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Metaphysics of soul and self in Plotinus

Gwenaëlle Aubry

One of the great singularities of the philosophy of Plotinus consists in thinking of the self¹ for its own sake and, in particular, in producing a concept of it different from that of soul.² This philosophical breakthrough is inseparable from the discovery of immediate reflexivity, that is, the subject's ability to apprehend itself independently of its relation to an object or to another subject.³ In Plotinus, however, this reflexivity occurs only in an interrogative form, which can be read, in particular, in *Enn.* I.1[53] and *Enn.* VI.4[22]. In other words, it does not, as in Descartes, assume the form of an intuition by means of which the subject, grasping itself as consciousness, would, at the same time, have an evident revelation of its essence. In *Enn.* I.1 and *Enn.* VI.4, the two reflexive questions serve as preludes to two enquiries involving the concepts of soul and human being, but also manifesting the irreducibility of the self to either of them. It is precisely this irreducibility that will interest us: we will see how Plotinus, although he seems to think of the self by means of the connected notions of soul and human being, but also of individual or even of consciousness, ceaselessly produces and renews a gap between them and the self. It is on the gap between soul and self that our attention will focus more particularly, both because it carries the others along with it, and because these two concepts are also susceptible of different meanings in Plotinus: just as he allows levels of the soul, so he is also prepared to accept levels of the self. And yet, they do not coincide. The self properly so called, which Plotinus refers to as the *hēmeis*, is distinct both from the essential or separated soul and from the soul linked to the body. Situated rather than defined, it cannot be substantified. To use Plotinian terminology, the *hēmeis* is neither god nor animal, but rather the power to become either one. These two possible and exclusive identifications depend on the orientation it gives to its consciousness. Consciousness therefore does not appear, as it will in Descartes, as a revelation of identity, but as a means of identification.

I should like to point out not only this irreducibility of the "self" to the soul, but also the fundamental role it plays in the Plotinian system: to show how it is that by which Plotinian

metaphysics integrates an ethics, or, again, that by which the necessity of procession leaves room for the free choice of conversion.

DEGREES OF THE SOUL AND THE METAPHYSICS OF PROCESSION

The separated soul

Another singular aspect of the philosophy of Plotinus is that it affirms the existence of a separated soul,⁴ which remains in the Intellect and alien to both the powers and the passions of the body. This doctrine was to be rejected by the later Neoplatonists, particularly Iamblichus and Proclus (Steel 1978), but it occupies a fundamental place in Plotinian thought. Thus, we shall have to enquire into the connection, articulating it with the other singular point in Plotinus: his conception of the self.

This separated soul is the object of an experience that can be described as foundational, and which is described in the first person in *Enn.* IV8[6]:

Often, awakening from my body to myself, having become external to everything else and internal to myself, contemplating such a wonderful beauty, certain then more than ever, that I belong to the higher world, activating the best life, becoming identical to the divine, and establishing myself in it, having attained this supreme activity and established myself above every other intelligible, when, after this rest in the divine, I descend from the Intellect to reasoning, I wonder how I could ever have descended in this way, and now again, how my soul was ever able to come to be inside a body, if it is such as it appeared by itself, even though it is in a body.

(*Enn.* IV.8[6] 1.1–11)⁵

As it is described here, this experience is at the same time that of a separation from the body – designated as an “awakening” – and of a presence to oneself. Nevertheless, it includes a flip side, or negative aspect: the experience of the “descent” or of falling back into the body, which, even more than the experience of separation, inspires astonishment, to the point of serving as prelude to one of the guiding questions of Plotinus’ philosophy: “How I could ever have descended in this way, and now again, how was my soul ever able to come to be inside a body?” (ll. 8–10). When formulated in this way, this question is consonant with the reflexive questions of other treatises which will be discussed below: if the Plotinian subject grasps itself only in an interrogative form, that is, not as something obvious but as something strange, it is because it undergoes the experience of several modes of relation to itself. The problem that then arises is that of which one defines it properly.

Through successive equivalences, the experience of self described by the first lines of *Enn.* IV.8 is also presented as an experience of the “divine” and of the “Intellect” (*nous*). Such, then, is the apparently paradoxical thesis that Plotinus maintains: the separate soul is divine, and yet it is in us; it is an intellect, but also a soul, or again, more precisely, it is “being-soul”, the essential soul, simultaneously pure form and pure *energeia*.⁶ In *Enn.* V3[49], Plotinus formulates this paradox in yet another way: strictly speaking, the intellectual soul cannot be counted among the parts of the soul, and yet, it is indeed ours (*hēmeteron*); in fact, he continues, “it is ours without being ours ... It is ours when we

use it; it is not ours when we do not use it”⁷ Here the distinction, to which we shall return, is already indicated between the soul and the self understood as “us”, or as *hēmeis*. By “soul”, *Enn.* V.3 here means *dianoia*, the soul that is not intellective but discursive, which, as Plotinus writes, “we always use”, unlike the first one.⁸ The inaugural lines of *Enn.* IV.8 described nothing other than the negative experience of the “descent” into the body as being that of the Intellect’s falling back into reasoning. Intellective thought, *noēsis*, thus appears as essential activity, *energeia*, or else as the life of the separate soul (cf. *Enn.* V.3[49].8.30–57; I.1[53].13.5–8). Like the total Intellect, and each of the intellects of which it is composed, the higher soul is characterized by intuitive thought, that is, by the simultaneous, inarticulated and non-propositional grasp of a complex content – comparable to a glance that embraces all the features of a face in a single vision (cf. *Enn.* IV.4[28].1.21–5; Emilsson 2007: 185–91).

