

## PLOTINUS: KNOWING ONESELF

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“I have actually lived the best life,” Plotinus confesses, “and come to identity with the divine.”<sup>1</sup> This is the only autobiographical passage in the *Enneads*,<sup>2</sup> and it tantalizes not only by its intimacy, but also by touching directly upon the very topic of this book, becoming god. But what is the best life, according to Plotinus, and what is the divine? This chapter will address these two questions after addressing a third, more fundamental: what is the self that lives this life and achieves this divinity? “But we,” he asks, “who are we?”<sup>3</sup> Attempting to answer this question along with Plotinus, seeking knowledge of his self, we shall be drawn quickly into his theology and thereafter into his ethics. For in the end, his self just is the divine, and its best life, its only life, is the life of perfect self-knowledge. If we are to understand how Plotinus sought divinity, then, we should begin with his quest to know himself.

### 1. KNOWING SELF

Plotinus’s quest met its most immediate obstacle in a paradox of self-knowledge advanced by Skeptics such as Sextus Empiricus. This paradox was first proposed by Plato in his *Charmides*, where Socrates objects that self-knowledge is impossible because the knower, as subject of this knowledge, could not also be the known, object of the very

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<sup>1</sup> *Enn.* 4.8.1.5–6. All translations of the *Enneads* are from Armstrong 1988, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Hadot 1993:25.

<sup>3</sup> *Enn.* 6.4.14.16.

same knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Plato proposes a similar paradox in *Republic*, where Socrates calls the expression ‘self-control’ ridiculous.<sup>5</sup> “The stronger self that does the controlling,” he observes, “is the same as the weaker self that gets controlled, so that only one person is referred to in all such expressions.”<sup>6</sup> But if these expressions do indeed refer to one person, the same self will be both controlling and controlled, a contradiction. Plato resolves this appearance of contradiction, as we have seen, by dividing the self into better and worse parts.<sup>7</sup> The better part is reason, the inner human, and whenever someone is said to control himself this part in fact exerts control over another, which Plato imagines as a bestiality.<sup>8</sup> ‘Self-control’ is thus a misnomer: this virtue is not the control of a self over itself, properly speaking, but rather the control of one part over another.

### 1.1 SEXTUS’S PARADOX

The paradox of self-knowledge, Sextus shows, is not so easily resolved. “If the mind [*nous*] apprehends itself,” he reasons, “either it as a whole will apprehend itself, or it will do so not as a whole but employing for the purpose a part of itself.”<sup>9</sup> Trouble arises, he thought, for both options. He quickly dismisses the first, apprehending by the whole self, for if the whole self becomes the subject of apprehension, “the apprehended object will no longer be anything.”<sup>10</sup> What about the second option, apprehension by a part of the self? This apprehending part, the subject of apprehension, will apprehend the rest of the

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<sup>4</sup> *Chrm.* 167a–169c. See also *De Anima* 3.2, 425b12–28, where a related puzzle arises for vision. For a discussion, see Sorabji 2006:201–11.

<sup>5</sup> *to kreittō hautou*

<sup>6</sup> *Republic* 4.430e11–431a1.

<sup>7</sup> *Republic* 4.431a3–b2.

<sup>8</sup> *Republic* 9.588b10–589b6. Plato uses the expression “inner man” (*ho entos anthrōpos*) at *Republic* 9.589a7–588a1. Plotinus is fond of the expression and variations on it (see, e.g., 5.1.10.10–11).

<sup>9</sup> *M.* 7.310–11. All translations of Sextus are from Bury 1933–49.

<sup>10</sup> *M.* 7.312.

self as its object. This option appears promising, initially, since it resembles Plato's resolution of the paradox of self-control: one part will know the rest, just as earlier one part controlled the rest. But whereas Plato could assume that the controlling part needed no control upon itself—reason, he assumed, was inherently disciplined—the knowing part still needs to be known, if this is to be perfect self-knowledge. How, then, will this knowing part be known?

It cannot know itself as a whole, Sextus writes, for the same reason he adduced against the first option: “the object sought will be nothing.”<sup>11</sup> It must therefore be known, if at all, by another part. Yet even if it should become the object of a further apprehension, by another apprehending part, this additional subject of this additional apprehension will itself remain unknown until it, in turn, becomes an object of still further apprehension. And so on for any subsequent part. Inquiry by a part of the self, therefore, produces an infinite regress. Anyone who would inquire into himself thus faces a dilemma: self-inquiry either cannot begin or it cannot end, self-knowledge either is empty or regresses infinitely. In the words of Sextus, “apprehension is a thing without beginning, as either no first subject is found to apprehend or no object exists to be apprehended.”<sup>12</sup> Sextus thus posed this paradox in the terms of whole and part, emptiness and infinity. Plotinus considers this same paradox first in these terms, switching quickly to terms more germane to his philosophical idiom: unity and duality, sameness and difference. To understand his resolution best, then, we should first rephrase the paradox in his alternate terms. To do so, let us notice something very basic about knowledge.

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<sup>11</sup> *M.* 7.312.

<sup>12</sup> *M.* 7.312. For other summaries, see Sorabji 2006:209–10, and O'Meara 1993:40.

Like control, knowledge is a relation between a subject and an object. Whenever something bears a relation to itself, whenever it is self-reflexive in any way, it must be both subject and object of the relation. At first glance, this does not appear to be a problem. Seeing, after all, is a relation and you can bear it to yourself simply by looking at yourself. But to be precise, your eye may look at the back of your hand, your forearm, the top of your thigh, and so on, but it cannot quite look at itself. Even if it look at itself in a mirror, in fact, it sees not itself but its reflection. Nothing sees itself, in the precise sense, although we sensibly allow a looser sense to accommodate cases where a part of one thing sees another part of the same thing. The same laxity permits us to ascribe self-control, with no less than Plato's permission, when one part of something controls the rest of it. But what about self-knowledge? Why not be similarly indulgent when we ascribe this self-reflexive relation as well?

