

5 Plotinus and the Theory of Forms

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I PLOTINUS IN HIS PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT

At their first meeting, Porphyry took Plotinus for ‘a complete fool’ and a sophist. This reaction was by no means exceptional.¹ The leading Platonists of the time, most notably Longinus, misclassified Plotinus as a representative of an Oriental, Pythagoreanizing version of Platonism.² Admittedly, it was not easy to understand the novelty of his views. At stake in the discussions with Porphyry and Longinus was the claim that the intelligibles are not outside the Intellect. Marginal as it might appear at first sight, Plotinus’ thesis actually paved the way to a new interpretation of Plato’s Forms, the kernel for any Platonist system. After an intense exchange, Porphyry ‘finally managed to understand what he was saying’,³ wrote a retraction, and became one of his most faithful pupils for the years to come. Most of the other Platonists continued to endorse their traditional interpretation. But in the meantime, the history of ancient Platonism had entered a new phase.

Over the centuries, the correct interpretation of the Forms had always been a priority for Platonists, and even more so in the first centuries of the Imperial Age. Unlike Early Academics such as Speusippus or Xenocrates, later Platonists intended to do more than just explore and discuss the nature and function of Forms as intelligible principles. Post-Hellenistic Platonists had the far more difficult task of accounting for the Forms within the constraints of two further assumptions. Since the Hellenistic period, the importance of the notion of system had now become central. The Stoics in particular,

as Piso remarks in Cicero's *De finibus*, proudly celebrated the perfect consistency of their system as a proof of the superiority of their philosophy over the other schools.⁴ Second, there was the growing importance of theology as the culmination of philosophical investigation. In short, early Imperial Platonism can be described as the attempt to produce a theologically oriented system out of the dialogues. The result, as is well known, is the three-principles doctrine of God, Forms, and matter. What was distinctive of this new Platonist system is the emphasis on the first divine principle, which was identified with the *Timaeus*' Demiurge and which was opposed to matter (an Aristotelian reshaping of the *Timaeus*' notoriously mysterious receptacle). This division had the evident merit of laying the foundation for a theological systematization of Plato's philosophy. But even leaving aside the exegetical issues, it clearly raised more problems than it solved. This holds true especially in the case of the Forms. The more the importance of the God/Demiurge was emphasized, the more the role of the Forms was questioned. What is the place of the Forms in this Platonist theologically oriented system? This is one of the most important topics of discussion among early Imperial Platonists.⁵

A widespread solution to this problem, on the basis of passages such as *Timaeus* 39e, was that Forms were the objects of God's contemplation, his thoughts. Given the growing importance of the Demiurge, this was an easily predictable solution. But the problem, then, was the Forms' ontological autonomy, as we can see in Alcinous' definition: 'Form considered in relation to God is an act of intellection; [...] considered in relation to itself it is substance.'⁶ Alcinous' definition, with the oscillation between their definition as 'thoughts' and 'substances', implies an ambivalence between the Forms' independent and dependent existence. By arguing that they are God's thoughts, the risk is that their ontological autonomy is put at risk. As a solution to this unwelcome outcome, the thesis that Forms are outside God's intellect progressively gained ground. The best solution was probably arrived at by the above-mentioned Longinus, one of the leading Platonists of the time, who argued that the relation

between the Demiurge and Forms could be explained by recourse to the Stoic doctrine of the *lekton*. By adopting the distinction between mental representation (dependent on the thinking mind) and propositional content (independent of the thinking mind), Longinus could argue for the Forms' ontological independence without denying their relation to the first principle. Forms exist in a way that is distinct from the first divine principle but nevertheless exist as a result of his activity. Undoubtedly, Longinus' solution was ingenious; it somehow warranted the Forms' ontological autonomy and thus contributed to a defence of their epistemological role.⁷ Indeed, as in many of Plato's dialogues, the Forms' most important task within the Platonist system was to ground a solid, alternative epistemology, in opposition to the empiricist models that had dominated the Hellenistic debates.⁸ In short, these were the issues at stake in the thesis of the Forms as being God's thoughts but outside his intellect. When reacting to this thesis, therefore, Plotinus was basically attacking one of the most important and distinctive tenets of the Platonist tradition. That reactions were vehement was all too predictable.

2 BEING, LIFE, THINKING

The first two chapters of treatise 5.5[32], *That the Intelligibles Are Not External to the Intellect, and on the Good*, written around the same years as the discussion with Porphyry (that is, around 263–268 CE) and taking as a starting point precisely the cardinal passage of *Timaeus* 39e, help to understand the reasons for Plotinus' opposition to these interpretations. Many scholars have remarked that these first two chapters echo some skeptical arguments, which can be paralleled in Sextus Empiricus.⁹ Of course, this does not make of Plotinus a skeptic. As he clearly states at the very beginning of the treatise, the possibility of infallible knowledge is not questioned ('Might, then, one say that Intellect – the true and real Intellect – will ever be in error [...]? Not at all'; 1.1–3) – on the contrary, once taken for granted that infallible knowledge is an indisputable fact, the problem is how to correctly account for it, avoiding such unwelcome and mistaken skeptical

outcomes. Skepticism, in other words, is not so much a philosophical option as a polemical argument, according to Plotinus.¹⁰ As is typical of his style, Plotinus does not explicitly mention his targets; he is more interested in the philosophical problem than in personal polemics. Some details of the text, however, clearly show whom Plotinus was referring to: in general, all the supporters of a representational theory of knowledge such as Stoics and Epicureans; more specifically, and most importantly, its Platonist supporters – that is, supporters such as Longinus or Atticus who argued for the view that the Forms are outside the Intellect.¹¹

