



***THE RECOVERY OF THE SELF.  
PLOTINUS ON SELF-COGNITION<sup>1</sup>***

**Abstract**

According to numerous interpretations, Neoplatonism was a recovery of the spirit of man and of the spirit of the world. The philosophy, whose founder was Plotinus, influenced German classical philosophy as well as phenomenology considerably. For Plotinus, the “spirit of the world”, i.e. *Logos* is real, objective being, and also forming principle, and principle of explanation. Additionally, it is causal principle of unity and organization, and according to this aspect, the being of *Logos* is universal creative activity (*ontopoiesis*). Following Plotinus, it is the soul of the world, and as such it underlies reality. All beings – insofar as they participate in *Logos* – are able to contemplate. This applies specially to man who, exiled from Absolute, has to return to it. Human restoration leads only through contemplation. The latter is the process directed to unity and identity between being and cognition. Due to the contemplation, the cognizing subject identifies itself with the cognized object. According to Plotinus, insofar as acts of cognition are intentional, namely they are directed towards external objects, unity between knower and known object cannot occur in the case of the cognition of external world. Such an unity is possible only in the case of self-cognition. When human’s mind knows itself, it attains the unity between object and subject, and the identity between being and knowing is completed.

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According to Hans Meinhardt, the German historian of philosophy, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was to say that Neoplatonism “has discovered spirit of the man and spirit of the world” (Gatti 2006, p. 23). However, before Hegel Plotinus’ philosophy as well as philosophical theories of many other Neoplatonists had been regarded as the theories which deformed the original thought of Plato for a long time. Nevertheless, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century mostly in Germany Plotinus and his philosophical system has been appreciated as the independent and autonomous philosophy of its own unique value.

The influence of Plotinus’ philosophical ideas upon the German thought seems to be apparent. One can even hazard the guess that the German philosophy has its roots in Neoplatonic thought. Indeed, while exploring modern and contemporary German thought, one can find many various references to Plotinus; the Neoplatonic concept of “being in the world” might be compared to the Martin Heidegger’s claim that we encounter ourselves as immediately and unreflectively immersed in the world (Thomson 2010). Also, there is similarity between Plotinus’ and Heidegger’s concepts of time. Additionally, Plotinus’ question about the possibility of freedom in the determined material world resembles a question which underlies Fichte’s philosophical system, whose primary task was to explain how freely agents can at the same time be considered part of a world of causally conditioned material objects (Breazeale 2006). Moreover, Plotinus’ observation that man is able to develop himself only as being temporal is parallel to Schelling’s claim that eternal potentialities have to become temporal in order to fulfill and realize (Schelling 2000). Finally, we could validly and convincingly maintain that Plotinus’ concept of the spirit of the world, i.e., Logos, anticipates Hegelian concept of the Absolute Spirit.

Although the problem of Plotinus’ influences concerns the German philosophy in general, this article asserts that such influences can be seen within the problem of self-cognition in particular. Inasmuch as Fichte, Schelling, Hegel and Heidegger tried to express human’s experience of self-cognition, also Plotinus referred to the problem significantly. Therefore, the aim of this article is to explore Plotinus’ idea of self-cognition. The problem of self-consciousness or self-cognition is the specific problem of modern and contemporary philosophy. The idea of René Descartes that the knowledge about self could be the basis of all knowledge has found its developments in later theories of self-cognition in Fichte, Schelling and Hegel (Halfwassen 1994, p. 5).

According to Jens Halfwassen, late medieval theories of intellect (theories of Dietrich of Freiburg, Nicolas of Cues and Master Eckhart) anticipate idealistic theories of subjectivity. Nevertheless, the medieval theories have their sources in antique philosophy, namely in Aristotelian and Neoplatonic metaphysics of spirit (Halfwassen 1994, p. 5). One can assume the

idea of self-cognition takes central place within Plotinus' philosophical system, and hence, it helps to explain not only human ambiguous position in the world, but also the metaphysical structure of the universe.

