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Introduction

We will begin by explaining the approach and outlook which has led to the writing of this book, and we seek here to raise some of the main themes of the work and to sum up what might be its contribution.

For Plotinus the individual self is placed in a whole, which is the All: this is the world of the self. It has numerous encounters, or touch points within this world – which range from loving to having, for example. This intersecting with its environment is as true for the physical body as it is for the highest reaches of the spirit, at which point the limits of the self are truly explored. The relationship between the self and its ambient reality is many-sided, and it is impossible to draw a single line around the periphery of the self.

'The Good is gentle and kind and gracious, and is present to anyone as he wishes.'[1] There is no rigidity about boundaries here, nothing schematic about the limits of the self. The Good may come and go, but this is partly dependent on the wishes of the individual.

In what follows we explore a number of encounter-points, without any claim that we have dealt with the matter exhaustively. The self has variable boundaries and there are many such points of encounter, and we endeavour to explore some of them. There is no doubt much more to be said along these lines, about the self and its limitless encounters.

The method used is exploratory and often asks questions drawn from a background of European philosophy, itself closer in the tradition to the thought of Plotinus himself. Much of European philosophy is more traditional, meaning that it is aligned with Greek and Western mediaeval philosophy, than it appears to be: its

[1] *Enn.* V.5(32)12, 33–35.

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traditionalism is often disguised in apparently innovative language, this being especially the case with Heidegger. So we are often prompted by some of those themes and find them a useful hermeneutic for opening up Plotinus – in a way which is intended to be responsive to his insights, rather than instructing him as to how he should have thought about things, or how he would have thought about things if he had had the advantage of a modern philosophical education. The objective of this book is to help understand what Plotinus might have meant, what might have prompted his questions or statements, and what deep questions he may have shared with us, and is in no way intended to help Plotinus organise or improve his thoughts. The approach is intended to be respectful of the text. In this the writer has been influenced particularly by the presentations (particularly the oral presentations) of A.H. Armstrong, Jean Trouillard, Pierre Hadot and Jean Pépin, and has been instructed by a reading, and rereading, of Heidegger. The method chosen is exploratory and dubitative, and seeks to engage an enquiry, without necessarily finishing an enquiry. It strives for an attitude of humility towards the majestic reach and vision of the works of Plotinus. At times we wander with Plotinus.

We will select here several leading issues, which prompt some questions which may be addressed to or through the thought of Plotinus. We will open them up in a broad discursive way, ranging freely over the ideas which seem to be in the text as they present themselves, and later in the book these themes will be subjected to detailed scrutiny within the text of Plotinus.

There is probably more to be said on the subject of play, for example, than we have done, though we do attempt to deal with it. A ruminative book of this kind is to some extent a process of discovery, and inevitably one feels that one has only scratched the surface in concluding it. The human capacity for play, or fascination with play, is proving to be of greater and greater interest at the present time: the new word 'gameification' is an indication of this trend, and provides an indication that the principles of play are more and more being annexed into industry to transform work, or ordinary chores including educational chores, into play. The player enjoys strategy, the impression of progress, and ultimately the feeling of winning and achieving a sense of personal autonomy. Why do we play?

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Plotinus is clearly interested in it in his own time, though with a clearly more negative assessment of play as an activity, often comparing human *praxis* to play. That is, in a certain sense human activity is not 'real'; it is merely play. (We do also explore what is real or authentic (*oikeion*) for the human being: that is how we choose to interpret this term; see Chapter 6, 'Being and having'.) It is as if so much of human *praxis* is pointless, undertaken for a purpose which is ephemeral or even inexplicable, that it can only be relegated to the status of 'play'. Far from providing profound insights, or should we say commercialisable insights, into human nature as is presently thought, play is a meaningless rehearsal of moves in a variety of roles or contexts, all equally insignificant.

We have touched on this issue at numerous points, particularly in Chapter 3, where we attempt to link ignorance and play. The issue has been elegantly treated by Stephen R.L. Clark in *Plotinus: Body and Soul*,[2] in a discussion of the parts which have to be played by human beings, as on a stage. 'The only difference, we may imagine, between men and brutes is that men are allowed to recognize that they are playing.'[3] Clark continues to develop the theme by quoting Wordsworth on the subject of the stage of life and the various parts which one is called upon to play, and which may change over time. And of course we know the words of the melancholy Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts . . . '.

There are other examples of this image in Shakespeare and it appears to be a well-established part of the tradition by his time. With regard to Plotinus what we try to consider is the way he runs together the stage metaphor with that of play generally, this kind of association being permitted by the Greek words used. Man is both a player and a plaything, an actor and a participant, as well as a victim and a plaything. The actor in the play is also a toy, and is toyed with, though being in the apparently active and directive role on the stage – directive whilst being directed.