We can remain strangers forever to this essential mode of being and thinking: or, as treatise *Enn.* V.3 says, we possibly never make use of it. *Enn.* V.1[10] opens with the acknowledgement of this fundamental ignorance: “Yet what can it be that has brought it about that the souls forget the god who is their father, and that they are as ignorant of themselves as they are of him, although they are parts that come from above, and in general belong to him?” (*Enn.* V.1[10].1.1–3).

The soul’s forgetfulness of the Intellect is also a forgetting of its own intellective origin – an origin that nevertheless has not come and gone, nor does it belong to a mythic past, but that remains in a state of unperceived presence. This forgetfulness is characteristic of pre-philosophical consciousness. Unaware of its dignity, soul is fascinated by externality: the body, the sensible. Narcissistic, it prefers its reflection to itself, ignorant of the fact that without it, this reflection, which is merely the effect of its power, could not subsist (cf. *Enn.* I.6[1].8.8–16; P. Hadot 1976). In order to tear the soul away from this mirage, it must be restored in its self-esteem, that is, recalled to the divine that it harbours. The *gnōthi seauton* which, for Plotinus as for Plato, serves as a prelude to philosophy, thus signifies, as much as “Know yourself”, “Know your worth” and “Become once again what you are” – and what in truth you have never ceased being, but of which you have lost awareness (cf. Verbeke 1997, Aubry 2007).

One must ask, however, what exactly is the status of this self that is rediscovered in the Intellect and the experience of which was described in *Enn.* IV.8. What remains in it of the personal self, the concrete, incarnate individual? That it is identical to the essential soul, so be it: but can it, as such, still be described as an individual?

Distinctions are necessary here, which manifest the complexity of the Plotinian thought of the self: in the first place, this essential self constituted by the separated soul must indeed be distinguished from the *hēmeis* and from what we may call the biographical subject, that is, the bearer of a history, a memory, and the form of consciousness that is linked to them.⁹ In *Enn.* IV.3[27], Plotinus thus develops the singular theory of the two memories: two distinct memories correspond to the separated soul and to the soul linked to the body, one that preserves the intelligible trace of the object, the other, the sensible trace (*Enn.* IV.3[27].31.28–31). Freed from the body, the soul preserves the memory of its friends, its children and its fatherland for a while; then, gradually, it forgets them: “The good soul is forgetful ... It is light and by itself” (*ibid.*: 32.18–21). This is why Socrates, having risen back up to the intelligible, does not recall that he has done philosophy (*Enn.* I.4[28].1.5), nor even when he contemplates that it is he, Socrates, who contemplates (*ibid.*: 2.1–3).

Like memory and individual history, consciousness disappears in the Intellect. More precisely, it gives way to a feeling of presence in which the duality between subject and object is abolished. In this state, Plotinus writes, we are “only potentially ourselves” (*Enn.* IV.4[28].2.5–8). We merge with that which we contemplate: “The self (*autos*) is all things and both are one” (*ibid.*: 2.22). In the Intellect, then, we are no longer “we”, but we are beings: “both what is ours and we are brought back to being” (*Enn.* VI.5[23].7.1). Here, none can say “it’s me up to this point” (7.15).¹⁰

This state in which the subject no longer experiences itself as such, but in its unity with being and with the others, is nevertheless designated by Plotinus as the site of its greatest proximity to itself, at the same time as it is genuine self-knowledge: “Being in this way, we are more than anything conscious of ourselves (*hautois synetoi*), and we acquire knowledge of ourselves as we make ourselves one” (*Enn.* V.8.[31].11.31–3). Thus, *synesis* is opposed to the reflexive consciousness which, just as *dianoia* fragments the contents of *noēsis*, divides what was grasped as a unity into a duality:¹¹ “This identity is a kind of immediate sense (*synesis*) and consciousness of the self (*synaisthēsis hautou*), which itself must take great care not to distance itself from itself, by wanting to sense too much” (*Enn.* V.8[31].11.23–4). This, then, is what Pierre Hadot (1997: 40) has called “the paradox of the human personal self”: it is when we are least aware of ourselves that we are most ourselves.