The very first paragraphs of *The Enneads* present the bundle of questions concerning human nature. However, Plotinus does not assume what exactly human nature is. Rather his point of departure is the mere observation of particular human feelings, thoughts, desires and pains<sup>1</sup>. All of these mental acts are human, nonetheless, can man be the compound of these mental acts, or rather is he something more than his mental acts? While considering relations between mental representations of the objects and ourselves, Plotinus poses the question: Whether the intellect while cognizing its mental representations cognizes itself simultaneously<sup>2</sup>. The issue is important for Plotinus in his formulation of the crucial question concerning self-cognition. If the answer to the question was affirmative, it would mean that the concept of self can be defined as a collection of mental events. But, does man identify himself with his own mental states?

In order to solve the puzzle, Plotinus describes the following thought experiment: "Suppose the hypothetical thinker to be considering any group of mental acts, any possible content for the consciousness (...). Now, since the thinker is not a separate substance apart from his own thoughts, the mental states of this thinker are in some sense a part of the thinker" (Rappe 2006, p. 263), but still, they are not identified with him. Plotinus emphasizes that one should distinguish between mental acts as contents, and "the sphere". The latter is for Plotinus the metaphor of consciousness, which contains mental events as its contents. Thus, Plotinus insists that behind mere mental states there has to be some subject or substance. Why is he so certain about the existence of the subject? The fact that hypothetical thinker is able to relate to his own mental states and cognize them as well, guarantees that there is such a subject behind these mental events. As Sara Rappe points out, "the person, qua knower, or subject of consciousness, will identify with the sphere, rather than with any of its contents" (Rappe 2006, p. 266). "I am not my own mental states" – Plotinus could have said.

However, such a view lays itself open to the charge of infinite regress. If we assume the existence of a certain observer who relates to his mental events, in consequence, we state the necessity of the next observer who relates to the observer perceiving his mental events, and so *in infinitum*. The argument has its sources in the sceptic tradition, namely, it has been formulated by Sextus Empirist. Nonetheless, Plotinus does not seem to solve this sceptic puzzle satisfactorily. He only says that in order to refute the sceptic argument, one has to assume self-cognition, namely one must assume that at least intellect cognizes himself. Thus, Plotinus'

question is not whether man is able to cognize himself, but rather he asks how is self-cognition possible?

Plotinus' discernment between self and his mental states leads to the question about the self-identity<sup>3</sup>. Such a lack of self-identity arises from the distance between the subject and his own mental events. Let us notice, that the problem of the lack of human self-identity has its sources in the constitution of human nature. Plotinus says, that since the human being is a kind of compound of his *substance* and *distinctive feature*, he cannot identify himself. Therefore, according to Plotinus, human being is not self-identified with his own substance, which means that he is not the mere substance<sup>4</sup>. Plotinus (1991, p. 524) contrasts human nature with the One: Whereas the latter is what it is, and it does not differ from itself and does not differ as the substance, human nature, on the contrary, is not undistinguished, rather it differs as such from itself. But, one may ask, why is not human nature undistinguished? Plotinus (1991, p. 4) replies that if it were undistinguished, why would it need a cognition or desire? Any kind of the act of cognition or desire damages the internal, united and integrate structure of the self, and therefore, man cannot be undistinguished in himself, and as the compound he cannot identify with himself. The Plotinus' account of man, as the compound of substantial identity and distinctive feature leads to the explanation of what human nature is: Since the unity of man is permanently disturbed by external acts of cognition or desire, and since the disturbance is specific for man, namely it defines man, human intellect is essentially ecstatic (Plotinus 1991, p. 4). Hence, the ecstasy defined as the intentional mental act directed toward the external empirical objects, is crucial for being a man.