On a first reading, Plotinus' argument, with its virtual lumping together of Platonists and empiricists such as Epicureans and Stoics, is surprising. As a matter of fact, it exposes a problem in Platonist epistemology that had gone unnoticed until then. Middle Platonists used to argue that empiricism cannot lay the foundation of correct knowledge because sense-perception always gives us a representation of the thing and never the thing itself ('what is known by means of sense-perception of the object is a reflection of the thing; it is not the thing itself that sense-perception receives, for that object remains outside it'; 5.5.1.16–19). The introduction of an innatist (Platonist) model of knowledge was clearly meant to offer an alternative to this model. But if the intelligible objects are external to the thinking Intellect, it is evident that the same problem occurs again. Indeed, if intelligibles were outside the intellect, in the intellect there would be an impression or a representation of these intelligibles. In that case, intellect would run into the same problems as sense-perception; it would not have attained the truth: 'Given that when Intellect knows, it knows intelligibles, how, if these are different from it, would it connect with them?'¹² Consequently, if knowledge exists (the thesis shared by both Plotinus and the other Platonists), intelligibles and Intellect must be one. Now, since knowledge exists, intelligibles and Intellect are one. The alternative is a skeptical outcome to which those Platonists¹³ who insist on that distinction are doomed, along with empiricists such as Stoics and Epicureans.

Plotinus' argument is clear but has the obvious drawback of putting the Forms' ontological autonomy at risk. Such an interpretation runs the danger of making the Forms depend for their existence on their being thought by the Intellect. This was the problem of those interpreters, such as the above-mentioned Alcinous, who argued that Forms are God's thoughts. Plotinus intends to counterbalance this risk when he emphasizes another distinctive feature of the Forms, whose importance other Platonists seemed to be unaware of. One interesting testimony is provided by, for instance, chapters 7 and 8 of treatise 5.9, which seem to target precisely these Middle Platonist readings. By referring to an important passage from the *Parmenides* (132b3–4), Plotinus claims that 'to say that Forms are acts of thinking is not right, if what is meant is that when someone thought, this or that came to be' (5.9.7.14–16). According to him, the major limit of the (Middle Platonist) theory of Forms as thoughts of God is that it entails a passive notion of the Forms themselves, as if they simply were mental objects. This is a patent mistake, because the intelligibles are first and foremost active. The mistake made by earlier Platonists, in other words, was to distinguish between an active Intellect (identified with the Demiurge) and its passive thoughts (Forms). As a matter of fact, each single Form is active; it is therefore a thinking Intellect ('What then is the Idea? Intellect and the intellectual substance, with each Idea not being different from the Intellect, but each being Intellect. And Intellect is wholly all the Forms'; 5.9.8.3–5).¹⁴ The *Enneads* repeatedly insist on this decisive point by referring to the three – distinctively Platonic – features of being, life, and thought.¹⁵ The first qualification – that Forms are real beings – does not even need to be defended among Platonists. Forms, the intelligibles, are the true and real being, which is always identical to itself, as opposed to sensible objects, which undergo continuous processes of transformation and change. The opposition between being and becoming is obvious for any Platonist, and so should be the consequence that Plotinus draws from it. Since Forms are perfect, it would be absurd to treat them as if they were dead corpses.¹⁶ Matter

and bodies are inert objects, not Forms: ‘so this thing which is primarily and always, is not something dead, like a stone or a log, but must be always living’ (4.7.9.23–24). Therefore, also life belongs to Forms: ‘there is no poverty or lack in the intelligible world; instead, everything is filled with life, and in a way seething. There is, in a way, a flowing of all things from one spring’ (6.7.12.22–24; 6.6.18.12–16). The notion of life plays a decisive role in Plotinus; it expresses the power which eternally holds Forms in their perfect existence, and this perfect existence confirms their superiority: ‘it has been said many times that the perfect life and the true and real life is in that intellectual nature’ (1.4.3.34–35). Therefore, insofar as they exist and live, Forms are active. Given that their nature is not material and not extended, their activity is eminently intellectual. Forms live by thinking, and this explains their third distinctive feature, thought. The only possible Platonic conclusion is that Forms are living, thinking thoughts composing a unity which is the divine Intellect, as we shall soon see. A banal claim for a Platonist, one could argue, but a claim which no Platonist made before Plotinus with such clarity and emphasis. Plotinus undoubtedly elaborated an original account of Plato’s theory of Forms.