Still, the question arises of what the subject, thus identified with the intellectual soul and unburdened of all biographical content, then grasps of itself. At this essential level, can we still speak of identity? Of individuality? This question joins another controversial one: that of whether or not Plotinus accepted the existence of Forms of individuals.¹² This problem cannot be dealt with here for its own sake.¹³ However, an attentive reading of the texts shows that Plotinus does indeed admit an intelligible principle of distinction between individuals which, however, cannot be identified with a Form, but must be identified, in the first place, with the original distinction between intellectual souls (cf. *Enn.* IV.3[27] 8.15–16; V.8 [31].10.1–18), and then with the *logos* that is associated with them.¹⁴ To each soul-intellect is added a *logos* that contains not only the essential qualities of Man as such (*Enn.* II.6[17].1.17; VI.1[42].20.19–20), but also – and this is the originality of the Plotinian thesis – the differences, which are not just specific, but also individual (*Enn.* V.7[18].1.21, 1.23, 3.5–6; V.9[5].12.5–11).

This principle of individual distinction must, of course, be distinguished from the concrete individual. Yet it is not the negation of that individual, but rather its foundation. The paradox of the Plotinian personal self is thus illuminated: if, for Plotinus, one is never more oneself than when one is no longer conscious of oneself, this is because the subject identified with its essential soul is not abolished in the universal. Rather, it is identified with the very source of its individuality, that is, with the singular viewpoint of its intellect upon the total Intellect, as well as with the *logos* that bears the power of its own becoming.

At this point, then, one can indeed identify the separated soul, the soul as *ousia*, and the essential self. Although the essential self is already individuated, it is not merged with the conscious, incarnate biographical self. As we shall see, it is nevertheless, for the Plotinian subject, a possible identity. Indeed, the notion of a separated soul orients Plotinian ethics, which has no other goal than to transform this constant but ordinarily unperceived presence into a conscious presence. Far from being immediate or mechanical, this transformation is given as a demanding, normed itinerary, whose various stages correspond to various degrees of virtue: the civic virtues, which are those of the soul still connected to

the body; the cathartic virtues, by the exercise of which it separates itself from the body; finally, the contemplative virtues (I.2[19]). This ethical itinerary, and we shall return to this point, is inseparably a trajectory of consciousness, which gradually turns away from the body to orient itself towards the separated soul. Several of Plotinus' treatises allow this itinerary not only to be seen, but to be carried out. They can be read as efficacious texts, which aim to bring about this mutation of consciousness. This is the case with *Enn.* I.1[53] (see Aubry 2004), but also with *Enn.* IV.8[6] which, opening with the inaugural experience of the fall from *noēsis* to *dianoia*, ends with the evocation of the separated soul; or again with *Enn.* V.1[10], whose structure is rather close, since it leads from the souls' forgetfulness of their divine origin to attention (*prosokhē*), that is, to that form of consciousness that knows how to leave itself open to the "voices from above" (*Enn.* V.1.[10].12.12–20).

In truth, then, the Plotinian beyond is very close: to reach it, it is enough to make oneself deaf to the tumult of the body, to release oneself from narcissistic fascination. For Plotinus, Odysseus represents the anti-Narcissus: he is the one who was able to resist the spells of the sensible, the charms of Circe and of Calypso (*Enn.* I.6[1].8.18–20). Yet the Plotinian Odyssey is a return to something that is always-already-there, which is the locus in us of a divine autarky, lucidity and happiness.

The lower powers of the soul and *dianoia*

Yet we must now return to the question of *Enn.* IV.8[6].1.9–10: "How could my soul ever come to be inside a body?" This question, ordinarily designated as being that of the descent of the soul, must, in fact, be formulated more precisely:

- First, because, strictly speaking, for Plotinus the soul does not descend. What descends, or mixes with the body to animate it, is the power, the *dynamis*, that emanates from the separated soul.
- In its confrontation with the body and with temporality, *noēsis* is transformed into *dianoia*. This is the moment by which the soul is truly constituted *qua* soul, in its difference from the Intellect. As such, it participates, like the first, in the necessity of procession.
- The descent can be considered as a fall or a fault only when *dianoia* and the consciousness linked to it, forgetful of the separated soul, are completely oriented towards the body.

One must therefore distinguish between these various moments of procession by seeing what concepts of the soul and what concepts of the self correspond to them, and how the distance between them designates the very locus of Plotinian ethics.

DYNAMIS AND "DESCENT"

As early as chapter 2 of *Enn.* IV.8[6], Plotinus states a principle: "It is not a bad thing for the soul to provide the body with the power of good and being, since it is not true that all providence applied to lower reality prevents this providential agent from remaining in what is best" (2.24–5).

This principle applies, in the first place, to the mode of government of the World Soul. For the higher part of this soul “is situated above the heaven, sending its lowest power within it” (2.32–3). In this way, the World Soul is “always directed toward those things, setting this universe in order with a power that is completely detached” (2.52–3). Here it clearly appears that the World Soul does not “descend”. What is “sent” into the world is not it, but its “lowest power” (*dynamis*). Yet it is precisely because the World Soul does not descend that it is able to govern the universe, to set it in order into a cosmos, a beautiful totality. This point of doctrine is explicitly formulated elsewhere, for instance at *Enn.* IV.3[27].6.21: “The souls that incline toward the intelligible world have a greater power”; or else *Enn.* II.9[33].2, where one reads that the World Soul governs “simply by looking at what is before it, thanks to its wonderful power. The more it devotes itself to contemplation, the more it is beautiful and powerful” (15–16).