Occasionally Plotinus will be indulgent, granting us images but not the archetype of self-knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Believing generally that we cannot understand an image without first understanding its archetype, however, he wants to understand the achievement of perfect self-knowledge, a self's total recognition of itself at a moment.<sup>14</sup> Yet this recognition makes apparently contradictory demands. Knowing itself perfectly, the self must be both the subject and the object of this knowledge, but are the subject and object the same or different, one or two? Each option is troublesome. If they are two wholly different things, one part of the self will be subject, knowing the rest of the self as object, and this will not be *self*-knowledge. More unity is thus required of the self to achieve

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<sup>13</sup> *Enn.* 5.3.2.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., *Enn.* 3.7.1.17–19: “for when we know that which holds the position of archetype, it will perhaps become clear how it is with its image.” The topic of this sentence is time, an image of its archetype, eternity; but the principle applies generally. It stems from the Aristotelian belief that actuality is prior to potentiality, and ultimately from the Platonic doctrine that a Form is prior to its instances.

perfect self-knowledge. But if subject and object of self-knowledge are wholly one and the same, there will not be enough duality for there to be self-*knowledge*. As we have also seen, knowledge is a relation between a subject and object; there must be enough difference between the two to make their distinction intelligible. To resolve this dilemma, then, the knowing self must be more unified than a duality, but more diverse than a unity. To make self-knowledge appear possible, in other words, this self must be at once both one and many, both the same as itself and different from itself. To achieve self-knowledge, it thus seems, the self must violate the principle of non-contradiction.

## 1.2. PLOTINUS'S SOLUTION

Plotinus reviews this paradox at the beginning of *Ennead* 5.3, "On the Knowing Hypostases."<sup>15</sup> Rather than asking whether something that thinks itself does so by a part of itself or by the whole of itself, he asks whether self-knowledge is possible for a complex thing or a simple one. "Does that which thinks itself have to be complex, in order that it may with one of its constituents contemplate the rest," he begins the treatise, "or is it possible for that which not composite also to have an intellectual awareness of itself?"<sup>16</sup> Now, a complex thing is just something with constituents, or parts, whereas something not composite, or simple, is something without parts, something which must do whatever it does with the whole of itself. So Plotinus's opening question remains essentially the same as that of Sextus's dilemma. The first part of his answer agrees

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<sup>15</sup> *Enn.* 5.3.1 and especially 5.3.5. The full title of this treatise is "On the Knowing Hypostases and That Which is Beyond." The titles were assigned not by Plotinus himself but by his student, Porphyry, who also assembled all of his teacher's writings according to a numerological scheme. *Enneas* means "the number nine" or "a group of nine," and Porphyry sorted the treatises into six groups of nine, sometimes cutting treatises into pieces to satisfy the formula. For a discussion of the exact relationship between Plotinus's version of this paradox and those of earlier Skeptics, see Wallis 1987:922–25.

<sup>16</sup> *Enn.* 5.3.1.1–6.

likewise with Sextus, insofar as it rejects the possibility of self-knowledge for a complex. But Plotinus does not complain, as Sextus does, that self-inquiry by a part of the self invites an infinite regress. Instead, he objects that “this will be, not what we are looking for, a thing which thinks itself, but one thing thinking another.”<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere he repeats the point, recalling the vision analogy to argue that self-knowledge by a part is impossible because “in this way one would be the seer, and the other the seen; but this is not ‘self-knowledge’.”<sup>18</sup>

So long as perfect self-knowledge is possible, then, it must be achieved by the whole of the self. “One must,” Plotinus writes, “assume that a simple thing thinks itself.”<sup>19</sup> One must assume this, of course, only if perfect self-knowledge is indeed possible. Plotinus believes, however, that “many absurdities follow from its abandonment.”<sup>20</sup> Chief among these absurdities will be the invalidation of all knowledge, but that consequence will not become clear to us for a while, not until we have turned in the next section to his general epistemology. For now, while we focus on self-knowledge specifically, we can recall another source of his conviction that it is possible, namely his own experience of it: “Often I have woken up out of my body to my self and have entered into myself.”<sup>21</sup> So begins the confessional passage with which this chapter began. Confident that perfect self-knowledge could be achieved, for whatever reason, Plotinus concludes that only a simple could achieve it.

### 1.3. PLOTINUS’S SELF

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<sup>17</sup> *Enn.* 5.3.1.12

<sup>18</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.5.3–4.

<sup>19</sup> *Enn.* 5.3.1.13–14.

<sup>20</sup> *Enn.* 5.3.1.16–17.

<sup>21</sup> *Enn.* 4.8.1.1–3.

Next, he turns to “investigate as far as possible how it does so,”<sup>22</sup> for this is no easy task. In order to circumvent the objection of Sextus’s dilemma, after all, he must explain how something simple, thinking itself as a whole, still has an object to know. To circumvent the objection of the reformulated dilemma more germane to his own idiom, moreover, he must explain how something simple still has enough duality to admit a distinguishable subject and object. Neither formulation of the objection is easily met, but we can make a little headway against the first by noticing, with Plotinus, that it weighs only against a self that is a quantity. For if the self is a quantity, and the whole quantity of the self is taken up with being the subject of inquiry, there will be no quantity left over to be the object of its inquiry. Plotinus can make some headway against this objection, then, by replying that the self has no quantity. Because every body has quantity, because every body has a size, this would be tantamount to claiming that the self is non-bodily, immaterial.

He lays the foundation for this claim in a short treatise, “On Complete Transfusion” (2.7), where he argues that for two things to be completely transfused, as the subject and object of perfect self-knowledge must be, they cannot be bodies.<sup>23</sup> No matter how thoroughly two bodies be mixed, he claims, either their parts become juxtaposed to one another, or some of these parts must be destroyed in order to make room for others. Thus, if the bodies are to be wholly preserved, no more intimate union between them is possible than juxtaposition of their tiniest parts. The perfect self-knower, as we have seen, cannot be divided into parts at all: he must know himself with his whole, and must know himself as this very same whole. He must, in other words,

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<sup>22</sup> *Enn.* 5.3.1.14.

<sup>23</sup> *Enn.* 2.7 (especially 2.7.1). Plotinus raises these same points in another treatise, “The Immortality of the Soul” (4.7; especially 4.7.8[2]), to argue that the soul is immaterial.

experience a complete transfusion of the subject and object of his self-inquiry.

Juxtaposition of tiny parts may make a very fine mixture, but it cannot reach the complete transfusion of whole by whole demanded in perfect self-knowledge. “For bodies are hindered from communion with each other by bodies,” he writes elsewhere, “but incorporeal things are not kept apart by bodies.”<sup>24</sup> Perfect self-knowledge therefore requires the self to be wholly immaterial.