3 PLOTINUS’ INTELLECT

Over the years, scholars have tried to identify Plotinus’ sources and influences. As he himself repeats in a famous passage from 5.1.8.17–18, the basic idea of this theory, the identification between being and thinking, goes back to the origins of the Greek philosophical tradition, most notably to Parmenides (5.1.8.17–9.32). But the reference to Parmenides and other Presocratics seems more to play the role of sheltering Plotinus under a venerable tradition than a philosophically productive stimulus. The real influences are, as has been remarked by all scholars, Aristotle and even more Plato.¹⁷ From Aristotle Plotinus drew the identification between the divine thinking intellect and its thoughts (a doctrine already occurring in some Platonist predecessors such as Alcinous) in *Metaphysics* 12.7 and *De anima* 3.5.¹⁸ Plato’s

Timaeus and *Sophist* are the decisive texts – with Plotinus always presenting himself as nothing but an exegete of Plato’s dialogues: ‘the things we are saying now comprise exegeses of those, relying on the writings of Plato himself as evidence that these are ancient views’ (5.1.8.12–14). For the sake of the present discussion, it is worth noting that Plotinus draws inspiration for his notion of life from the *Timaeus*, where the intelligible world is described as the *pantelos zoon*.¹⁹ Even more relevant is the role played by the *Sophist*, most notably the theory of the great kinds (*megista genē*, 248a–258d), where Plato investigates the internal relations among the Forms. In this section of the dialogue, Plotinus did not only find a confirmation for his account of the Forms as being, living, and thinking, the emphasis on their mutual interconnection (*sumplokē*) is equally important.²⁰ Forms are not simply a casual random collection of thoughts but they have a necessary internal relation with each other. It is by developing these insights that Plotinus will elaborate his theory of the Intellect, as constituted by the Forms thinking themselves and the other Forms.

Regarding the mutual relation among the Forms, the most eloquent text is probably treatise 6.2[43], the second treatise of the trilogy *On the Genera of Being*. Here the theory of the *megista genē* (*Sophist* 254d) is used to investigate and account for ‘the infrastructure of the noetic world’.²¹ Forms are thinking thoughts, and the object of their thinking activity are themselves and the other Forms. This mutual relationship among Forms is made clear by the reference to the five genres of the *Sophist*: being, movement, stability, identity, and difference. Stability and being explain the activity of the Forms. Given the identification between movement and life, and between life and thought (see above), this first kind indicates once again that the Forms’ activity is intellectual. At stake is not physical movement (a meaningless notion in this context, since Forms are not physical entities) but intellectual movement, that is, the activity of thinking. Second, the fact that this movement comes from being and is directed towards it shows that it is directed also to the other Forms, the real

being, and further indicates that there is no distinction or separation in the intelligible world but simultaneity among all the thinking thoughts (6.2.8.12–16). This is confirmed by the third genre, stability; in the noetic world everything is simultaneously present to itself; all is in all (6.2.8.18–24).²² As for the kinds identity and difference they are used to explain that in spite of their unity and perfect interconnection Forms maintain their ontological autonomy.

Interestingly, the use of the *megista genē* serves even more to explain the Intellect as a whole (this is the proper theme of the above-mentioned treatises *On the Genera of Being*; see in particular 6.2.7–8 and 20, where Plotinus argues for the existence of a general Intellect, along with the particular ones):²³ a living substance (movement and being), not perfectly simple (unlike the first principle, the One), because it contains a plurality of entities which are different from each other (difference). But it is still a perfectly interconnected plurality, to the greatest possible degree of unification (identity and stability).²⁴ Intellect turns out to be ‘an eternal and stable collection of Forms, undivided and all together in unity’; and yet, ‘its content can be taken individually each with its own specific difference’.²⁵ This interplay of multiplicity and unity is the most distinctive, and counterintuitive, feature of the intelligible world. As a matter of fact, however, this paradoxical impression is only apparent for Plotinus. Since this multiplicity is not spatially articulated, the intelligible intellects are not separated from each other as bodies are. Plotinus presents some familiar examples to explain how this multiple unity is less implausible than one might think by referring to the seed, which is one but at the same time contains all the powers which will manifest themselves as it develops (5.9.6.12–15; unlike the seed, Forms do not develop temporally), or, even more enlightening, to scientific knowledge, in which all the theorems constituting a body of scientific knowledge are simultaneously present, each in its position and with its specific role (‘the entirety of the scientific understanding includes all theorems, each part of the whole not discriminated by place, but each having its power in the whole’: 5.9.8.4–8; 4.9.5.7–8; 5.8.4.48–55; 6.2.20.6–9).²⁶

The same holds, eminently, for the Forms, which are ‘all together’ (*homou panta*) in the Intellect (3.6.6.23; 4.2.2.44; 5.3.15.21; 6.4.14.4–6; 6.7.33.8). Every intelligible understands and is understood ‘at all times’ as itself and in the context of the complete whole. Each Form, insofar as it is itself, also contains the totality to which it belongs (5.8.4.22–23: ‘in the intelligible world each part always comes from the whole and each is at once also all’). This totality is the Intellect, the whole that not only contains parts but that is also contained in each of them.