Plotinus considers the problem of ecstasy while explaining the Aristotelian theory of perception, for which the concept of passive intellect is its main notion. It is worth to notice that Aristotle treats perception as the case of interaction between two elements: objects capable of acting and capacities capable of being affected (Shields 2008). Let us remind that according to Aristotle, human intellect is such a "capacity capable of being acted", namely it is the mere passivity, which is actualized by its object (capable of acting). Hence, the Aristotelian intellect becomes active only if it confronts with its object. In other words, the intellect is an active power only in its acts of cognition. The process of cognition consists then in receiving forms of the object by intellect; Stagyrte uses in the context the metaphor of a seal impressed in wax to explain this concept. However, Plotinus rejects definitely such a conception (Plotinus 1991, p. 329). Instead, he presents four arguments against the Aristotelian theory of impression. First of all, Plotinus points out that to be able to receive such an imprint the soul would have to be in some way material, and of this there can be no question. Secondly, when we perceive an object

by means of sight, we see where the object is, and we direct our power of vision to that point; it is clear, Plotinus says, this is how the perception takes place. Thirdly, Plotinus notices that the soul looks outside just because there is no impression in it, and it takes on no stamp. If it did it would have no need at all to look outwards, for it would already possess the form of the object. Finally, Plotinus claims that if the impression theory of sense-perception was correct, it would mean that we do not see the objects themselves but only some sort of images of them (Blumenthal 1971, pp. 70-71).

In Plotinus rejection of the Aristotelian foundations of psychology, we might find reemphasis on an active aspect of human intellect. Again, Plotinus stresses that human intellect is defined by the acts of ecstasy. If we accepted the Aristotelian theory of cognition, how could we explain the ecstatic acts of the human soul? Plotinus (1991, p. 329) says, that the soul observes what is outside, and not impressions inside it, because they are not there.

While exploring the concept of human ecstatic acts, Plotinus describes nature as undistinguished and self-identified. Such a nature lives in unity and eternity, and it does not move. As Andrew Smith (2006, p. 198) suggests, “eternity remains in unity”, what also suggests “rest”. Let us remind that the idea of eternity as a being in rest has been provided by Plato’s *Timaeus* (Smith 2006, pp. 199-200). Indeed, Plotinus follows Plato when he says that time is an image of eternity<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, so far as Plotinus points out that nature has to become temporal in order to develop itself (and cognize itself as well), his vision of time and eternity differs from Plato’s view. Thus, whereas the Platonic man raises up from temporal empirical being towards eternal ideas, the Neoplatonic man moves in the opposite direction: from eternal unity he descends towards empirical (and temporal) world. Descent from eternity is some kind of motion, therefore, so far as rest corresponds to eternity, motion corresponds to time (Smith 2006, p. 199). Thus, the moment of the nature’s descent is also the moment in which time has come to existence. In other words, ecstatic acts are the source of time (Plotinus 1991, p. 227).

Plotinus rejects the Aristotelian definition of time as the measure of motion. According to Smith, “the doctrine of Aristotle is deemed inadequate precisely because it commences from and does not rise above an empirical analysis of time, an attempt to find an adequate account of how time operates rather than to ask what it is” (Smith 2006, p. 197), whereas Plotinus hopes for answering the question concerning the essence of time. Aristotle states that time is the measure of movement of heavens circuit. Such a movement would never cease, and it seems to be a good candidate for identification with time. Thus, time is measure of sunrises and sunsets. Let us notice that the concept of time as a measure of heavens circuit movement has been maintained

by Plato and his followers as well. Therefore, as a Platonist Plotinus refers to this idea of time. Nevertheless, he proposes his own view.

Plotinus' discussion with Aristotle's concept of time begins by rejecting the claim that time is movement of heavens circuit. First of all, he observes that movement can be regular as well as irregular, and he asks how is it possible to measure something which is not regular (Smith 2006, p. 207)? Moreover, he notices that the movement of heavens circuit can lapse, but time cannot. According to Plotinus, if the heavenly circuit should cease to move (and hence all physical movement cease) even its rest would be in time (Smith 2006, p. 211), and this rest would be measured by soul.