Should it achieve perfect self-knowledge, furthermore, this immaterial self must know itself as essentially a thinking thing. “When we are thinking ourselves we are,” Plotinus observes, “looking at a thinking nature, or our statement that there is thinking would be false.”<sup>25</sup> The argument is hypothetical, and doubly so: if we think *ourselves*, the object of the thinking must be the same as its subject; if we *think* ourselves, this selfsame object of our thought must also be performing the same activity of thinking that its subject performs. Blending these two conditionals together, Plotinus writes: “If, then, we think, and think ourselves, we think a nature which is thinking.”<sup>26</sup> In perfect self-knowledge, the thinking subject is also the thinking object; perfect self-knowledge, if it is possible, therefore reveals the self as a thinking thing. So much the argument entitles Plotinus to infer, but it entitles him also to two more precise conclusions that he does not mention here, although he assumes them elsewhere.

First of all, the subject is not simply thinking, that is, thinking about anything at all, it is self-thinking, thinking precisely about itself. Since the object of this self-thinking must be the same as its subject, the self must be not simply a thinking thing, as Plotinus

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<sup>24</sup> *Enn.* 6.9.8.30–32.

<sup>25</sup> *Enn.* 3.9.6.1–2. This argument seems to have inspired similar versions in Augustine, from whom Descartes apparently adopted his own two versions. For a discussion of these derivative arguments, their differences from the originals in Plotinus, and some of the flaws they introduce, see Sorabji 2006:217–21.

<sup>26</sup> *Enn.* 3.9.6.2–3.

concludes above, but specifically a self-thinking thing. Secondly, and more precisely still, there cannot be any distinction between this self-thinking thing and its activity of self-thinking. Since the object of this self-thinking must be the same as its subject, if there were a distinction between the self-thinker and its self-thinking, a dilemma would arise about the identity of this object: would it be the thinker or its activity of thinking? Neither option is satisfactory. For if the object is the self-thinker, on the one hand, and this self-thinker is distinct from its activity of self-thinking, then the subject would likewise be the self-thinker as distinct from its activity of self-thinking. Yet if the object were the activity of self-thinking, on the other hand, then it would not be the substantial self sought by this activity. The only way to resolve this subtle dilemma is to make the self-thinker identical to its activity of thinking itself, as Plotinus does,<sup>27</sup> entitling to reason more precisely as follows: If, then, we think, and think ourselves, we think a nature which is thinking itself; that is to say, we think a nature which is this very self-thinking.

To be clear, though, this thinking nature, this activity of self-inquiry that the perfect self-knower essentially is, cannot be at any time a movement toward a goal as yet unreached. For if there were some time when self-inquiry was imperfect, there would be at that time a gap between the subject and the object of the inquiry. But if ever there is such a gap, there must always be one. As we have seen, there can be no self-inquiry properly speaking whenever there is a gap between subject and object of the inquiry, but instead only the inquiry of one thing into another. Self-knowledge must therefore be a timeless inheritance, according to Plotinus, not something to be sought in time. But if imperfect self-inquiry must be futile, if perfect self-knowledge cannot be sought in time, and if we here in time do not yet have it, how can Plotinus enjoin us seek it? Knowing

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<sup>27</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.5.38–49.

ourselves is our highest aspiration, he often writes, but his argument seems to place it out of our reach.<sup>28</sup> Given this obstacle, moreover, how did he himself achieve it, especially if his own experience of perfect self-knowledge really does underwrite his conclusions about the self? This problem, as we shall see, proves to be one of the most nettlesome of his philosophy.

In the meantime, though, we should review the highlights of the argument that have brought us to this point: if perfect self-knowledge, total self-recognition at a moment, is possible, the self-knower must know himself as a whole; in order to do so, the subject and object of his self-inquiry must be the same; this identity has three significant consequences: first of all, the self of the inquiry must be immaterial; secondly, it must be a thinking thing; finally, it must have its self-knowledge as a timeless inheritance.

Immaterial, thinking, timeless: this is the self, according to Plotinus.

However promising this argument is, at least in outline, some of its main moves remain obscure, to say the least. Fortunately, Plotinus himself recognizes this obscurity and seeks to dispel as much of it as he can. After concluding that only a simple could know itself perfectly, recall, he promised to “investigate as far as possible how it does so.”<sup>29</sup> Two obstacles loomed large then, and have hardly shrunk since. To the first, Plotinus must still explain how something simple, thinking itself as a whole, has any object left to know. Even if he has shown that a body could not do this, he must still explain how something non-bodily could. Until then, he cannot satisfy the skeptic who denies that self-knowledge is possible. To the second obstacle, he must still explain how something simple has enough duality nonetheless to admit a distinguishable subject and

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<sup>28</sup> *Enn.* 4.7.10; 5.3.4; 6.7.41; 6.8.13; 6.9.7.

<sup>29</sup> *Enn.* 5.3.1.14.

object. Until then, he cannot satisfy anyone who credits the principle of non-contradiction.

In the next section, on his general epistemology, we shall retrace the many steps by which he surmounts this obstacle. Pure Intellect, he will argue, knows itself when it knows the Forms within itself. As Intellect it is one; as Forms, many; without violating the principle of non-contradiction, this perfect self-knower is a “one-many.”<sup>30</sup>

## 2. KNOWING BEING

Pure intellect is one of the ‘hypostases’ of Plotinus, three principles (*archai*) he extracts from his predecessors, but especially Plato, in order to resolve the most basic problems they faced. From the beginning of their tradition, these predecessors had worried above all about unity-in-difference. As we saw earlier, the Milesians first gave the problem shape, a shape Heraclitus and Parmenides would mold, but which Plato would cast for Plotinus to fill with his own innovations: how can different individual things share one nature?<sup>31</sup> How can different instances of beauty, for instance, share the one nature of being beautiful?<sup>32</sup> The following dilemma seemed to threaten any proposed solution: if there is just one nature, it cannot be shared fully by every instance; but if there is a distinct nature for each instance, these natures cannot also be one and the same.<sup>33</sup> Plato’s response to this problem was to hypostatize a Form—although he never made clear when

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<sup>30</sup> *Enn.* 5.1.8.27 (*hen polla*).

<sup>31</sup> *Parmenides* 127e. See also: *Meno* 72a–c; *Philebus* 34e.

<sup>32</sup> *Symposium* 211a–212a.