Plotinus’ holism, this identity and simultaneity of the Forms, is also important for a better understanding of how Forms (and thus Intellect) think. Forms simultaneously possess themselves and all the rest; in order to understand any one item in the intelligible world, we will have to bring in all the rest; an account of each thing involves all the others.²⁷ Given this simultaneity and unity, however, their thought or knowledge does not presuppose argumentative passages, demonstrations, or external confirmations. Noetic thought does not involve ordinary linguistic propositions; things like premises, axioms, predicates, and so on are alien to it.²⁸ It is, therefore, non-inferential and unmediated, grasping everything at once; and it is infallible, because in the act of knowing subject and object are cognitively identical; each Form is a thinking thought or intellect that thinks the entire intelligible world in all its interrelations (‘each is all’; 5.8.9.16).²⁹ Like Leibniz’s monads, single Forms constitute as many views of the same city – a city that, given its purity, should be understood as composed of crystal and light, as absolutely transparent and such as to allow an exhaustive overall look at every point: ‘For every god has everything in himself, and, again, he sees everything in another, so that everything is everywhere and all is all and each is all and the glory is unlimited [...] And the sun in the intelligible world is all the stars, and all the stars are, again, the sun and all the other stars’ (5.8.4.6–10).

Undoubtedly, this is a brilliant reconstruction of Plato’s theory of Forms and Aristotle’s theory of Intellect, which also serves to offer

an answer to the epistemological problem we started from. Plotinus' insistence on the identification between the thinking subject and the object of thought shows that there is a level of reality in which knowledge and being, epistemology and ontology, coincide. All intellects have truth as a permanent possession,³⁰ and this is the necessary condition for infallible knowledge, contrary to what the supporters of a representational kind of knowledge and skeptics think. In spite of the notorious obscurity of his style, Plotinus is also capable of describing the intellectual realm with great effectiveness; and by developing his interpretation of Plato he has also found a new answer to the above-mentioned skeptical challenge that his predecessors had not been able to face.

4 THE FORMS AS ACTIVE CAUSES

The problem that early Imperial Platonists faced was how to avoid the marginalization of the Forms. Plotinus' interpretation leads us in the opposite direction, with the necessity of rethinking the Demiurge's role and function.³¹ As a matter of fact, by insisting on their active role, Plotinus consequently underlines another aspect of Forms, too, which had been underestimated in previous interpretations: their causal role. As scholars have now repeatedly shown, one major problem for all Platonists was to explain the causal interaction between the intelligible and the sensible world. Plato was notoriously reticent on this point, as Aristotle had already remarked when he credited Plato with having recognized two causes only, the formal and the material, but not the efficient.³² The problem became even more important with the Stoic emphasis on the notion of cause as productive (*aition*) and not only explanatory (*aitia*).³³ The importance of the Demiurge as active cause was meant to be a reaction to such criticisms by showing that Plato, too, was aware of the causal role of the first principles. In this case as well, Plotinus followed an alternative path by arguing that Forms, and the Intellect in general, insofar as they are active, themselves exert the active role, but not in the sense in which the Demiurge was traditionally credited. As he repeatedly

explains, Forms and the Intellect are paradigmatic causes and also productive powers but not in the technical sense that dominated in the preceding centuries with a divine artisan creating the universe by looking at the paradigmatic model.³⁴

This is explained by his theory of ‘double activity’, a theory that applies to all levels of reality, ensuring causal continuity from the One down to the level of sensible form.³⁵ In several passages and in treatise 5.4, most notably with regard to Forms,³⁶ Plotinus argues that real causes act in virtue of their real essence without undergoing any affection, by distinguishing two different kinds of activity, *energeiai*. There is a difference between the activity which is constitutive of the essence of a given principle and the activity which results from this essence. The first *energeia* is the internal activity that constitutes the essence of a given cause; in virtue of this activity real causes therefore remain what they are and ‘abide in themselves’.³⁷ But, again in virtue of their nature, an external activity (the second *energeia*) also ‘flows’, or derives, from them, as a sort of necessary by-product which does not modify the cause and exerts a causal influence on the lower levels.³⁸ This secondary activity cannot be separated from the first; it is to the first as the image is to the paradigm (5.1.6.30–34; 5.8.12.20). The examples of fire producing heat (5.4.2.27–33), the sun giving off light (6.9.9.6–7), and snow giving off cold (5.1.6.35) are introduced as examples of this pattern: ‘each substance (e.g. fire) has a primary (or internal) activity proper to itself and gives rise to a secondary activity (e.g. heat) external to, or different from, the primary activity’.³⁹ In other words, this theory explains how a causal relation between the caused and the cause takes place, in spite of the fact that the latter is different from what is caused by it (fire, say, is hot in a different and superior way to heated things). There is no reciprocity between the intelligible and the sensible but only ontological dependence.

The sensible world is therefore a lower and extended image of the intelligible world, which unfolds what was there present all together.⁴⁰ Most distinctively, this theory explains the conflation of the paradigmatic and demiurgic causation in the Forms and the

Intellect. Forms remain themselves in virtue of their essence, which is not affected by the causal process; but Forms are not only explanatory models, because they also generate the physical world as a reflection and image of themselves – of the perfect knowledge that they have of themselves – and in this sense they are the cause of reality being what it is.