This description of the mode of governance of the World Soul is nothing other than an application of the Plotinian model of causality. This states that from every being in act (*energeiai*) there necessarily emanates an active, productive power (*dynamis*), which in turn is the cause of a new being and a new act. This model applies first to the causality of the One-Good, which, although it is perfect, is beyond act.¹⁵ However, it also holds, beyond the first principle, for all of procession, so that one can deduce from it the main features of such procession: necessity (causality is not the result of a choice), continuity (*dynamis* ensures the sustained presence of the cause to the effect, which it transcends), and degradation (the effect is inferior to its cause, and is, in turn, the source of a diminished power) (e.g. *Enn.* V.4[7].1.23–8). This is the model that dictates here Plotinus’ affirmation that the power of the World Soul is all the greater the more intense its act of contemplation is.

Yet the same model also holds for the individual soul. As we have seen, the separated soul is also an *energeia*, a perfect and impassible act of contemplation. It is therefore, as such, at the beginning of an emanated power. For the individual soul as for the World Soul, however, Plotinus emphasizes that it is this power, this *dynamis*, and *not the soul itself*, that descends and is mixed with the body. This is why the Aristotelian definition of the soul as first entelechy of the body¹⁶ must be opposed by the assertion that the soul is itself in act, already *entelekheia*, without the body, and that only for this reason there can be a body. Thus, the *synamphoteron*, that is, the living body, is not a mixture of body and soul, but only of the body and the power emanated from the soul. If it exists, Plotinus writes, it is “by the mere presence of the soul, not because this soul itself gives itself to the couple, but because it creates the nature of the animal from the qualified body and from a kind of light it gives” (*Enn.* I.1[53].7.1–4). Thus, one must answer the Gnostics that “it is not because the soul inclines that it produces, but rather because it does not incline” (*Enn.* II.9[33].4.6–7).

It is at the conjunction of the powers emanated from the World Soul and the separated individual soul that the organic compound is constituted – or again, that the “man without qualities” present in the Intellect will be transformed into a concrete particular. Once again, however, two moments must be distinguished here: the power emanated from the World Soul constitutes what Plotinus calls the “living body”, or else the “qualified body”.¹⁷ By this, one must understand the body endowed with the vegetative power, and with an inferior form, not yet individualized, of sensation.¹⁸ To this living body, *Enn.* VI.4[22] also attributes an *epitēdeiotēs*, or a disposition to receive such-and-such a soul.¹⁹ However, the “qualified” body does not really become an individual body until the power that comes

from the individual soul is added to the power emanated from the World Soul. The World Soul still has a role to play in this conjunction: it is she who “distributes” individual souls, like dancers in a choreography, into one animated body or another (cf. *Enn.* VI.7[38].7.10; IV.3[27].12.17–19, 37–9). Yet a spontaneous motion is added to this determination.²⁰ Indeed, Plotinus writes of the divine soul that it “leaps (*hoion exethoren*), as it were, out of the all into a part” (*Enn.* VI.4[22].16.29–30). This is when it becomes the soul of a body. And it is within this relation that particularization must be situated: whereas it was only potentially particular in the Intellect,²¹ the soul becomes particular in act.

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE *DIANOIA*

Here, however, a difficulty must be illuminated. If the higher soul does not descend, if only its emanated *dynamis* is mixed with the body, how should we understand Plotinus’ words that the soul “leaps” towards its own body? The answer is that this motion is what constitutes the soul *qua* soul, in its difference from the Intellect, or again that by which *noēsis* is modified into *dianoia*. Indeed, *dianoia* is the result of the encounter of intellectual thought with time. It deploys the immediacy and totality of intuition into successive moments, to respond to the demands of the body, of action, and of a life diffracted by temporality (*Enn.* III.7[45].11). Thus, it must be considered “the sign of a diminishment of the Intellect” (*Enn.* IV.3[27].18.1–7): and it is indeed this diminished, less intense, less lucid life that was attested by the liminary experience of *Enn.* IV.8. At the same time, however, this weakening does not affect the separated soul, and constitutes the soul in its proper function of animation and organization of the sensible. Thus, the soul’s dianoeitic constitution is still inscribed in the order of procession. Still in *Enn.* IV.8, Plotinus emphasizes its necessity: “The function of the more rational soul is to think, but not only to think. What would differentiate it from the Intellect? For it has added something else to the fact of being intelligent, such that it did not remain Intellect” (3.21–4). Once again, it is this necessity that is indicated by the insistence on the soul’s “double nature” and its “amphibious” character (*Enn.* IV.8[6].4.31–5; cf. also *Enn.* IV.7[2].13).

Thus, no more than the gift of power in which animation consists can the soul’s relation to the particular body be truly considered as a “descent” or a fall. It is, of course, a distancing, or a secession from the intelligible totality: as such, however, it constitutes the soul in its proper nature, and therefore always participates in the order of procession.

THE SITUATION OF THE *HĒMEIS*

At this point, then, one sees the various levels of the soul becoming arranged: that is, always according to the order of procession: the higher soul; its lower powers, which are mixed with the body; and, intermediary between the separated soul and the animated body, *dianoia*.