<sup>33</sup> *Parmenides* 130e–131b; *Republic* 10.596a.

it was appropriate to do so and when not.<sup>34</sup> A Form he supposed to be one thing whose immaterial nature could be fully shared by different material instances without compromising its identity.<sup>35</sup>

Although this response to the ontological problem of unity-in-difference provoked its own worries, which Plato himself shared,<sup>36</sup> it had the advantage of addressing the epistemological problem that also preoccupied him: how can we know a world that always appears—most evidently after Heraclitus—to be changing?<sup>37</sup> How is it possible to know the nature of beauty, for instance, when the circumstances in which beauty appears disappear the very moment they arise? According to the epistemology Plato developed in tandem with the ontology just sketched, we know something stable whenever we turn our cognitive attention away from ever-changing material bodies, with the contradictory reports sensation makes about them, and toward the consistent contact of pure reason with the unchanging immaterial Forms.<sup>38</sup> This response to the epistemological problem provoked its own worries, not surprisingly, but Plato raised them amid the others about his ontology.<sup>39</sup> Plato's two most distinctive doctrines—immaterial Forms and pure intellect—thus appeared intertwined, as though succeeding or failing together.

Nowhere does their twin fate become clearer than in Plotinus. As a devoted Platonist, he inherited these doctrines, with all their assets and liabilities. Most often he presumes their soundness, addressing other questions in their light, but on a few occasions he does elaborate and defend them directly. The three most rigorous such

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<sup>34</sup> *Parmenides* 132a, 130b–d.

<sup>35</sup> *Parmenides* 129a; *Phaedo* 100b–102a. See also *Parmenides* 131b, where one day—which is immaterial—is said to be fully present in different places without making it many.

<sup>36</sup> *Parmenides* 130a–133a.

<sup>37</sup> *Symposium* 207d–208b; *Republic* 5.479a–e; *Theaetetus* 152d–e.

<sup>38</sup> *Republic* 5.475e–480a; *Phaedo* 74d–76a, 82d–84b; *Parmenides* 132c.

<sup>39</sup> *Parmenides* 133b–135c.

occasions are found in the fifth Ennead: in the treatise we have already discussed, “On the Knowing Hypostases” (5.3), but also in two others: “That the Intelligibles are not Outside the Intellect” (5.5), and “On Intellect, Forms, and Being” (5.9).<sup>40</sup> Just as his earlier discussion of self-knowledge seemed to respond to a dilemma in Sextus, so too does his treatment of knowledge more generally address a skeptical argument. Therefore, in order to understand how Plotinus elaborates and defends the twin doctrines of Platonism, warranting his hypostasis of a pure Intellect, which he calls not just “a great god” but even “universal god,”<sup>41</sup> we should consider first this skeptical argument.

## 2.1. SEXTUS’S PARADOX

Chief among the Skeptics’ rivals were the Epicureans and Stoics, who, despite their many doctrinal differences, shared a basic epistemological model: we know the world by receiving representations of it. Both were aware of how deceptive appearances and representations could be, especially in circumstances such as those later catalogued by Sextus,<sup>42</sup> so they sought a criterion to distinguish deceptive representations from truthful ones. While they quarreled over this criterion, which would reveal the precise cause of truthful representations, they agreed that “the truth is perceived not in so far as it appears but owing to another cause.”<sup>43</sup> But this agreement is vulnerable to the following skeptical question: “How do they perceive this cause itself?” Sextus suggests two answers, which together present a dilemma: “as appearing to them or as not appearing?” The second

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<sup>40</sup> The ordering of the treatises was no more Plotinus’s own than were their titles. Porphyry arranged them topically, rather than chronologically, so that, e.g., the treatises of the fifth Ennead concern primarily Intellect. But few of Plotinus’s treatises stick exclusively to one topic, and most treat other major elements of his philosophy, as the full title of 5.5 shows: “That the Intelligibles are not Outside the Intellect, and On the Good.”

<sup>41</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.3.2–3: *ei de, theos tis megas; mallon de ou tis, alla pas axioi tauta einai*

<sup>42</sup> *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.31–186.

<sup>43</sup> *M.* 8.48–50.

option is unavailable, for “how have they perceived what is not appearing to them?” Nor is the first option any more accessible. After all, if the cause of a truthful representation were to appear to them, this additional appearance, or representation, might also deceive. Underwriting this representation with still another would evidently send them off on an infinite regress. “As the inquisition thus proceeds *ad infinitum*,” Sextus concludes, “the true becomes undiscoverable.”<sup>44</sup>

## 2.2. PLOTINUS’S SOLUTION

Plotinus seems to have this very argument in mind when he himself criticizes sense-perception at the beginning of 5.5. “There is a lack of confidence about even those objects of sense-perception which seem to inspire the strongest confidence in their self-evidence,” he writes, “whether their apparent existence may be not in the underlying realities, but in the ways the sense organs are affected.”<sup>45</sup> To distinguish true from deceptive sense-perceptions, he adds, those who rely on them for knowledge “need intellect or discursive reason to make judgments about them.”<sup>46</sup> The basic problem with this approach—so cleverly exposed by Sextus to criticize dogmatism, but so readily exploited by Plotinus to defend his own doctrines—is that whatever “is known by sense-perception is an image of the thing, and sense-perception does not apprehend the thing

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<sup>44</sup> The same skeptical problem would preoccupy early modern philosophers, especially the British Empiricists, who were never able to shake its basic objection: that intermediaries such as representations (or impressions and ideas) between the knower and the known introduce the possibility of error, turning knowledge into mere belief. Richard Rorty (1979) accordingly criticizes the representational epistemology dominant in modern philosophy, defending his preferred pragmatist alternative, whose best exponents were Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. He does not mention the provenance of this alternative in the Sophists (cf. Socrates’ prosopopeia of Protagoras in *Theaetetus*, 166e–167). Nor does he seriously entertain Hegel’s phenomenology, the closest modern alternative to Plotinus’s idealist approach.

<sup>45</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.1.12–14.

<sup>46</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.1.16.

itself: for that remains outside.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, representational epistemologies are doomed because they alienate the knower from the known. To fill the gap between them, it must interpose representations whose credibility cannot ever be established beyond doubt.

To remedy this problem, and thereby preserve the possibility of knowledge, Plotinus does not fill the gap between knower and known with something else, something somehow more reliable than representations; he closes the gap altogether. For if the intelligible objects remain in any way external to the intellect, the possibility of mistaking them arises and knowledge becomes impossible. “If they are going to say that the intelligibles and the Intellect are linked,” Plotinus asks, “what does this ‘linked’ mean?”<sup>48</sup> If it means that the intelligibles are at all external to the Intellect, there must be some intermediary, and then “how will it know that it really grasped them?”<sup>49</sup> Only if the intelligibles are within the Intellect, he thus concludes, is knowledge possible: “The contemplation must be the same as the contemplated, and Intellect the same as the intelligible; for, if not the same, there will not be truth.”<sup>50</sup>

Someone sensitive to the skeptical challenge, but hesitant before such metaphysical abstractions as Forms within Intellect, might object that this is too rigorous a standard of knowledge. Would not justified true belief—an account of knowledge canvassed even by Plato—remain possible?<sup>51</sup> Not according to Plotinus, whose argument entails that even justification must close the gap between intellect and its objects. To illustrate this argument, let us imagine an intellect entertaining one hundred specific

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<sup>47</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.1.17–20.