Plotinus' conclusion is the thesis that time is not a movement of the world, but rather it is a movement of the soul. Precisely, time is the life of the soul. According to Plotinus, time exists on two levels; on the one hand, it exists on the level of soul's life, on the other hand, it can be perceived in the physical world, when worldly things exist "in time". And since world exists in time, and since time is soul's life, as Plotinus concludes, the world exists in the soul (Smith 2006, p. 210). Thus, unlike Aristotle and Plato, Plotinus shows that time is internal to the soul, not external. He stresses that "we should not imagine the time as something being outside the soul, and similarly, we should not imagine the eternity as something <out there>" (Plotinus 1991, p. 227).

However, in Plotinus' view time is not only the life of the soul, but also it has its origin in the soul. Plotinus explains that as soon as nature desires "something more" than presence and stillness, it has made itself temporal. It is so, because, according to Plotinus, only being in time guarantees an authentic human experience. As Plotinus says, understanding what time is helps us to understand what we are (Smith 2006, p. 210). Hence, only in its ecstatic acts, the soul undergoes the changes, and within these changes it becomes temporal. In consequence, within becoming temporal, the soul creates the empirical temporal world as well.

While remaining in the unity and rest nature does not desire anything, and hence, it is self-sufficient. And the crucial question is: Why does nature want to disturb its unity and stillness by its ecstatic acts? And why does nature want to abandon its eternity and become temporal? According to Plotinus, the source of the soul's descent as well as beginning of time is nature's desire of mastering itself and belonging to itself. In order to do that, it has decided to achieve "more than presence" and has set itself in motion (Plotinus 1991, pp. 227-228). According to Blumenthal, "the soul must descend (...), but it does so by its own dynamism: it comes down by reason of its power to organize subsequent being, starting from an impulse of its

own free will” (Blumenthal 1971, p. 5). Therefore, the source of the soul’s descent is some “restless power”, as Plotinus says, inside nature, and due to this power, the nature wants to spread itself in ecstatic acts.

Let us notice that this movement of nature can be regarded as a metaphysical explanation of human freedom. Georges Leroux, while considering the concept of freedom in Plotinus’ thought poses the question: “Does the soul descend voluntarily, that is, does it freely move toward the lower states of its realization, and in particular toward the body?” (Leroux 2006, p. 295). But it seems that it would be better if we claimed that soul moves toward the lower states of its realization, because of its freedom. In other words, the process of emanation is entirely free process; the soul emanates and thus moves towards lower and external states. This movement is also the manifestation of freedom.

Plotinus’ emphasis on the ecstatic character of the soul aims at the understanding of what the human being is. As he points out, this ecstatic property of man is not the property of man considered as a whole compound, but rather it is a property of mere intellect. Therefore, as Plotinus puts it, our intellect is our truest self (Blumenthal 2006, p. 96). This intellect is defined as *διανοια*, the real human intellectual capacity, the power of reasoning and judgment, with which Plotinus often says we are to be identified (Blumenthal 1971, p. 43). It may thus be regarded as the meeting place of the of sensible and intelligible worlds (Blumenthal 1971, p. 111), and this is the psychic level when human concept of the self is being constituted.

Plotinus shows that in order to see and understand our intellect as our truest self, one should purify himself of all desires, thoughts, memories and material body. After such a purification, he would see himself as a pure and immortal intellect (Plotinus 1991, pp. 336-343). Hence, the first step of self-cognition is to recognize oneself as the intellect. In order to make this thesis clear, Plotinus creates the second part of his “hypothetical thinker” thought experiment: let us remind that hypothetical thinker was supposed to consider all his mental acts and contents of consciousness: “No matter how diverse the causes that initially produced these elements in the external world, as for the contents of the sphere considered solely as objects of thought, it is true to say that their productive cause is singular, namely, the hypothetical thinker himself” (Rappe 2006, p. 263). This is the very crucial moment in Plotinus’ work, because he claims that we are able grasp the reality as it appears in our consciousness. And if we concentrated on our consciousness events, it would turn out that our consciousness is the “productive and efficient cause” of its contents. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the empirical material world is somehow dependent on our consciousness. Plotinus does not maintain anything like this. He only says that there are two ways of perceiving the world: as the

macrocosm and the microcosm. “The macrocosm is a publicly available world, inhabited and experienced by countless sentient beings, each with a diverse perspective. The microcosm is that same world, seen from within the confines of an individual consciousness” (Rappe 2006, p. 262).