In this case as well, Plotinus could mention some passages from the Platonic dialogues in support of his theory.⁴¹ Undoubtedly, however, Plotinus' theory also implies a change of perspective when compared to Plato. For the latter, the relationship between sensibles and intelligibles is normally investigated from the point of view of sensible entities, that 'participate in' or 'imitate' Forms; in Plotinus, as Riccardo Chiaradonna rightly remarks, the focus is rather on the principles and causes, and not so much on the caused and dependent entities; the derivation process is participation, as seen from the perspective of the cause.⁴² The changes are evident also with respect to his Platonist predecessors. In this model Forms replace the artisanal model of causation that early Platonists attributed to the Demiurge, as the programmatic text of 6.7.1–3 makes abundantly clear.⁴³

As a matter of fact, Plotinus' theory of the double activity introduces once again substantial changes to the accounts found in Middle Platonism.⁴⁴ When denying that the principle produces the universe as a craftsman Plotinus also denies it any deliberation or intentional design. In the Intellect, as already remarked, there is no discursive or inferential reasoning nor calculation, because this would imply imperfection on its part; planning involves consideration of alternative non-actual states of affairs, and this contrasts with Intellect's knowledge, which is always actual and timeless. 'The actuality of divine *Nous* [...] precludes its entertaining alternatives and so precludes its planning.'⁴⁵ Besides, since the cosmos always existed, there was no time before it when Intellect could have planned it out in advance.⁴⁶ What depends on the Intellect 'automatically' unfolds from it without the need of any foresight or

deliberation. Accordingly, it makes no sense to account for the causal principle as if it were a provident craftsman who plans how to bring about the best cosmic order among several options.⁴⁷ ‘The physical world exists because Forms necessarily produce it by emanation; and the physical world is well ordered because it is necessarily the physical expression of the perfections of the Forms, in all their variety and mutual harmony.’⁴⁸ Plotinus, in other words, develops his interpretation of Plato on the basis of a metaphorical interpretation of the *Timaeus*, in opposition to the literal reading which dominates in the preceding two centuries.

This theory of the double activity also serves to illustrate the genesis of the Intellect. Being composite, Intellect cannot be the first principle but is constituted by a principle that is absolutely simple, the One, from which everything else, directly or indirectly, takes its existence.⁴⁹ The dynamic is the same as the one we have sketched for the relation between the intelligible and the physical world. Being absolutely perfect, the One cannot be sterile (5.1.6.30; 5.4.1.25–30); the Intellect is the by-product of this excess, which does not affect the One’s perfection and independence. What is important to underline, however, is that derivation is not sufficient in itself. The Intellect comes to be only when it ‘turns towards’ its principle (*epistrophê* is the term used), desiring the Good, and gains awareness of what it is.

How the (atemporal) ‘turning’ of this yet indeterminate Intellect takes place remains somehow obscure. It is not easy to understand how the One, unknowable, unthinkable, and ineffable, can become an object of thought for the Intellect; it is also obscure how to reconcile the idea of a ‘potential’, indeterminate Intellect with the fact that the Intellect is always actively thinking and therefore involves no potentiality. Plotinus tries to solve these riddles by arguing that this indeterminate Intellect knows first of all itself, because being an intellect it is in its nature to fulfill its desire by thinking. But the One cannot be captured by thought; by trying to grasp the One, the Intellect will therefore come to understand its intellectual nature, so to speak. And by knowing its unity it also comprehends, insofar as

this is possible, its relationship with the absolute unity and simplicity of the One. As for the content of its thinking, the intelligibles, there is no need of anything prior to them to give them form (the intelligible horse, say, is not a potential horse made actual by some prior horse). They are always fully what they are, and in this sense there is no space for potentiality.⁵⁰

Most importantly, since this double movement of derivation and reversion takes place at all levels, it helps us to understand a cardinal point in Plotinus' theory. Reality is constituted not only as the result of a passive process, with the principles somehow 'producing' lower entities. It also requires some degree of intellectual activity on the part of the lower entity, which must become, as it were, aware of its nature and provenance. Also, this is part of *epistrophē*. Remarkably, Plotinus argues, this applies also to the natural world in its relationship with the intelligible principles.⁵¹ Also at the level of nature, therefore, it is necessary to assume that there is some degree of intellectual activity (*theōria*), a sort of contemplation or consciousness (corresponding to the consciousness of one who is asleep, for instance),⁵² which is responsible for giving order to matter and contributes to the existence of sensible reality.⁵³ As Intellect exists as a contemplation of the One (and Soul as a contemplation of the Intellect), so the physical world exists as a consequence and by-product of nature contemplating the intelligible principles and 'informing' matter accordingly.