<sup>48</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.1.24.

<sup>49</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.1.29.

<sup>50</sup> *Enn.* 5.3.5.23–25.

<sup>51</sup> *Theaetetus* 201c–210a.

beliefs, while also believing generally that one of them may be false. This is roughly like the position of someone who seeks knowledge but has been rattled by Skepticism. If this intellect is to justify any one of these beliefs, it must guarantee it against the general suspicion of falsehood. But how can it do so without appealing to the other beliefs, each of which labors under the same suspicion? Only by self-evidence, writes Plotinus, “for even if anyone did say that some of the things it knows were known by demonstration, some, all the same, would be immediately self-evident to it.”<sup>52</sup> The only way for something to be self-evident to intellect, as we have seen, is for it to be within intellect, directly present to it without any representation. The argument thus far, then, shows that at least one thing the intellect knows must be within it.

According to Plotinus, moreover, “the argument in fact says that all things it knows are self-evident.”<sup>53</sup> His reasoning becomes clearer with the help of one of his examples, the sort of necessary truth he considers demonstrable from knowledge of its components alone: “Justice is Beautiful.”<sup>54</sup> (Remembering the less controversial example of Plato, we might have preferred “Three is Odd,”<sup>55</sup> but anyone who balks at the moral and aesthetic necessity of Plotinus’s choice can easily substitute the mathematical one of Plato’s.) If there is a Form of Justice and a Form of Beauty, as he assumes, the necessary truth of their relation, which he also assumes, must be some real and intimate relation between the Forms themselves. For “if they are going to say that justice and beauty are simple realities, justice by itself and beauty by itself,” Plotinus objects, “the intelligible

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<sup>52</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.1.7–9.

<sup>53</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.1.8.

<sup>54</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.1.41.

<sup>55</sup> *Phaedo* 103e–104b.

will not be a unity or in a unity.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, he thinks the reality corresponding to the proposition “Justice is Beautiful,” the intelligible object that makes it necessarily true, must itself be both unified and in a unity. Only so, he reasons, can it be necessarily true and known as such.

But why? Why must this intelligible object be in a unity, and why must it be unified itself? The answers to these two peculiar questions are the same, in the end, but this common answer emerges most easily when we respond to the questions separately. First of all, this intelligible object must be in the Intellect, just as any other intelligible must be, lest it become impossible to know; any gap between it and the Intellect, as we have just seen, invites the skeptical argument against representational knowledge. Secondly, this Intellect must itself be a unity, lest it become unable to know itself; any gap within an intellect, as we saw in the first section of this chapter, invites the skeptical argument against self-knowledge. Combining these two answers, we find the intelligible object in something unified, so that it too must be unified. Within themselves and all together, therefore, the following must be in unity: the intelligible object known by the Intellect that knows a necessary truth; the intelligible objects, or Forms, that compose any intelligible object corresponding to this truth; and finally, the Intellect knowing these objects.

### 2.3. PLOTINUS’S INTELLECT

Plotinus thus infers a unity of Forms and intellect from two assumptions: self-knowledge and the knowledge of necessary truths. With so complete a transfusion of intellect and the Forms, it is no surprise to find him mentioning with approval the third fragment of

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<sup>56</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.1.42–44.

Parmenides: “thinking and being are the same.”<sup>57</sup> Interpreting ‘being’ (*einai*) in this fragment as the equivalent of Platonic Forms or Aristotelian essences, and thereby synthesizing the epistemological tradition we have been investigating, Plotinus adopts their shared view of knowledge, that it is an identity between thinking and being, knower and known, subject and object. More than recapitulating this view, however, and far from producing a degenerate syncretism, he has refined their identity epistemology by his encounter with skepticism. Echoing Sextus’s critique of representational epistemology, while assuming with Plato that immaterial Forms alone account for the manifest unity-in-difference, Plotinus shows not only how knowledge of these Forms requires Intellect’s identification with them, but also how their necessary relations among themselves requires identification with intellect. More precisely, he shows how these necessary relations require identification not simply with the intellect of individual humans, but rather with the principle he hypostatizes as Intellect.

The argument for this last conclusion is very subtle.<sup>58</sup> Yet if the Form of Justice and the Form of Beauty are necessarily related, as Plotinus believes, something must guarantee the necessity of this relation. The guarantor should become more apparent if we revert to the less controversial example of Plato’s *Phaedo*: three is odd.<sup>59</sup> Because this is a necessary truth, the Form of Three must be related to the Form of Odd in such a way as to guarantee that every instance of Three is an instance of Odd. Socrates’ three accusers must also be an odd number of accusers, just as the three great Pythagoreans

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<sup>57</sup> *Enn.* 5.1.8.17: (*to gar auto noein esti te kai einai*). This is an accurate quotation, as is 5.9.5.29–30. See also the inaccurate ones at 1.4.10.6 (*to auto to noein kai einai*) and 3.8.8.8 (*tauton to einai kai to noein einai*). Gerson (2009:150, n.10) claims that Plotinus cites this fragment seven times with approval.

<sup>58</sup> Without Lloyd Gerson’s acute exposition, in fact, it would be difficult to recognize at all (Gerson 1994:48–52). This chapter is indebted to Gerson at many points, but here above all.

<sup>59</sup> *Phaedo* 103e–104b.

must also be an odd number of Pythagoreans, and so on. But what exactly is this necessary relation between these two Forms, or any others which together underwrite a necessary truth? Two explanations are initially attractive, but both appear troublesome after a quick inspection. Yet after introducing them and inspecting their shoals, we can navigate carefully between them and then moor more securely in Plotinus's own explanation: Intellect.

First of all, perhaps these Forms are related to one another as part is related to whole: the Form of Three is a part of the Form of Odd. With such a relation between them, it seems, every instance of the Form of Three would also be an instance of the Form of Odd, for through its participation in the Form contained as part it would necessarily participate in the Form containing as whole. Analogously, after all, if you touch a column, which is a part of a temple, you necessarily also touch the temple, which contains the column as a part. But a disanalogy spoils the comparison: the temple is material, whereas Forms are immaterial. Material bodies are divisible into parts because they have magnitude; immaterial Forms, by contrast, have neither magnitude nor parts—they are indivisible.<sup>60</sup> A group of three things participates in the Form of Odd, to be sure, but it thereby participates also in the whole Form of Odd, for a group of three things is no less odd than it is three. It is precisely because Forms are immaterial, as we saw at the beginning of this section, that their diverse participants can participate in their wholes, without them being divided. So Forms are not related to one another as parts are related to wholes.