Since Plotinus claims that consciousness contents can be individuated in a complete independence of empirical objects, this thought experiment might be interpreted as a kind of internalism: mental states have their only cause and source in thinking intellect. However, how Plotinus can claim both that the human intellect in his very nature follows external objects in cognition, and the cognized world is just the totality of consciousness contents? Let us notice that Plotinus makes use of special notions of “externality” and “internality”, which are crucial to his concept of self-cognition. He tries to show, as Rappe puts it, “how the soul constructs a (...) sense of self when it conceives the world as outside of the self; (...) the thought experiments reveal a way of conceiving the world as not external to the self” (Rappe 2006, p. 265). Thus, the world is not external to the intellect, it is rather internal: worldly objects are perceived as the contents of consciousness. Therefore, since the world is internal to the human intellect, the latter cognizes himself in his ecstatic acts.

Since borders of myself are simultaneously the borders of the world, self-cognition would be cognition of the world, which is identified with the self. If we look closer to the Plotinus’ notions of internality and externality, we might ask whether there is any kind of external world in a strict sense, totally independent from the intellect. Plotinus states that the world of matter is such a world, because matter would never become internal to the intellect. Matter, as the last emanation from the One cannot be regarded as any being, because the latter, for Plotinus, is only that what is intellectual. On the contrary, matter is the end of the intellectual world, and therefore, it can be regarded as a nothingness. Plotinus compares matter to the mirror: the same as the mirror is indispensable for reflections, matter is indispensable for reflections of real beings. Matter as the mirror is not visible itself, it is only visible due to its reflected images of real intellectual beings (Demińska-Siury 1995, p. 54).

This theory of matter, which is Plato’s legacy, has tremendous consequences for Plotinus’ theory of the self and self-cognition. The concept of the self which is identified with the mere intellect is exactly a result of Plotinus’ doctrine of matter. It is so, because the statement applies to human body as well: since the human body and its organs are material, they cannot be regarded as the parts of the self. While describing the process of perceiving, Plotinus notices that we perceive only the external objects. But he asks about perception of the internal processes of an organism. Do we perceive our bodily experiences as internal to ourselves or rather external? Plotinus distinguishes power responsible for the perception of external objects from the power



of perceiving what goes on within us. Plotinus talks of the power of internal perception. However, all sensation is of externals because the affections of the body which such a faculty cognizes are also external to the soul (Blumenthal 1971, p. 42). Thus, according to Plotinus, every time we experience any kind of “bodily disorder”, we used to experience it as if it came from outside (Plotinus 1991, p. 309). Therefore, the body is not a part of myself, but the part of the external – material world (Plotinus 1991, p. 367). “I am not my body, I am only my intellect” – Plotinus might say.

The specific notion of externality in Plotinus’ thought is a result of habitually identifying with the body (Rappe 2006, p. 265). Let us stress, following Rappe, that “gradually the boundary that separates self and world is erased, when the demarcations of selfhood are no longer around the body, but around the totality of any given phenomenal presentation” (Rappe 2006, p. 265). In consequence, “every cognizable fact about the knower’s identity as subject is converted to the status of an external condition: body, personality, life history, passions, and so forth” (Rappe 2006, p. 266). Within Plotinus’ works, these qualities have received the status of mere modifications of the self. Behind these modifications, there is an authentic self. Cognition of this authentic self is for Plotinus the proper self-cognition.