The question then arises of whether, and to what extent, these levels of the soul can be made to correspond to levels of the “self”. We have seen that the separated soul could be identified with the essential individual. Yet what about the soul (or, more precisely, the soul’s powers) that is (or are) mixed with the body, and the *dianoia*?

Plotinus raises this question explicitly, in the reflexive form of questioning by the *hēmeis* of its own identity:

We, however ... Who are “we”? Are we “that one”, or are we that which has approached [to “that one”], and is subject to becoming in time? ... It is true that now another man, who wanted to exist, has added himself to that man, and once he found us ... he attributed himself to us, and he added himself to that man who we were originally ... and thus we have become both, and more than once we are no longer who we were before, and we are the one that we then added on to ourselves, when the man we were stops being active, and, in a way, stops being present.

(*Enn.* VI.4[22].14.16–31)

This text describes the *hēmeis* as the “couple” (*to synamphō*) of two men, who are precisely the separated soul and the animated body. It also appears, however, that the *hēmeis* cannot be identified with either of them: both are in it, without either of them being it, properly speaking. Nor do they constitute it as elements, but, rather, as alternating and alternative presences that are also “activities”: when we are the second man, it is because the first one “stops being active”.

We see here, once again, what is singular about Plotinian reflexivity: the act by which the subject grasps itself reveals to it not its identity, but its duality. Through it, it does not attain itself in its essence (the separated soul, the first man), but in its difference from the latter. This structure is also found elsewhere. Thus, in *Enn.* I.1[53], one reads yet another reflexive question: after enumerating the various contents of interiority, from the passions to *noēsis*, by way of opinion and reflection, Plotinus asks: “That which searches, examines and decides these questions: whatever can it be?” (1.9–11). Once again, however, this question does not preside over the unification of the various inner contents. If the *hēmeis* is able to apprehend them without mediation, it does not discover itself as what unifies them, to the very degree to which it is conscious of them. At first, it grasps itself only as this multiplicity, not as what totalizes it: “*polla gar hēmeis*”, Plotinus thus writes, “we are several” (*Enn.* I.1[53].9.7). Thus, *Enn.* I.1 will initially distribute this multiplicity between three distinct terms: the separated soul, the soul that uses the body, and “a third thing made up of the soul and the body” (1.2–5; Cf. Plato, *Alc.* 130a). This movement seems to attest an oscillation between two conceptions of the subject: the reflexive subject and the subject of attribution (the logical or ontological substrate). What in fact appears, however, is that once again the reflexive subject – the *hēmeis* – does not allow itself to be reduced to the subject of attribution. It cannot be identified with any of the three terms among which *noēsis*, reflection, opinion and passions are distributed. It is distinct both from the soul when alone, or separated, and from the compound of soul and body. As far as the “soul using the body” (*Enn.* I.1[53].3) is concerned, the question is more complex. Still in *Enn.* I.1, Plotinus lists the operations that are at the foundation of the soul’s power (*hēgemonia*) over the animal: reflection, *dianoia*, opinion, *doxa*, notions, *noēseis*; and he concludes by saying “and this is precisely what we are, above all (*malista*)” (7.16–17). Here we see that the *hēmeis* is not identified with the soul using the body, nor even with *dianoia*, but is simply situated on the same level as these. And this situation is presented as dominant, but not as exclusive. This is why Plotinus specifies, shortly afterwards: “The ‘*hēmeis*’ is thus twofold: either one takes the beast into account, or else one considers only what

is already above it" (10.5–7). The surprising "above all" (*malista*) at the end of Plotinus' phrase can be explained as follows: the *hēmeis* can also be situated higher or lower than *dianoia*, according to whether it identifies with the animate body or the separated soul, with the second or the first man. Although it is there "above all", it can also be elsewhere.

We thus see, to conclude on this point, that if the essential self can be identified with the separated soul, on the other hand the *hēmeis*, or reflexive subject, must be distinguished both from the latter and from the body animated by the powers that proceed from it. The separated soul and the animal, the first and the second man, are in it without being it. The consciousness by which it grasps itself does not grant it access to its identity, but only to this constitutive duality and to the various inner contents that can be referred to it. The *hēmeis* can only be situated at a level intermediary between the two men, or else between the separated soul and the living compound, but this situation is itself mobile, so that the *hēmeis* cannot be strictly identified with the *dianoia* either. We must now see how this dynamic character of the Plotinian subject is what constitutes it as the subject of ethics.

THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE *HĒMEIS* AND THE ETHICS OF CONVERSION

The *hēmeis* and the levels of the soul

Like *Enn.* I.1[53], *Enn.* V.3[49] underlines both the proximity and the difference between the *hēmeis* and *dianoia*. The *hēmeis* is here designated as "the main part of the soul intermediary between two powers" (*Enn.* V.3[49].3.35–8). The rest of the treatise will identify these two powers as sensation and intelligence. One might therefore be tempted to read an identification here between the *hēmeis* and the soul *qua* soul, that is, the *dianoia*. A bit earlier in the treatise, however, Plotinus writes, as we have seen, that intelligence belongs to us, but not to the soul.²² *Hēmeis* and soul are thus distinguished here, and they are so in that some powers can be attributed to the *hēmeis* that cannot be attributed to the soul: it would make no sense to say of *noēsis* that it "belongs to the soul", since the latter, as we have seen, is constituted *qua* soul, that is, as *dia-noia*, the deployment within time of an intuitive content, only in its difference from the *nous*. Thus, *Enn.* V.3 makes an additional distinction between the self-knowledge of *dianoia* and that of the *hēmeis*; for *dianoia*, to know itself in its essence is to know itself as coming from the Intelligence, but also as distinct from the latter; for the *hēmeis*, in contrast, to know itself is to know the Intelligence as constituting its essence (4.23–30). The *dianoia* is an image of the Intelligence, and this is what constitutes it as such. The *hēmeis*, for its part, is what can actualize the Intelligence as one of its powers.²³

This also holds true for sensation: here again, one can say of it that it is "ours" – but not that it belongs to *dianoia*, nor to the median part of the soul, since it is to the animated body that it must be attributed: "It is agreed that sensation is considered to be always ours – indeed, we always sense – whereas for the Intellect, there is room for doubt, because we do not always use it and because it is separated" (*Enn.* V.3[49].3.39–41).

The terminology here is very close to that of *Enn.* VI.4: like the two men, the two powers that correspond to them (one, sensation, defining the animal, the other, intelligence, defining the separated soul), are the subject of an alternative "usage". Just as *Enn.* VI.4[22] designated "us" as being adventitious man "more than once", so, here, it is said that we "always sense". And just as the first man was said to be "inactive" when the second

man is active in us, so here it is said that “we do not always use it”. The parallelism between those formulations is worth noticing, even though the vocabulary of usage substitutes for that of activity.

If the *hēmeis* cannot be identified with the median part of the soul, any more than with the separated soul, it is because, unlike the soul, it is not the subject of definitional powers. Whereas the separated soul has *noēsis* as its essential act, the median part of the soul is constituted as *dianoia*, and the living body is the subject of sensation and passions, the *hēmeis*, for its part, is what can make use in turn of either one of these powers.

HĒMEIS AND CONSCIOUSNESS

In this irreducibility of the *hēmeis* to the various levels of the soul, we may see an effect of Plotinus’ discovery of the difference between subject-consciousness and subject-substrate.

That the *hēmeis* is not a substance follows from the fact that for Plotinus, only the separated soul can be said to be *ousia*. The animated body itself, like every sensible reality, cannot be said to be such (see Chiaradonna 2002). However, the fact that the *hēmeis* is not the substrate of definite operations either results from the connection Plotinus establishes between it and consciousness. This connection is more intimate than the one between *hēmeis* and *dianoia*; and it is precisely, as is shown by the following text, that by virtue of which the *hēmeis* cannot be identified with a part of the soul, but rather with what Plotinus calls “the total soul”:

Everything present in the soul is not for that reason conscious, but ... it reaches “us” when it reaches consciousness.²⁴ When one of the soul’s activities is exercised without communicating anything to consciousness, that activity does not reach the total soul. It follows that “we” know nothing of this activity, because “we” are connected to consciousness (*meta tou aisthētikou*), and “we” are not part of the soul, but the total soul. (*Enn.* V.1[10].12.5–10)

It is thus this connection with consciousness that brings it about that the *hēmeis* cannot be identified with one level of the soul but is, at least in principle, that to which these levels are all present, and which totalizes them. Nevertheless, this text must be read together with those from *Enn.* VI.4[22] and *Enn.* V.3[49], already cited, which designated the two men – and with them *noēsis* and sensation – as presences or activities that are not simultaneous, but alternating and alternative. This implies that we should further elucidate the link between the *hēmeis* and consciousness.

CONSCIOUSNESS AND IDENTIFICATION

A passage from *Enn.* I.1[53] sheds light on the formulation, still vague, of *Enn.* V.1[10]: “‘we’ are linked to consciousness”. Here, precisely, the question is raised of the degree to which the *hēmeis* can not only be associated with *dianoia*, but even identified with the separated soul: “Are we not also what is prior to this part (that is, the middle part of the soul)?” The answer is as follows: “Yes, as long as we become aware of it: for we do not

always use all that we have, but only when we orient the middle part upwards, or in the contrary direction; must we not say that we make use of all that we make pass from potentiality or disposition to act?" (*Enn.* I.1[53].11.4–8).

Even more than as the subject of consciousness, the *hēmeis* appears here as what pre-sides over its orientation "upwards, or in the contrary direction" – in other words, towards the first or the second man, towards intelligence or towards sensation. This realization is at the same time described as a "making use" and an actualization. Yet it is also that by which what was merely "ours" becomes "us". Thus, "we are also" what is superior to the middle part of the soul – that is, the separated soul – when we become aware of its presence in us: in other words, this realization is inseparably an identification. Consciousness is therefore not so much constitutive of identity as it is a condition for identification. We are not what we are aware of: quite the contrary, we become what we *become* aware of. If the reflexive question ends up in the acknowledgement of a duality, becoming aware, for its part, is equivalent to the choice of an identity.