Secondly, then, if the Form of Three is not a part of the Form of Odd, one might try to explain their necessary relation as an identity. Did not Plotinus say that such Forms

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<sup>60</sup> *Enn.* 5.9.5.45: *ou gar megethē*.

must be unified?<sup>61</sup> With such a tight relation between them, every instance of the Form of Three would certainly also be an instance of the Form of Odd, and no less so of one than of the other. Yet these Forms have separate instances—a group of five things is an instance of the Form of Odd, but not of the Form of Three—and this would be impossible were the Forms truly identical. The relation of identity is therefore too tight: to account for the necessary truth that three is odd it must disregard the differences between the respective Forms. The relation of part and whole, however, proved too loose: to account for this necessary truth it had to ignore the participation of an instance of one Form in the whole of the other. These two efforts fail, to be sure, but viewed together they trace the contours of a successful alternative. To explain the necessary relations between Forms we must posit something tighter than the relation of part and whole, but looser than the relation of identity. This middle alternative, Plotinus thinks, is Intellect.

Adopting the notions of actuality and potentiality from Aristotle, and using them to explain this Platonic doctrine, Plotinus considers each Form the full actualization of its instances' potentialities.<sup>62</sup> This explanation is not at all foreign to Plato, who describes someone taking two sticks that he sees as equal and comparing their equality to the Form of equality, realizing “that that which he now sees wants to be like some other reality but falls short and cannot be like that other since it is inferior.”<sup>63</sup> The Form of Equality, in this hybrid Platonic-Aristotelian idiom, is the full actualization of the potentiality for equality in these two sticks. Every Form, in this way, is the full actualization of some distinct potentiality. “Each,” Plotinus writes, “is a special power.”<sup>64</sup> Yet every Form by

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<sup>61</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.1.42–44.

<sup>62</sup> *Enn.* 5.9 *passim*.

<sup>63</sup> *Phaedo* 74d–e.

<sup>64</sup> *Enn.* 5.9.6.9: *hekaston dunamis idia*.

itself remains nonetheless potential in one crucial respect: it is intelligible, a possible object of thought, but as such unable to actualize itself.<sup>65</sup>

By contemplating one of these Forms with your individual intellect, then, it appears that you could grant it some additional actuality. There is a shadow of truth in this appearance, and so Plotinus uses it as an image of his principle's supreme intellection. For an individual intellect thinks of multiple Forms simultaneously, unifying them within itself as a complex thought, but also managing somehow to keep them distinct. When you think that three is odd, for example, you think three and you think odd, while also thinking them together in their necessary relation. "Each individual thought," Plotinus writes, "is clear of the other thoughts which remain within the mind when it comes into activity."<sup>66</sup> Despite the appeal of this analogy, however, the activity of an individual intellect is only an image of supreme intellection, its model, because an individual intellect is limited. Among other shortcomings, after all, you could not sustain your contemplation for the eternity demanded by the actual guarantors of necessary truth. For your intellect is distinct from its intellection: sometimes you think, and other times you do not. What is needed is an eternal principle that "really thinks the real beings."<sup>67</sup>

This is Intellect. Plotinus claims that it not only thinks these real beings, the Forms, it even "establishes them in existence."<sup>68</sup> It must therefore be more than metaphysical glue, so to speak, it must do more than merely hold pre-existent Forms in eternal relations in order to guarantee necessary truths. Even if it establish them in existence, however, Plotinus does not think it brings them into existence—that is to say,

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<sup>65</sup> See 5.3.5.33–36.

<sup>66</sup> *Enn.* 5.9.6.7–8.

<sup>67</sup> *Enn.* 5.9.5.13: *ontōs noei ta onta.*

<sup>68</sup> *Enn.* 5.9.5.14: *kai huphistēsīn.*

creates them—by thinking them. It is “incorrect to say that the Forms are thoughts,” he insists, “if what is meant by this is that when Intellect thought this particular Form came into existence.”<sup>69</sup> To say this would make Intellect prior to Form, but Plotinus believes that their relationship is the reverse. “For what is thought,” he claims, “must be prior to what is thinking.”<sup>70</sup> The Forms are what is thought, the objects, whereas the Intellect is what is thinking, the subject, so the Forms must be prior to the Intellect. How, then, can this *posterior* Intellect establish these *prior* Forms in existence? How can it do this, moreover, without bringing them into existence? What sort of relationship would make this apparently contradictory feat possible?

#### 2.4. THE ONE-MANY

Among other analogies, Plotinus compares the relationship of Intellect and Forms to a whole and its parts,<sup>71</sup> preferring two specific versions, each of which exploits the distinction between potentiality and actuality. In the first version of this mereological analogy, “the powers (*dunameis*) of seeds (*spermata*) give a likeness of what we are talking about.”<sup>72</sup> A seed is an apparently simple whole within which there are nonetheless distinct powers—the power to see, for example, or to grab.<sup>73</sup> Fully actualized, these powers become the parts of the organism—the eye, or the hand—but in this tiny whole they remain undistinguished. “Their rational forming principles (*logoi*) are as if in one

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<sup>69</sup> *Enn.* 5.9.7.14–16.

<sup>70</sup> *Enn.* 5.9.7.16–17. See also 5.9.8.11–12. Aristotle likewise assumes this principle (*De Anima* 3.4 [esp. 429a17], *Metaphysics* 12.9 [esp. 1074b17–21], which seems to stem from Parmenides B6.1: “That which is there to be spoken and thought of must be.”

<sup>71</sup> *Enn.* 5.9.6.10–11.

<sup>72</sup> *Enn.* 5.9.6.11–12.

<sup>73</sup> *Enn.* 5.9.6. 15–25. Following Aristotle, and many other ancient biologists, Plotinus believed that the *sperma* contained the form of the fully developed organism, with all its powers or potentialities, but lacked only the matter.

central point,” Plotinus writes, “and all the same there is one principle of the eye and another of the hand.”<sup>74</sup> The seed thus establishes these powers into full existence, as it grows and actualizes them, but unless they were already in existence as powers it could not do so. Analogously, the Intellect establishes the Forms into full existence, actualizing their intelligibility while thinking them. But unless they were already in existence as potential objects of thought, it could not do so.