Plotinus himself is aware of the strangeness of such a theory (3.8.1.1–7). But again, one has to observe that this is the coherent result of Plotinus' theory. And it is also a powerful meditation on the importance of the desire to know, which makes philosophy so important. Every activity below the One, including the operations of nature, is a kind of thought, and, at different degrees, knowledge is the goal not only of human beings but also of irrational things. This is a surprising claim, to be sure, that a modern counterpart can perhaps make less eccentric, when one considers the analogy of 'enzymes "reading" a cell's genetic code and determining the cell's function accordingly', as Christian Wildberg has brilliantly remarked.⁵⁴

5 FORMS OF INDIVIDUALS

Over the centuries, Platonists explored many other problems concerning the Forms, which Plato's dialogues did not present in a sufficiently clear way. The scope of the doctrine, for instance, was the object of many debates, and even more controversial, after Aristotle's criticisms, was the problem of whether there are also Forms of individuals.⁵⁵ Xenocrates' very influential definition limited Forms to things constituted by nature. And since they are universal models that refer to what is common among individual instantiations (according to the well-known principle of the 'one over many'), the most reasonable conclusion was taken to be that there were no Forms of individuals such as Socrates or Plato. Such was, for instance, Alcinous' conclusion: 'Form is defined as an eternal model of things that are in accordance with nature. For most Platonists do not accept that there are forms of artificial objects, such as a shield or a lyre, nor of things that are contrary to nature, like fever or cholera, nor of individuals such as Socrates and Plato, not yet of any trivial thing, such as dirt or chaff, nor of relations, such as the greater or the superior.'⁵⁶

Less interested in these scholastic classifications than his colleagues, Plotinus did not address the problem systematically (to the extent that he has also been accused of inconsistency by some modern scholars),⁵⁷ and yet he developed an original, far-from-orthodox, interpretation.⁵⁸ Judging by some passages at the end of 5.9, where he discusses a series of standard questions, Plotinus seems to allow Forms at least of some *tekhnai* and their products (5.9.10.15–20), in opposition to other Platonists. He also seems to discuss the possibility that specific qualities such as 'snub' or 'aquiline' are also present at the level of the *logos* (5.9.12.6–11).⁵⁹

Most remarkably, he also appears to include Forms of individuals, at least with regard to human beings, in the intelligible world. This last problem is explicitly addressed in another, later and very short, treatise, *On Whether or Not There Are Ideas of Individuals* (5.7). But since this

treatise is more a dialectical investigation than an exhaustive account and has no clear-cut conclusion, it is hard to reconstruct his exact view.⁶⁰ Plotinus introduces and seems to favor this possibility but he also raises several problems that result from it, without a final and transparent resolution being offered. What remains clear, in any case, is that some metaphysical assumptions in Plotinus' interpretation of Plato were leading him towards that possibility. First, this conclusion seems to follow from the typically Platonist contrast between what is form and determinate and what is deficiency and disorder in the sensible world. Given such a contrast, if lack of being determined results from matter, the cause of determination (also in the case of sensible particulars, then) will be referred to Forms (5.9.10.1–2; 6.7.11.3–4). In other words, if there is an intelligible content in the individual as such, this seems to need accounting for by Intellect; and since for Intellect to account for something is for there to be a Form, the conclusion follows that there are also Forms of individuals.⁶¹ Second, the problem is strictly connected to one of Plotinus' most controversial theses, that is the idea that one 'part' of our soul never abandons the intelligible world (see 4.8.8.3). If our soul, or better 'the intellect of the soul', is always there, one must clearly admit that there are also individual entities in the intelligible realm – and therefore Forms of individuals, given that the intelligible world is populated by Forms.⁶² Remarkably, in the case of individual Forms the original–copy relation, which is distinctive of the relation between Forms and sensibles, would not apply, for these entities would not relate to a Form in itself, as sensible entities do.⁶³

The reasons for arguing for the existence of Forms of individuals such as Socrates are clear but, of course, they do not solve all the problems. First of all, it is not clear whether the intelligible world is larger than that of the Forms in the strict sense that belong to the Intellect; are these Forms of individuals to be regarded as Forms in the strict sense or perhaps rather as souls (or Form-souls)? Some scholars have concluded that the question is insoluble.⁶⁴ Oscillations and caution left aside, however, it seems more reasonable to conclude

that Plotinus was referring to Forms and not souls, given that theirs is a noetic knowledge; if undescended intellects are cognitively identical with Forms, then they are also Forms in a sense.⁶⁵ Once this has been granted, a more complicated objection arises. Given Plotinus' holism, as we have already remarked, in the Intellect 'all is all'; but if the eidetic content is the same for all the Forms, it is not clear therefore how these Forms of individuals can preserve their identity. According to Plotinus, however, the whole-part relation within the Intellect does not impede the preservation of individual features, as we have already remarked; as the above-mentioned analogy of the sciences makes clear, one individual Form represents one specific perspective on the whole, 'the focusing of the activity in a particular area'.⁶⁶

