpret Plotinus bearing his systematic approach in mind. Such a “unitarian” approach is not tantamount to becoming a “partisan” of Plotinian Neoplatonism. Simple attentiveness to the unity of thought is a precondition for understanding any thinker.

Let us take a preliminary glance at what Plotinus thinks is implied philosophically by a unification with Soul and then Intellect before moving on to unification with the One.

Unification with Soul

Plotinus believes that all human souls, like souls in general, originate from a common World Soul or from Soul as such (e.g., IV.3.1.16-37, IV.3.7, IV.8.6.1-6, IV.9.4.6-20, III.5.3.36-38, I.1.8.8-15, VI.2.5.10), cf. *Timaeus* (34b-c, 41d-42e), *Philebus* (30a-b), *Laws* (892a-893b, 896d-e). The particular soul is not cut off from that whole Soul, on the contrary (III.5.4.10-12, III.7.13.66-69, IV.4.32.4-13, IV.9.1.6-13). He therefore raises the question in VI.4.14.1 (cf. VI.4.4.1-4, IV.9.1.13-23):

But if it is the same Soul in each and every place, how is it peculiar (*idia*) in each particular soul?

The body is in a way what differentiates particular souls from each other, since particular bodies, “which are different from each other and in different places” (IV.2[4].1.60-61) and will each have their particular movement (IV.9.2.1-12 & 21-24, IV.7.5.1-2, II.9.7.7-11), both need and presuppose particular souls (IV.4.5.18-21, cf. *Timaeus* 89e) that direct, preserve and take care of the particular bodies (IV.8.2.6-14, IV.3.6.7-8 & 11-15). Within the sphere of Soul and its subordinate kind of necessity (cf. *Republic* 616c) called Fate (*heimarmenê*, cf. *Timaeus* 41e, *Laws* 904c),² humans will also be different because of their particular fortunes (*tûchais*), parents, seasons and places of birth and upbringing (V.7.2.1-15, IV.3.15.7-9, II.3.15.5-8, cf. *Metaphysics* 1021a21-25,

2. Cf. Graeser (1972) 108.

1071a20-24). These elements, as well as innate character and resulting behaviour (IV.3.8.5-9), correspond to the external, mortal, bodily part of particular souls. There is another, immortal part of them to which belongs ascent from the bodily to the divine and to themselves (II.3.9, cf. *Timaeus* 41c-d, 42e, 69c-d, 90b-c). Likewise, we are told that an essential difference from “themselves” makes them react quite differently to identical circumstances (IV.3.15.4-15, II.9.13.22-25, cf. III.4.6.8-10 & 46-60). We are now to investigate what that from “themselves” actually is.³

As will become clearer below, the faculty of making different particular movements is a decisive criterion for distinction (IV.7.5.2-7, VI.2.6.13-16). It is, for instance, this faculty that makes the soul capable of any ascent to Intellect and to the One. The particular human soul is also able to ascend to Soul as such. This faculty is not just the passive sympathy of all souls standing in potential mutual compassion with each other, such as is demonstrated by the actual power of magic for Plotinus. He merely uses that kind of soulful compassion as additional evidence for Soul being the common source of all souls (IV.9.3.1-9, IV.3.8.1-4, IV.4.32.13-25, IV.4.45.1-24, V.1.2, II.3.7.16-25, cf. the possibly spurious II.3.12.30-32).⁴ The emotional peculiarities of the particular soul are preserved, though they will certainly either be consciously or unconsciously influenced by other particular souls and by Soul as such. However, the soul must experience unification with Soul as much as it must unify with Intellect and the One to reach perfection. For while discussing other matters in V.1.12.8-10, Plotinus says in passing that “we” human beings are not just a part of soul but the whole soul. The whole particular soul is probably meant first of all in that connection, but Plotinus shows that he considers the comment valid also for the particular souls’ relation to the Soul as such, cf. IV.3.7.14-18 referring to the *Phaedrus* (246b-c):

What could it be, then, which directs the nature of body, and either shapes it or sets it in order or makes it, except soul? And it is not the case that one soul is naturally able to do this, but the other is not. Plato says, then, that the “perfect” soul, the Soul of the All, “walks on high”, and does not come down, but, as we may say, rides upon the universe and creates (*poiei*) in it; and this is the manner of direction of every soul which is perfect.