[2] In Lloyd P. Gerson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 275–91.
[3] *Ibid.* p. 282.

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It appears that the human being is drawn into various ways of being by his physical constitution, by his cultural role, as a prince, beggar, or soldier, and plays out these roles without much choice or any particular authenticity. He is an actor but is tossed into roles willy-nilly by the world of the real. Within this instability of personal identity there must be something to hang onto, and this is the final stronghold of the actor/plaything. And this is how we seek to understand the principle of *to oikeion*. We argue here that 'having' what is proper to one constitutes that piece of reality which provides the solid basis for living. This theme of Plotinus, which has not been developed in the scholarship, provides a basis for positive thought against the possible negativity about life in the physical world, of which Plotinus might have been accused. The Good only has itself, but others have what is proper to them.

This leads us to reflect on the idea of authenticity in Plotinus, which we could attach to the twin themes of *to oikeion* ('one's own'), and that of having or possessing. These matters have generally not been taken together, but linking them is fruitful. It is clear that authenticity is a concept of major concern in the evolution of the West: Sartre, both in his novels and his philosophical works, does exalt the inner freedom which contrasts with the pressures on the self coming from external values and externally valued modes of behaviour. It should also be said that the Sartrean concept of authenticity could be reduced to an idea of ultra-freedom, a kind of un-French wildness.

At the same time the concept of autonomy, the capacity to be one's own person, has had immense importance since the philosophy of Kant, in whose moral philosophy it is central. Whilst this is fundamentally a concept of moral philosophy (rather than ontology), it is rooted in the idea that there is an inner core, which is not and cannot be made over to external distorting forces – and this is where we see some connection with Plotinus. Autonomy in the Western enlightenment is not so much a concept of freedom, but is about the personal authenticity in which such freedoms are rooted. It may at times be about self-governance, or even self-control, but even where this is the case there is a robust view of the competencies and the character of the underlying self.

Is the Western preoccupation with autonomy solely about freedom from interference? Is it about threats to autonomy, such as

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dictatorship, slavery, or even simple paternalism? It would sometimes seem to be the case. It is certainly intimately associated with Western individualism, and the whole business of inviting others to get out of one's life. It has become a concept of moral philosophy, with concerns about self-worth and valuing oneself becoming an important part of the issue. Moral philosophy is the terrain, so that valuing and transgressing become the major issues.

But it is also partly about accepting responsibility, and calculating what is good and bad for one, about the basic undeniable constant of the real self. Freedom can exist within constraint, and is thought by some to be irreducible. In the end, Western autonomy has difficulties over the lack of real foundation for the 'moral imperative', as Kant had it.

So what Plotinus will say, as might be expected of a Platonist, is that the autonomy of the self is grounded in reality. Deontology is founded in ontology, as they say: there is no room for the relativism that threatens Kant or even Rawls. I was taught as a philosophy student that philosophy had made progress, and that we now knew that the Greeks' ontology was unfounded. That may be so, but the question I am asking is: Where does Plotinus lie in the history of Western thought on the subject of authenticity and autonomy? Does he make a contribution here which may be equal in importance to his other contributions, such as the idea of the personal individual self?

'Each thing exists more . . . when it belongs to itself.'[4] Here, Plotinus asserts that existence is tied to self-belonging, and that the impulse towards externality causes a departure from real being. It is not merely a question of externality, but the impulse towards size or multiplicity is also aimed in the wrong direction, as the basis of existence is found in the One. But the intention here is not to draw attention so much to the theme of the One and the multiple, as to the emphasis on self-belonging, or being 'of oneself' as the Greek says. There appears to be in Plotinus an idea of the legitimate ownership of a parcel of reality, and this ownership is the foundation of the idea of autonomy that we find in this writer. We do not, of course,

[4] *Enn.* VI.6(34)1, 12.

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speak of ownership in any quasi-legal sense, but of a real holding on to something: based on the real, this possession cannot be the centre of any dispute or misunderstanding. My arm is my arm in a sense which is quite a deal more self-evidently true than the claim that my house is my house, or that my imagination is my own, and it is this indubitably fundamental and true reality which provides Plotinus with the basis of his approach to what we would now call autonomy or authenticity. He sees 'having' as an indispensable part of the human (and cosmic) condition, but it is that kind of real and undeniable having, not the having of acquisitiveness, which itself speaks of a fall into multiplicity, but the having which is irresistibly natural. The life you live is your 'own life' (see Chapter 6): there is an appropriate form of life, which is natural, given, as it should be. Having what is your own is a natural state, and in this state one should be what one truly is.