CONSCIOUSNESS AND CONVERSION

There is nothing necessary about such a process. As we have said, consciousness, in its pre-philosophical stage, is spontaneously directed downward; this is why Plotinus writes in *Enn.* V.3[49] that "we always sense". Yet it depends on us to prolong or to reverse this orientation, and this is the point at which Plotinian ethics enters the picture. As we have seen, the gap between the soul and the Intellect, its union with the body, is not by itself a "fault" or a "descent", but participates in the movement of procession. There is a fault only when the government (*hēgemonia*) of the body becomes exclusive concern (*kēdemonia*) for it. Entirely swallowed up by the body, under the sway of narcissistic illusion, consciousness then becomes incapable of reflecting the other activities of the soul and other powers of the *hēmeis*: Plotinus compares it to a broken "mirror", in which "discursive reason and Intelligence exercise their activity without reflection" (*Enn.* I.4[46].10.17–19). It is this same image of the mirror that is broken, or such that one can see oneself in it only as fragmented – the "mirror of Dionysus" – which elsewhere comes to express the soul's fascination with its own body and its descent into it (*Enn.* IV.3[27].12.1–2). In fact, it is in this bad orientation of consciousness, both obsessed and troubled by the body, that the true "descent" must be seen.

The necessary process of particularization, by virtue of which the essential "self" becomes an incarnate "self", then yields to the risk of parcelization: the subject, completely merged with its body, cuts itself off from the others, entering into that regime of division, of mutual inhibition, which characterizes corporeal reality (cf. *Enn.* III.6[26].6.33–64); but it no longer has access to its own totality, either. Thus, as early as *Enn.* IV.8[6], the Platonic drama of the descent is re-translated by Plotinus in epistemic terms: the descent must be understood, above all, as the forgetfulness by the soul of its intelligible rootedness, that is, as the obliteration of some of its faculties, the deactivation of some of its powers (cf. *Enn.* IV.8[6].8.1–13; I.8[51].14.44–6).

The point, then – and this, as we have said, is the movement obeyed by several Plotinian treatises – is to recall the subject to the consciousness of all the powers it bears within itself in order that, ultimately, it may be able to direct its attention towards the separated

soul. In other words, the goal is still to give rise to a trajectory of consciousness whose various moments would be the following: pre-philosophical consciousness, fragmented, narcissistic, which has no other object than its own body (*kēdemonia*); the totalizing consciousness by which the *hēmeis* discovers that all the powers of the soul are “its own”; selective consciousness (*prosokhē*), oriented towards the separated soul alone; finally, the pure presence (*synesis*) in which all duality between the intellect and its object is abolished.

This trajectory of consciousness is inseparably an epistemic and an ethical trajectory: *Enn.* V.3 and *Enn.* I.1 thus manifest that the constant activity within us of the separated soul is the necessary condition for such everyday cognitive operations as judgement. Indeed, the latter is the placing in relation of the imprints, or *typoi*, issuing forth from sensible things, with the *typoi* issuing from the intelligible forms (*Enn.* V.3[49].2–3.11; I.1[53].7.9–16, 9.18–23), that is, the notions (*noēseis*). True reasoning can then be defined as the “activation of notions” (*Enn.* I.1[53].9.21). This process of the actualization of notions is also what Plotinus calls “reminiscence”, by which he defines cathartic virtue (cf. *Enn.* I.2[19].4.19–25; IV.3[27].25.30–33; V.3[49].2.7–14).

In this way, the movement of conversion is the reverse of that of procession: the degradation of powers is reversed into an actualization of the potential, that is, of the traces left in us by higher realities.²⁵ However, while procession is necessary, conversion is contingent, depending as it does on the choice of the *hēmeis*, who can remain forever cut off from its intelligible origin and its essential identity.²⁶

In conclusion, then, we see that the association of *hēmeis* with consciousness prohibits the identification of it with any specific level of soul. At the same time, Plotinus thus provides himself with a graduated conception of the subject, since he distinguishes between the *hēmeis* and the intelligible “self”. It is in the latter – identical to the pure *ousia*, that is, the separated soul – that the foundation of individuality resides, together with the most intense life and an unalterable happiness. We have tried to show what was singular about these two theses, already in themselves. But the strength of Plotinus’ thought also resides in their articulation: in the affirmation both that something of us remains “up above”, so that happiness is a very close presence, and that it can nevertheless escape us, since this presence must still be actualized, and this actualization depends on a choice. Whereas his successors Iamblichus and Proclus were to deny the existence of the separated soul and to delegate conversion to theurgical ritual or to a purely cognitive process (see Westra 1987), Plotinus, for his part, is able to conceive both the permanent, impersonal subject and the ethical subject defined as what makes the choice of its identity.