3. Especially in this part ‘I. Selfhood’ and the next, ‘II. Freedom’.

4. This level of mutual connectedness of souls is described excellently by Bussanich (1994) 5305-10. Cf. also Phillips (1983).

Similar reports on unification with Soul or the World Soul or rather both are stated in I.7.3.9, III.2.4.9-11, IV.3.2.58-59, IV.3.12.8-12, IV.8.2.19-26, IV.8.4.5-10 and V.8.7.25-35.⁵ In the last-mentioned passage, it is even promised (V.8.7.35) that when the initiate in this way “comes to belong to the whole, he makes (*poiei*) the whole”.⁶ As we have seen above (IV.3.7.15-18), this should in principle be possible for all souls.

The reverse process of particularisation is described as the disadvantage or even disaster of sinking deeply into the particulars, losing the soul’s feathers and instead acquiring the fetters of the body (IV.8.4.10-35, cf. IV.3.6.24-27), cf. respectively the *Phaedrus* (246c-e, 248b-c) and the *Phaedo* (62b, 66a-67b). Particularisation can only be preliminarily overcome by unification with the higher part of Soul, which we are told is the only one sufficiently united as one Soul (IV.9.5.3-7). In this unification process, at the stage of the World Soul we are like a gardener who cares for a plant, which Plotinus uses as a metaphor for the world. Our embodiment is compared to the rotten part of the plant suffering from maggots (IV.3.4.26-33), which are presumably symbols of exterior forces that risk taking over the human soul from the inside as well. They correspond to forces of unduly worldly particularisation in different respects. The souls that, partly due to these forces, stay behind in the world, are considered souls of third rank (IV.3.6.27-34, cf. III.2.18.3-5). The best of these souls will unite with Soul as such, “for, in spite of everything, the soul always possesses something transcendent (*hūperechon ti*) in some way” (IV.8.4.30-31), or even (IV.8.8.17-18) possesses “the Transcendent (*to hūperechon*)”. A further ascent is possible, for as Plotinus says (V.1.2.11-14):

Let it look at the great Soul, being itself another soul which is no small one, which has become worthy (*allē psūchē ou smikra axia*) to look by being freed from deceit and the things that have bewitched the other souls, and is established as thorough Stillness in Quietude (*hēsūchōi tēi katastasēi*).

5. As distinct from Hadot (1980) 245, who rightly says that unification with the One is not the only kind of unification in Plotinus but who only mentions unification with Intellect as another kind. Also as distinct from Bussanich (1994) 5310 n. 25: “I do not argue that Plotinus thinks the soul merges with the physical universe or even the World-Soul.” This latter kind of unification is further investigated in section ‘III.B.1. The king’ below.
6. As distinct from Kélessidou-Galanou (1971) 395, who believes this passage concerns unification with the One. The One cannot be a whole, however. Cf. further discussion in section ‘I.C.2. The One within’ below.

As human souls, souls of the third rank could not be excluded in principle from this further ascent, but unlike souls of the second and first rank, they have excluded themselves from further ascent to Intellect and the One, respectively. That choice forms the basis of the tripartition of souls.⁷ Whether the choice itself could after all be predetermined will be discussed further below. We must first investigate whether any kind of distinction between souls could still be implied during unification with Intellect, and if so, what kind of distinction it is.

7. Other tripartitions of souls are to be found in Plotinus, for example I.3.1.8-9, as further investigated by Schniewind (2000b) 53-54 and Schniewind (2003) *passim*. However, it appears to me that they are subordinate to the tripartition of souls found in, e.g., IV.3.6.27-34. Cf. further discussion in section 'I.C.2. The One within' below.