With the question of love (see Chapter 4) we seek to open up the gap between Plotinus and his master Plato: there are some quite striking differences. We will use the language of Heidegger who speaks of the closeness of reality to the subject: through a series of metaphors derived from the hand (*Zuhandenheit*, *Vorhandenheit*), and probably behind it all from Aristotle, Heidegger develops the theme that we are not estranged from our world of reality, but at home in it. The objective reality which surrounds us is not alien and does not present the challenge of the foreign. We do not have to get caught up here in the relative importance of *Dasein*, *Zuhandenheit* and *Vorhandenheit* in Heidegger, but simply note that, for Heidegger, that most traditional of philosophers with the most untraditional of language, the world of objective reality 'fits'. The world is to hand.

For Plotinus the soul reacts to beauty in a welcoming way, and recoils from ugliness. It is alienated from it. As a Greek he has no difficulty in seeing that there is a clear difference between the beautiful and the ugly. This is one part of love, the matching up of the soul and that part of the world which is beautiful. They are made for each other. They fit, so that for Plotinus there is no random spark which produces love, but rather a deep ontological harmony. His is a strangely static view of love based on what is, even though there is language about 'welcoming' and 'recoiling' and so on. The

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investigation of erotic passion, clearly a starting-point for Plato, is completely absent. It follows that love is more about seeing that things are the case, namely, that the beautiful is beautiful and that it is there, than about some flash of unconnected inspiration.

So if the reality is there and the human spirit is attuned to that reality, or to that part of it which is beautiful, all that is needed is for the two to meet up. One might suspect that in so well structured a world this encounter would happen automatically, but there is still the need for an intermediary, which 'installs the vision', or gives the power of seeing. It is a puzzle to know why there is or remains such a gap in a world where beauty has only to be seen for it to be received and welcomed: the ontology of Plotinus seems to be so well structured that it is hard to imagine why such a dysfunction occurs. But the answer is probably two-fold: first, there is the obvious fact of human experience that love is a sporadic and occasional thing, and does not happen in a pre-planned way, or on a massive scale like the ocean lapping on the seashore which is meant for it. Secondly, Plato had made a place for *eros* and had also introduced the idea of the *metaxu*, or intermediary, needed precisely to bring the two parties together, so that any gap was overcome.

We will also discuss the absence of desire in Plotinus' *eros*, based as it is on a sort of satisfied contemplation of beauty: all the acquisitive, needful, and artful striving of Plato's lover goes by the board. Love and lust are clearly separated, and the latter is clearly relegated to a position of not much interest. We have discussed elsewhere[5] the role of desire in various philosophies or world views, over a range of views drawn from the history of the West, and noted the tendency to reduce the importance of desire where there is an accompanying tendency towards emphasising the wholeness, or homogeneity, of reality. There is only a need for such a disruptive and energising force where the objective world is thought to be alien or impenetrable.

In general, Plotinus associates desire with otherness and difference, and the two are relegated to an inferior status. The idea of difference (*heterotes, differentia*) has an interesting history running through from Plotinus to Thomas Aquinas, and to Heidegger then Derrida, and

[5] Raoul Mortley, *Désir et différence dans la tradition platonicienne* (Paris, Vrin, 1988), p. 33 ff.

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there is a certain amount of constancy in the treatments of all these authors, even including the last two, when one sets aside the twentieth century penchant (in Europe) for neologising, and for a style which involves the appearance of innovation without innovation necessarily having taken place.

For Plotinus, otherness involves departure from the One and a falling away into an inferior state. He seeks to avoid equating otherness with spatial difference: difference is not a matter of place. He is clear that 'Things are first and second and third in rank, power and differences, not by their placement'.[6]

Plotinus wants things to be all together but also different from each other, without this having to be a matter of location: it is quite impossible that this variegated type of reality should be so by virtue of place (*topos*). He goes on to argue that such variegated reality is also simple or single, since the eye perceives the colour of a thing whilst at the same time another sense perceives its fragrance as being part of one and the same being. This discussion of otherness in the above passage sits alongside a discussion of presence (*parousia*), another theme of Plotinus which we do not treat in what follows, but which is a rich theme indeed, and rich in historical echoes again (one thinks of Heidegger's *Dasein*, or *da-sein*, which is quite clearly an exploration of this very idea of *parousia*, no doubt mediated through the tradition from Plotinus). Plotinus seeks to develop an idea of differentiation within presence, such that beings are present to each other whilst still enjoying some differentiation. 'Presence' involves not only proximity – that is the least of it – but a kind of unity within differentiation. In fact, it involves non-spatial differentiation; differentiation within space is exactly what it is not. There is a higher, positive form of differentiation.[7]

This makes it possible for Plotinus to claim difference in the One even though it would be expected that this should not be the case. It seems to be part of his thinking to have the presence

[6] *Enn*. VI.4(22)11, 9–11.