Helpful as this version of the analogy may be to our imaginations, it fails in two important ways to explain the relationship between Intellect and Forms. First of all, it appeals to a material whole with really distinct parts; however simple the tiny whole of the seed may appear to our eyes, its material parts are really distinct. Although the Forms are like parts of Intellect, they cannot be really distinct, lest they destroy its unity. Furthermore, this version of the analogy appeals to a temporal sequence: the eye and the hand are at the beginning mere powers of the seed; much later, when the seed grows into a full-fledged animal, they become actualities. Although the Forms are actualized by Intellect’s contemplation of them, there is no earlier moment when they are merely potential; they must be eternally active. Because the seed version of the mereological analogy thus involves matter and time, both of which are foreign to the immaterial and eternal principles of Intellect and the Forms, Plotinus favors a second version of the analogy that involves neither.

According to this second version, “the whole body of knowledge is all its theorems, but each theorem is a part of the whole, not as being spatially distinct, but as having its particular power in the whole.”<sup>75</sup> The whole body of knowledge, or science,

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<sup>74</sup> *Enn.* 5.9.6.13–14.

<sup>75</sup> *Enn.* 5.9.8.5–7.

occupies no space or time; it is unified, even indivisible, yet it nonetheless contains its theorems as parts. How so? Their distinction is logical rather than ontological: one theorem has a power that the others do not, the power to explain what the other theorems cannot, but it is not thereby a different thing, with an independent existence. As a science is to its theorems, Plotinus thinks, so too is Intellect to its Forms. For he supposes the Intellect to be similarly outside space and time, containing the Forms as distinct parts, even though its unity is not jeopardized by their distinction. As with the theorems of a science, furthermore, this distinction is merely logical, not ontological. But how does he conceive this logical distinction? The Forms are separate powers, as we have seen, but now this conception needs to be made more precise.

On one hand, a Form is an *actuality* of different instances which have the potentiality to embody it more or less. As we saw at the beginning of this section, for example, the Form of Equality is the perfect actuality approximated by different instances of equality to greater or lesser degrees. On the other hand, as we saw more recently, a Form is an intelligible object, which is to say a *potentiality* to be contemplated. The Form of Equality is thus not only an actuality relative to its many instances, it is a potentiality relative to its contemplator. Plotinus thus distinguishes between an actuality (*energeia*) and a first actuality (*prōtē energeia*);<sup>76</sup> in Aristotelian terms, this is the distinction between a first actuality and a higher, second actuality—between someone, on one hand, who has actualized the ability to learn a language but is not presently speaking it, and someone, on the other hand, who is actively doing so.<sup>77</sup> Analyzed in these terms, the Forms are logically distinct actualities, whereas Intellect is their common, higher-order

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<sup>76</sup> *Enn.* 5.3.5.36–37.

<sup>77</sup> *De Anima* 416a22–417b2.

actuality. Just as a science contains many theorems, without compromising its unity, Intellect contains many Forms.

Now, however, a problem arises that threatens to pierce the heart of Plotinus's system. For this system seems to commit him to the following inconsistent set of beliefs: first of all, the Forms are prior to Intellect, inasmuch as the intelligible object is prior to any intellection of it; secondly, Intellect actualizes the Forms fully, inasmuch as they have the potential to be contemplated by it; thirdly, actuality is prior to potentiality, inasmuch as "it is in every way superlatively absurd," according to Plotinus, "not to put actuality before potency."<sup>78</sup> The inconsistency arises because the first belief seems to contradict a combination of the second and the third, which together entail a fourth: Intellect, as actuality, is prior to the Forms, which are potentialities to be thought. In sum, the Forms appear both prior and posterior to Intellect. Plotinus dispels this contradiction—or reaches the edge of meaningful discourse in his effort to do so—by reminding us not only that the Forms are within Intellect, but also, because there is no substantial distinction between them, that Intellect is within the Forms. Intellect and the Forms are one thing, he thinks; or rather, they are a "one-many" (*hen polla*).<sup>79</sup>

Those intolerant of paradox will be tempted to dismiss this formula as Neoplatonist obscurantism, but Plotinus has come to it honestly, by a series of lucid albeit intricate arguments. Our discussion of his general epistemology has endeavored to reconstruct these arguments, along roughly the following lines: different necessary truths

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<sup>78</sup> *Enn.* 6.1.26.1–3; see also, e.g., *Enn.* 5.9.4.5–8, where Plotinus applies the principle to soul. Aristotle privileged actuality over potentiality: *Metaph.* 1049b4–17; *De Anima* 415a19–20; *Phys.* 200a32–200b3. For his use of it to privilege active intellect over its passive counterpart—just as Plotinus uses it to privilege Intellect over Forms—see also *De Anima* 430a20–22.

<sup>79</sup> *Enn.* 5.1.8.26. Gerson 1994:44 notes the following instances of this or similar expressions: 4.8.3.10; 5.3.15.11, 22; 6.2.2.2; 7.2.10.11; 6.2.15.14; 6.2.21.7, 46–47; 6.2.22.10; 6.5.6.1–2; 6.6.8.22; 6.6.13.52–53; 6.7.8.17–18; 6.7.14.11–12; 6.7.39.11–14.

require diverse constellations of distinct Forms, but these truths also require their correlative Forms to be one with the unified Intellect that actualizes them fully; only so, Plotinus argues, can we account for the existence of such truths, let alone our knowledge of them; only so, ultimately, can we account for unity in diversity. “Intellect is all things together,” he thus concludes, “and also not together.”<sup>80</sup>

## 2.5 DIVINE SELF-KNOWLEDGE

To this heady blend of Intellect and intelligible Forms, finally, Plotinus adds Intellect’s intellection, for neither can there be any real distinction between Intellect’s substance and its activity. There is such a distinction between you and your intellectual activity, by contrast, because there are times when you do not actively think, although even then you preserve the power to do so. If Intellect were in potentiality to its intellection, however, it could not fully actualize the Forms on its own, but would require something further to actualize it. This something further would in turn either be the same as its activity, or it too would require something further to actualize it, and so on to infinity. Stopping this regress with Intellect, then, just as Aristotle stopped a similar one with his supreme god, Plotinus writes that “its substance is actuality, it is one and the same with its actuality.”<sup>81</sup>

Accordingly, we should pause for a moment to consider the many ways in which this Intellect resembles Aristotle’s god. In order to be pure activity, recall, his god also had to be identical with its activity, thinking, lest he be in any way potential and thereby require something further to actualize him in turn.<sup>82</sup> In order to be truly active, moreover,

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<sup>80</sup> *Enn.* 5.9.6.8–9.