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NOTES

1. Emphasized by Henri Bergson (2011), the fundamental role of Plotinian thought in the constitution of the notion of “Self” is curiously undervalued in genealogies such as those of Vernant (1989), C. Taylor (1989) or Foucault (2001). For recent re-evaluations, see Remes & Sihvola (2008), as well as Aubry & Ildefonse (2008).
2. This point was already noted by Dodds (1960). Let us specify at the outset that the notion of “self” is

- understood here in a broad sense, including both what is called in French “le moi” and “le soi”, that is, both the biographical, incarnate individual and the impersonal and/or essential identity.
3. Plotinus thereby distinguishes himself from both Plato and Aristotle, who accept reflexivity only *qua* mediated by an object or by another subject. Cf. especially Brunschwig (1983, 1996).
 4. It has become frequent in the secondary literature to designate this soul as “undescended”. We will see below how this designation is inadequate, in so far as, strictly speaking, the soul never “descends” for Plotinus.
 5. Translation is that of Pierre Hadot, retranslated by Michael Chase.
 6. Cf. I.1[53].2.2, 6, 8. On the problem of the demarcation between soul and Intellect, cf. Blumenthal (1993b, 1996b).
 7. *Enn.* V.3[49].3.23–9 (Ἀλλ’ οὐ ψυχῆς μὲν φήσομεν, ἡμέτερον δὲ νοῦν φήσομεν ...).
 8. *Ibid.*: 3.28.
 9. If this distinction between the levels of the self structures the foundational works of P. Hadot (1980) and O’Daly (1973), contemporary research has, partly under the influence of the “philosophy of mind”, been mainly interested in this essential level (see Rappe 1996, Gerson 1997b). Remes (2007) reconstructs the question of the continuity between the essential self and the concrete personal self.
 10. εἴτ’ οὐκ ἔχων ὅπη αὐτὸν στήσας ὀριεῖ καὶ μέχρι τίνος αὐτός ἐστιν.
 11. Cf. *Enn.* V.8.[31].11.5–12. See, along the same lines, *Enn.* IV.3[27].30.7–14, where consciousness is associated with discourse, *logos* and with imagination, *phantastikon*, as well as *Enn.* I.4[46].10.21–34, where Plotinus writes: “Acts of consciousness risk weakening the acts they accompany, whereas if they are not accompanied by consciousness, acts are more pure, having more intensity and life.”
 12. The debate is abundant: see, in particular, Rist (1963, 1970), Armstrong (1977), Blumenthal (1966, 1998), Gerson (1994: 139–51), Kalligas (1997), Morel (1999), Petit (1999), Nikulin (2005), Remes (2005; 2007: 32–59).
 13. It is discussed in Aubry (2008a), of which I take up the conclusions here.
 14. Cf. *Enn.* VI.7[38].5.2–3 (with the commentary of P. Hadot 1987: 214).
 15. On the subversion of the Aristotelian couple of potential and act implied by this model, and its application to the first principle, see Aubry (2006).
 16. Aristotle, *de An.* II.1.412a19–414a28. On this progressive definition, see Ackrill (1979).
 17. ζῶσθ’ ἐν τῷ σώματι; τὸ σῶμα τοιοῦτον/τοιόνδε. On the Plotinian terminology of the soul–body union, see Aubry (2004: 378–80).
 18. The texts do not all agree on this point. Some (*Enn.* VI.4[22].15) suggest that it is the individual soul that, at birth, ends with sensation the body already animated by the World Soul; others (*Enn.* I.1[53].8.18) explicitly make sensation an effect of the World Soul. This conflict may be reduced, however, in so far as Plotinus distinguishes two forms of sensation: one, purely mechanical, is the pure reception of a *pathos* by the living body; the other, active and conscious, would already be a perception (as is well known, Greek has only one word, *aisthēsis*, for sensation and for perception). One may assume that the former is an effect of the World Soul, the latter of the individual soul.
 19. *Enn.* VI.4[22].15.2. On this notion of *epitēdeiotēs*, see Aubry (2008b).
 20. That is, neither constrained nor fully free. Cf. O’Brien (1977), D’Ancona (2003), Aubry (2012).
 21. οἶον δυνάμει τότε τὸ μέρος οὔσα, *Enn.* VI.4[22].16.36.
 22. *Enn.* V.3[49].3.23–4: *ou psuchēs ... hēmeteron de ...*
 23. On the irreducibility of the *hēmeis* both to the separated soul and to *dianoia*, may I refer to my reply (Aubry 2008c: 118 n. 29) to Chiaradonna (2008c). See also Lavaud (2002).
 24. Here, *aisthēsis*. We also find the term *antilēpsis* at line 12. On the Plotinian vocabulary of consciousness, see, for an attempt of classification, Schwyzer (1960), A. C. Lloyd (1964), Warren (1964).
 25. On the way in which the equivocality of *dynamis* (its twofold meaning of power/potentiality) comes to express in Plotinus the reciprocity of procession and conversion, cf. Aubry (2006).
 26. For this reason, I see in the *hēmeis* not a “pure potentiality” (as Tornau (2009) reproached me), but a power of choice and self-determination. On this link between *hēmeis* and *proairesis*, cf. Aubry (2004: 302–4); in the same sense, see Sorabji (2006: 119) as well as O’Daly (1973: 49).