However, having established our self as the intellect, Plotinus goes one step further and asks about the principle of the unity of the self. Our intellect has been defined as discursive potency, namely as  $\delta\iota\alpha\nu\omicron\iota\alpha$ . Moreover, since its movement has been defined as circular which means that the intellect moves from intelligible rules ( $\text{Nov}\sigma$ ) to the sensible world and back, it is not united and thus not one. In consequence, the intellect has been also defined as Dyad: it is duality of a cognizing subject and a cognized intellect, it is also indefinite and unlimited. Intellect’s position between intelligible and sensible world as well as its other attributes are precisely the reasons of deficiency of its unity. Therefore, Plotinus poses the question about the grounds of self-unity: On what grounds do we cognize ourselves as one?

Let us emphasize that relation to ourselves is being constituted in reciprocity of thinker and thought. The unity of self-thinking is not absolute unity, because, as Plotinus says, the unity in multiplicity is primary the multiplicity. Thus, Plotinus’ aim is to introduce some kind of the third element which would unite thinker and thought in an act of self-cognition. It has to be the principle of both unity and multiplicity, and as such it would be the ground of unity of the self in self-cognition (Halfwassen 1994, p. 9).

Plotinus answers that we perceive the unity of ourselves in the light of  $\text{Nov}\sigma$  (Halfwassen 1994, p. 22). How do we discover presence of  $\text{Nov}\sigma$  within us? Plotinus shows two ways of our

participation in *Nous*: firstly, *Nous* is the power which unites multiplicity of our thinking, namely it unites variety of *λογοι*. And secondly, we become *Nous* through intellectual insight. According to Halfwassen, there are two concepts of self-cognition which are joined to these two ways of participation in *Nous*. Therefore, self-cognition can be regarded either as the cognition of the essence of discursive thinking, or as an intellectual self-insight which relies on intellectual turn to *Nous* with complete omitting discursive potencies of intellect (Halfwassen 1994, p. 22). Plotinus definitely chooses the second option. Thus, man does not cognize himself as a discursive thinking which is aware of its reception of external truths. Preferably, not only he cognizes himself as a principle of his own unity, but also while participating in *Nous* he ceases to be indefinite and unlimited.

To sum up, let us stress that Plotinus claims that the very nature of human being consists in ecstatic acts. Because of these intentional and directed towards external objects acts, man cannot be self-identified. Thus, transgression describes human condition in the world, and it derives from freedom. While transgressing his unity and self-identity, man becomes temporal. Plotinus would agree with Schelling here in saying that only being in time helps man develop and cognize himself. Therefore, in order to cognize himself, man has to be in time. Since ecstasy is the intellectual property, Plotinus claims that intellect is the human truest self. Plotinus' "hypothetical thinker" thought experiment has led him to the conclusion that the world is internal to man. This applies to the body as well, which is just a part of external and empirical world. And as far as man is able to recognize himself in his pure intellect, and as far as he knows that the world, time, his body, memories, personality and mental events are only modifications of himself, and he is something behind all these qualifications, then he would cognize himself. This pure intellect has been defined by Plotinus as *διανοια*, nevertheless the principle of its unity is not himself, but *Nous* understood as an intellectual intuitive insight.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Pleasure and distress, fear and courage, desire and aversion, where have these affections and experiences their seat?" (Plotinus 1991, p. 3).

<sup>2</sup> "Are we to think that a being knowing itself must contain diversity, that self-knowledge can be affirmed only when some one phase of the self perceives other phases and that therefore an absolutely simplex entity would be equally incapable of introversion and of self-awareness?" (Plotinus 1991, p. 364).

<sup>3</sup> According to Blumenthal, there is another explanation why Plotinus had problems with answering the question “who we are”: “Our soul does not descend completely, but a part stays up in the intelligible world” (Blumenthal, 1971, p. 6).

<sup>4</sup> “This is a compound state, a mingling of Reality and Difference, not therefore reality in the strictest sense, not reality pure. Thus far we are not masters of our being; in some sense the reality in us is one thing and we are another. We are not masters of our being” (Plotinus 1991, p. 524).

<sup>5</sup> “For Plotinus himself one important and central element of this is the linking of eternity with the unchanging and transcendent intelligible world and time with the physical world of becoming. Clearly Plato lies partly behind this” (Smith, 2006, 196).

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