<sup>81</sup> *Enn.* 5.3.5.42–44.

<sup>82</sup> *Metaphysics* 1074b19–21.

his god likewise had to think about something, lest his thought have no object.<sup>83</sup> Finally, in order to remain purely active, in order to avoid any infection of potentiality, the object of this thought had to be no less active than himself.<sup>84</sup> God alone satisfied this last condition, so that the object of divine thought had to be none other than its subject.<sup>85</sup> Aristotle concluded, as we saw in an earlier chapter, that his “thinking is a thinking of thinking” (*noēsis...noēseōs noēsis*).<sup>86</sup> Presuming the same arguments, and echoing the same vocabulary, Plotinus similarly concludes: “All together are one, Intellect (*nous*), intellection (*noēsis*), the intelligible (*noēton*).”<sup>87</sup>

From this conclusion, he immediately deduces the following bewildering succession of claims:

If therefore Intellect’s intellection is the intelligible, and the intelligible is itself, it will itself think itself: for it will think with the intellection which it is itself and will think the intelligible, which it is itself. In both ways, then, it will think itself, in that intellection is itself and in that the intelligible is itself which it thinks in its intellection and which is itself.<sup>88</sup>

Even for Plotinus these sentences are compressed, but the arguments we have been reconstructing in this chapter should help us to unpack them. By identifying as one substance all three—Intellect, its intellection, and the intelligible—he has thoroughly identified the subject and object of Intellect’s thought. Indeed, he has been so careful to do so that he has closed every gap between Intellect’s substance and its activity; the activity of thinking is its substance, and so it never ceases to think. Thinking eternally,

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<sup>83</sup> *Metaphysics* 1074b17–18.

<sup>84</sup> *Metaphysics* 1074b26–27.

<sup>85</sup> *Metaphysics* 1074b33–34.

<sup>86</sup> *Metaphysics* 1074b34.

<sup>87</sup> *Enn.* 5.3.5.44.

<sup>88</sup> *Enn.* 5.3.5.45–50.

with the identity of its subject and object secure, Plotinus is entitled to conclude that Intellect thinks itself. In other words, he has defended the possibility of perfect self-knowledge against Sextus's first paradox. For that paradox required the self-knower to have enough duality to *know* himself but also enough unity to know *himself*. The logical distinction between subject and object of Intellect's activity affords this duality; their substantial identity affords it the requisite unity.

With the possibility of self-knowledge established, moreover, Plotinus has also managed to defend the possibility of general knowledge against Sextus's second paradox. For there can be no more gap between Intellect and the intelligible, as we have seen, than there is between Intellect and its intellection. Knowing all the Forms, Intellect knows itself; knowing itself, it knows all the Forms. The relationship between them, in other words, is tight enough for self-knowledge, but loose enough for knowledge. The solution to Sextus's paradox of self-knowledge is thus the same as the solution to his paradox of knowledge more generally. The only difference between these solutions is a matter of emphasis: Intellect can know itself because it is a one-many; it is able to know infallibly because it is, as it were, a many-one. Plotinus thus resolves these two skeptical paradoxes, if at all, with his own paradox: pure reason.

A brief review of his resolution and the paradox it produces is now in order. Beginning with unity-in-difference, he follows Plato and posits Forms. In order to account for the necessary relations between them, he must posit Intellect. So long as he can explain it, helped especially by the Aristotelian distinction between potentiality and actuality, he can then demonstrate not only how both knowledge and self-knowledge are possible, but also how they are the same. Indeed, with his particular demonstration, he

establishes mutual entailments between necessary truth, infallible knowledge, and perfect self-knowledge. For if there are necessary truths, there must be something to know them infallibly; if there is such infallible knowledge, it must be perfect self-knowledge; and if there is perfect self-knowledge, finally, there must be necessary truth. Intellect underwrites every move. Starting with unity-in-difference, in sum, Plotinus shows how it presupposes this one-many. Ultimately, in fact, he show how it is this one-many.

Emphasizing its unity, he often calls this principle ‘Intellect’ (*nous*), as we have seen, but sometimes he calls it ‘Being’ (*ousia*), thereby emphasizing its plurality. This is especially marked when he uses its grammatical plural (*ousiai*, “the realities”). Whatever his emphasis, though, his different names never denote different referents. “Being and Intellect are therefore one nature (*phusis*).”<sup>89</sup> Sharing this nature, they also share each other’s accolades. “For in this way it will also know them,” he writes of Intellect, “and the truth will be in it and it will be the foundation of all realities and they will live and think.”<sup>90</sup> This last conclusion—that the realities, or Forms, live and think—follows neatly from the same line of argument we have reconstructed and just reviewed. Intellect and Forms are so perfectly unified that if the intellect thinks, so too must the Forms. The Forms think themselves, as does the Intellect, with which they are consubstantial. Knowing everything, being everything, Intellect has at last earned the dignity of its majuscule. It is not just “a great god,” according to Plotinus, but “demands as of right that this which it is is universal god.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> *Enn.* 5.9.8.17–18. See also 5.9.5.14

<sup>90</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.2.10–13. See also 5.9.8.11–14

<sup>91</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.3.2–3.

What about us? Long before coming to this universal god, after all, we asked with Plotinus: “But we—who are we?”<sup>92</sup> Can we know ourselves? The answer to this question, about self-knowledge, has produced an answer to another question, about the self. For if we can know ourselves perfectly, he has argued, we must be identified both with our activity of thinking and with its object. In order to be identical with this activity, first of all, we must be not only immaterial thought, but also eternally thinking. This is a lot to ask of mere humans, who sometimes think, but sometimes do not. Embodiment, with its many demands, draws strict limits around human activity, not least intellection. As humans, then, we cannot be identical with our thinking. Plotinus, however, does not believe we are really humans. Confident that we can achieve perfect self-knowledge, and thereby divine thinking, he believes instead that we are ultimately this divine thinking. For in order to be identical with the object of our thinking, secondly, we must be both one and many. To achieve perfect self-knowledge, to be identical with both our activity of thinking and its object, we must be divine Intellect itself. Explaining this amazing claim, despite all appearances to the contrary, will be the purpose of the next section.

3. BECOMING BEING

4. BEYOND BEING

5. BECOMING GOD

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<sup>92</sup> *Enn.* 6.4.14.16.

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