Unification with Intellect

In one of Plotinus' earliest treatises (IV.8[6].1), he begins by referring to one of his frequent (*pollakis*) experiences of unification with Intellect. He says, "Often I have awoken into myself out of the body", knowing that the self will rather be at the level of Intellect than at the level of the soul's embodiment (cf. I.6.6.13-18, V.3.4.9-10 & 20-30). Moreover, he says that he has "become the same as the divine (*tôi theiôi eis tauton gegenêmenos*)". We will hold off for the time being our discussion of whether this is unification with Intellect only or includes unification with the One as well. The Stillness (*stasin*) he claims to have experienced in the divine will in any case be found as a Form only in Intellect, and he explicitly describes the following descent back from Intellect (*ek nou*, IV.8.1.8) to discursive reasoning on the level of Soul. His personal testimony of a level of intuitive thought (*noêsis*) in Intellect attainable at least temporarily confirms similar views expressed by Plato. Although traces of the distinction between intuitive thought and discursive reasoning can be found elsewhere in Plato, as in the analogy of the divided line in the *Republic* (511d-e) and in the distinction between two different intellectual capacities of Soul in the *Timaeus* (36e-37c),⁸ it is evident that Plotinus primarily refers to the myth in the *Phaedrus* (246a-257b).

According to Plotinus (IV.8.1.1-11), human souls will have to leave Intellect again at some point for discursive – i.e. sequential – reasoning in the same way as was pointed out in the *Phaedrus* (247d-248b). Plotinus' reading

8. According to Jäger (1967) 33, 35, 40 in Plato, *dianoia* and *logismos* direct themselves to things in time, while *noein* and *ennoein* direct themselves to the timeless and non-sensible.

of the *Phaedrus* suggests that one remains oneself even when participating temporarily in the cyclical motion of Intellect (cf. *Timaeus* 37c, 39d-e, 47b-c, *Laws* 897c-898b) – like a dancer in a choir around a supreme god (VI.9.1.32, VI.9.8.36-VI.9.9.1, VI.9.11.17, cf. *Phaedrus* 247a, 252d). According to the *Phaedrus* (248a), one can at least for a while become like one of the gods in the cyclical motion, but even the ordinary gods themselves have souls with “charioteers” and “horses” (246a-b). In other words, in Plato, not even gods – in the plural – become completely identical with Intellect in a sense that would annihilate their particularity. According to his follower Plotinus as well, humans retain their distinctiveness during the movements of Intellect (I.8.7.12-16), although not as embodied men obviously (VI.4.4.37-39, cf. V.8.7.31-35). Indeed, they do continue to be distinct persons after unification of their particular intellects with Intellect, cf. IV.3[27].5.1-9:

But how will there still be one particular soul which is yours, one which is the soul of this particular man, and one which is another's? Are they the souls of particular persons in the lower order, but belong in the higher order to that higher unity? But this will mean that Socrates, and the soul of Socrates, will exist as long as he is in the body; but he will cease to be precisely when he attains to the very best. Now no real being ever ceases to be; since the intellects there too are not dissolved into a unity because they are not corporeally divided, but each remains distinct in Difference, having the same essential being. So too it is with souls [...].

But how can they still be different? For when affirming that they are different, Plotinus raises the question of how persons could distinguish themselves from Intellect and how they could then distinguish themselves from each other within Intellect.

I.B.1. Memories of the body

Obviously, in the passage quoted above, Plotinus denies that bodies on their own are enough to distinguish persons. For then the immortality for which Socrates searched in the *Phaedo* would already have to be given up when the soul leaves the body and the body consequently vanishes step-by-step (IV.4.29.1-7, cf. IV.4.14.6-8, II.4.14.12-16, VI.4.10.1-22, IV.5.7.56-62, *Phaedo*

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