[7] See Mortley, *Désir et différence*, p. 34. It is clear, of course, that the idea of the *parousia* has an enormously strong place in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, referring to the coming, or presence, of God or Christ: it plays a strong role in Jesus' own teaching about himself (Mark 14:62), and is later developed into a more timeless idea by John. Paul develops it further, and of course, the Patristic tradition follows.

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of the One available everywhere, and this cannot occur without difference.

'But that from which each individual thing comes is not an individual thing, but is different from all of them.'[8] There is foreshadowed here a positive view of difference which will see it later on in the tradition become a creative force, which links beings and makes them what they are. However, there is only a suggestion of this, and Plotinus is not one who emphasises a strong force of differentiation or otherness in the constitution of reality. The predominant view is of a universe bound together in a way which fits, and is harmonious.

Plotinus' view of love is based on the idea that it arises out of need, and that need itself arises out of privation. Matter is the source of this privation, which is reduction or removal of essence, because of its own privation, this arising from otherness or difference (the bad sense of difference in Plotinus). Desire thus springs from need, and desire is 'for' the beautiful. Plotinus follows the lead of Plato's *Symposium* but adds his own distinct reinterpretation. 'Love is love of what is beautiful', says Plato,[9] and of course this thought impregnates Plotinus' whole treatment of the issue. In what follows we consider Plotinus to have kept his distance from Plato's model, but in many respects there are similarities: some kind of non-rational awareness (*alogon synesin*) of beauty being 'their own' is what drives lovers, and what causes desire of beauty. Nature looks towards beauty when it creates. It recoils from ugliness.[10]

But we do notice that Plotinus does veer away from the emphasis on procreation that comes with Plato's narrative. More on this later, but let us note here that Plato does, as per Diotima in Socrates' narrative, notice that two lovers eventually want to procreate. That is, they turn their attention from each other, which is the first phase of passionate love, and they long to reproduce. At a certain age, we are told by Socrates, humankind becomes impatient to bring forth some progeny, to engender something, and when it does it wants 'to engender in beauty'.[11] Plato has thus made the desire for procreation part of his narrative of love, which is by and large an interpretation of human experience in the light of the transcendent reality in which

[8] *Enn.* V.3(49).11, 17–18.
[9] *Symposium* 204 D.
[10] *Enn.* III.5(50)1, 17–23.
[11] *Symposium* 206 C–E.

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it dwells. Plotinus therefore must deal with it, and he does so in his own way.

Plotinus is equivocal about the idea of procreation, or engendering. He certainly acknowledges that Plato talks about bringing forth in beauty, but only to say that of course it is said that procreating takes place in beauty, since doing so in ugliness would make no sense at all. But he immediately distances himself by saying that those who are content with engendering in the literal sense are simply content with the lower level of images and bodies. Such people, actual physical lovers and their babies or other projects, are not part of this higher scene of gazing upon beauty, 'since the archetype is not present to them, that which is the cause of their loving even what is here below'.[12]

Plotinus chooses one element of Plato's phrase, procreating in beauty, and focuses on that – beauty – the most congenial part, for the sake of which everything exists. But he seems to feel obliged to dismiss ordinary sexual experience and the urge towards procreation, and does not take up this aspect of Plato's story about love, except to find it a difficulty. We comment on this further below, and in particular on Plotinus' condemnation of the desire to procreate as representing a lack of self-sufficiency: the conflict for Plotinus probably lies with his desire to make love a form of contemplation, almost static in character. He wants none of the upheaval or creativity which Plato's model carries with it. Further, he wants no ugliness at all – and even where a man falls in love (and it seems to be about a man) with a beautiful woman, which is laudable enough, if this is a contaminated, physical kind of love, all he is doing is trying to perpetuate himself. If he should be falling in love with someone who is not beautiful, then he fails on both counts. And it may even be possible to fall in love with the ugly because of love itself. So that it is possible to fail on several counts: first, that of being interested in procreation itself; secondly, that of falling in love with someone beautiful but allowing this love to subsist at a physical level only; and thirdly, that of falling in love with someone ugly, presumably by an error of major proportions.[13]

Engendering is for the weak, and for those who fail in self-sufficiency. Plotinus is quite clear in his condemnation.

[12] *Enn.* III.5(50)1, 33. [13] *Enn.* III.5(50)1, 55–66.

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