Interestingly, this latter point shows what was really at stake in Plotinus' claim about Forms of individuals. The problem was not so much the discussion of some scholastic problems as the question of personal identity in a Platonic world and the possibility of a real ascension from the world of matter to the real intelligible world (5.7.1.1–3), an ascension that can take place only noetically.⁶⁷ It is extremely difficult to reconstruct Plotinus' theory of the individual, but for the sake of the present discussion it suffices to say that in the Platonic framework as interpreted by Plotinus, the real self is not the empirical individual; individuality depends on the intelligible realities, whereas particularization implies a loss of identity of the authentic self, which is universal in its intellectual content.⁶⁸ By knowing these intelligible realities – and this is Plotinus' ascent – we will therefore regain our real, intelligible, nature. Again, and unsurprisingly, these are all highly controversial claims, showing once more that Plotinus was interested in exploring a set of inter-related problems which defines the identity of an authentic Platonic philosophy – a philosophy turning around the possibility of accounting for the real, intelligible world, of which we are also part (and of which, therefore, we can have knowledge), according to its own principles. Original and controversial as they may appear, Plotinus' views display a remarkable consistency in this regard.

NOTES

- 1 Porph. *Plot.* 18.
- 2 *Plot.* 15, 17, 19–21; in other words, the charge was that Plotinus was a follower (or a plagiarist, depending on the polemical tone of the testimonies) of Numenius. I reconstruct this polemical context in Bonazzi 2015, 126–35; see also Menn 2001a, 116–20.
- 3 *Plot.* 18.
- 4 Thus, Cato in Cic. *Fin.* 3.74, with Donini 1994, 5056–63.
- 5 See Baltès 1996; Boys-Stones 2018, 125–37, 150–9.
- 6 Alc. *Did.* 9.163.14–17; see also Atticus fr. 9 and 28.1–7 des Places.
- 7 See Frede 1990.
- 8 See Bonazzi 2017, 120–41.
- 9 Compare 5.5.1.12–19 with Sext. *Emp. Pyr.* 2.51 and 72. See O’Meara 2000; Gerson 2013b, 64–9.
- 10 Chiaradonna 2012b, 90.
- 11 For a reconstruction of Plotinus’ polemical targets, I refer to Bonazzi 2015, 123–5, with further bibliography; on the Hellenistic background, see now Morel 2016 and Taormina 2016.
- 12 5.5.1.20–21; see the list of questions at 25–30; the same idea is repeated over and over again, for instance, at 1.55–56. See also Gerson 2009, 137, quoting 5.3.5.19–26 and 5.3.8.36.
- 13 Longinus being the clearest example; see the reference to *lekton* and intelligibles at 5.5.1.38.
- 14 See also 6.6.6.25–26.
- 15 See the seminal Hadot 1960, 107–57. Other distinctive features are eternity (see Chiaradonna, Chapter 11 in this volume) and beauty (see Omtzigt 2012).
- 16 See, for instance, 5.4.2.43–44; 6.9.2.24–26.
- 17 Gerson 1994, 44–52.
- 18 See Hadot 1996, 367–76. No less important was the influence of the Peripatetic tradition (most notably Alexander of Aphrodisias), as Philip Merlan already remarked in his seminal study in 1969.
- 19 See *Tim.* 29e, 30b–31a, 33b, 37d, 39e; see, for instance, 6.6.7.14–19.
- 20 See *Soph.* 259e, 262c.
- 21 Charrue 1978, 223. On Plotinus’ trilogy, and more generally on his interpretation of the *Sophist*, see Würm 1973 and Chiaradonna 2002.
- 22 See also 6.3.27 and 5.3.7.15–25.

- 23 On this general Intellect, ‘the thread or glue that runs through the system and unifies it’, see Emilsson 2017, 138–40 (from which the quotation is taken) and Chiaradonna forthcoming.
- 24 Remes 2007, 135–40. As Chiaradonna 2009a, 71, rightly remarks, Plotinus’ treatment of the genres Sameness and Difference is highly symptomatic of his interpretation. Whereas Plato, in the *Sophist*, argues that each of the three previous genres (being, movement, and rest) is identical to itself and different from the others, Plotinus, by affirming that they are together identical to themselves (and not each to itself) (6.2.8.34–38), further emphasizes the unity and identity of the intelligible world.
- 25 Remes 2007, 132.
- 26 See Tornau 1998; Emilsson 2007, 201–7; and Coope 2020, 149n36, who rightly criticizes Caluori’s thesis that ‘the whole science’ is only of axioms (Caluori 2015a, 80): ‘the whole science (both the axioms and the theorems) is prior to any axiom or theorem, because to understand any one axiom, one must bring to bear one’s understanding of all of them’.
- 27 Emilsson 2017, 134–5.
- 28 See 5.5.1.38–39; 5.9.7.8–10.
- 29 A more complicated problem is whether noetic thought is also non-propositional or non-conceptual; see Sorabji 1982; Remes 2007, 130–5; Emilsson 2007, 176–213. For a more detailed presentation of Plotinus’ epistemology, see Tornau’s Chapter 8 in this volume.
- 30 Gerson 2009, 139.
- 31 Opsomer 2005b.
- 32 *Metaph.* 1.6.988a8–16, 992a25–29; *Arist. Gen. corr.* 2.9.335a24–30.
- 33 Frede 1980.
- 34 Needless to say, this does not mean any form of ‘creationism’ on Plotinus’ part. The production of the different levels of reality does not take place in time but depends on eternal causal relations (that ultimately can be traced back to the One); see, for instance, Chiaradonna 2009a, 75. The productive process is normally described as ‘emanation’ by modern readers (and in some passages also by Plotinus, see, for instance, *aporroia* in 3.4.3.25). This term needs to be used with caution in order to avoid the idea that it is a material process. As O’Meara 1993, 60, rightly remarks, it is better to use the more generic ‘derivation’. Plotinus himself uses *proodos*. As for the role of the One, see Aubry’s Chapter 4 in this volume.

- 35 The most complete treatment of this complicated doctrine is Emilsson 2007, 22–68; see also Michalewski 2014, 97–136 and 172–83. Chiaradonna 2015 reconstructs the polemical context by underlining the importance of Alexander’s influence.
- 36 Most importantly, 6.1.6.28–53; 6.2.1.12–18; 5.3.7.13–34; 5.4.2.21–27; 5.9.8.11–19.
- 37 *Tim.* 42e5–6, as quoted, for instance, in 5.4.2.21 and 34.
- 38 An important assumption of this theory is the idea that, when things reach maturity, they necessarily procreate (5.4.1.26–30). Perfection implies generation. The influence of Aristotle’s biology or Plato’s claim that the divine is not envious (*Tim.* 29e) is evident; what Plotinus does is to generalize this familiar notion to all the levels of reality, from the One downwards.
- 39 O’Meara 1993, 63.
- 40 The opposition between ‘here’ and ‘there’, so frequent in the *Enneads*, is potentially misleading. The intelligibles are not spatially separated; but since they are immaterial entities, they are not affected by the sensibles, nor do they mix with them. Paradoxically (5.2.2.20), they are everywhere without being anywhere; see Michalewski 2014, 116.
- 41 See, for instance, Gerson 1994, 24–5, quoting *Pl. Rep.* 6.509b (the Idea of the Good), *Tim.* 29e (on the Demiurge’s benevolence), or *Symp.* 212a–b (where Diotima claims that possession of beauty brings about beauty also in the others). Another interesting passage, mentioned by Emilsson 2007, 65, is *Pl. Phdr.* 245c–d (on the soul being the motion and the cause of movement).
- 42 Emilsson 2017, 56 and 79.
- 43 See Noble and Powers 2015.
- 44 Michalewski 2014, 187–8.
- 45 Noble and Powers 2015, 59.
- 46 3.2.1.15–26; 6.8.17.1–9.
- 47 See, for instance, *Ph. Op. Mund.* 16ff.; *Apul. Plat.* 1.8 and 10; Atticus fr. 6.6–9 des Places; *Plut. De an. procr.* 1027a and *De sera* 550d–e; *Alc. Did.* 12.23, 14.4 with Opsomer 2005a.
- 48 Noble and Powers 2015, 69.
- 49 On the One, see Aubry, Chapter 4 in this volume.
- 50 Emilsson 2017, 98–9 and 105.
- 51 For the sake of the present discussion, there is no need to further distinguish between Intellect and the second intelligible principle, the

Soul. As Blumenthal 1974, 219, rightly remarks, Plotinus blurs this distinction whenever his general purpose is to distinguish between the intelligible and the sensible world.

52 See 3.8.4.22–24.

53 See Wilberding, Chapter 13 in this volume.

54 Wildberg 2009, 134, who further continues: ‘When the information contained in the long permutation of the code is deciphered by different chemical substances and expressed in the appearance and functioning of the organism, the process does seem to possess traces of what it is to think and to make; yet it involves no reasoning, deliberation, or even imagination. However precisely this transition from pure code and aphenomenal information to the living phenotype is to be understood – one could do worse than describe it with Plotinus as an activity that looks very much like introspection and expression, in short *theoria*.’

55 See *Alex. in Metaph.* 81.25–82.7.

56 *Did.* 163.23–30. Two other important testimonies are Syrian; *in Metaph.* 39.1–5 and *Procl. in Prm.* 815.15–833.19 with Baltes 1998, 70–8 and 336–50.

57 See Blumenthal 1966, 76.

58 See, among others, Gerson 1994, 72–8; Kalligas 1997; Ferrari 1998 and forthcoming; O’Meara 1999a; Tornau 2009.

59 See Wilberding 2011, 57–72.

60 Ferrari 1997, 37–9; Plotinus investigates these problems also at the end of 5.9, chapters 10–24.

61 Gerson 1994, 74; O’Meara 1999a, 267.

62 Ferrari 1998, 638–44.

63 5.9.13.3–7 with Tornau 2009, 344.

64 Blumenthal 1996, 100.

65 See Gerson 1994, 72–8, and Tornau 2009, 353, commenting on 6.5.7.1–8, in favor of the first option; Kalligas 1997, 214–17, who speaks of ‘soul-forms’; D’Ancona Costa 2002, 542–52; and Ferrari forthcoming, in favor of the second.

66 Kalligas 1997, 223; see also Tornau 2009, 346.

67 D’Ancona Costa 2002.

68 Tornau 2009 is an excellent discussion of the problem.