

**Raoul MORTLEY, *Plotinus, Self and the World***, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 153, ISBN 978-1-10-704024-3, £64.99.

The concept of the “self” or “identity” is one of the most studied nowadays, in humanities as well as in social sciences. The same question has been intriguing Plotinian scholars for a long time and a seminal book by Gerard O’DALY<sup>1</sup> was just a beginning of a long series of publications trying to cast light on this fascinating subject. The work of Raoul MORTLEY [= M.] is an interesting contribution to the growing body of literature on the subject and we can be sure it will not be the last one.

In the “Introduction” to this short study, the author presents its main threads as well as his methodology. He informs the reader that he is inspired by questions asked by modern philosophy, but that he will also be respectful of Plotinus’ text. “The method chosen is exploratory and dubitative”, says M., “and seeks to engage an enquiry, without necessarily finishing an enquiry” (p. 2). This honest declaration prepares the reader in advance not to expect too comprehensive a study or too many references to the secondary literature. The author also points to his main area of interest: what was Plotinus’ position on autonomy, authenticity and the personal, individual self – the great themes of modern, Enlightenment philosophy, still debated and important today. He also suggests the main conclusion of this, at first glance, inconclusive, work: Plotinus’ was the idea of the human self “being thoroughly at home with the All” (p. 13).

The first chapter (“The individuated self and memory”) begins with a comparison of Plotinus with Augustine in terms of their views on the personal self. It is quite banal to say that Augustine is considered to be the one who “invented” the individual self for Western culture<sup>2</sup>, especially because of his *Confessions*, an “autobiography” (which is not an autobiography) which seduces the modern reader with all the ideas of memory, individual history, dialogue, relationship, hermeneutics etc., so cherished by 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and culture. M. accepts those presuppositions, but argues that it was Plotinus who “invented” modern selfhood and asks a more intriguing (and less often asked) question: if so, why did Plotinus not write his own *Confessions*, in other words did not write an autobiography?

In the first chapter, the main problem is that of memory in Plotinus, contrasted with the quite crucial role that this concept plays in Augustine’s philosophy. After a brief review of the secondary literature on the self in Plotinus, M. describes two kinds of memory that can be found in the *Enneads* (or, more precisely, in a long treatise on the soul, divided rather clumsily by Porphyry, into *Enn.* IV 3, IV 4 and IV 5). One type of memory is a lower and affective memory, the other – a higher and disaffected one, which M. tries to clarify as being “analytical” and “clinical”. In this chapter, the author claims that he is presenting a “negative” view of memory in Plotinus; forgetfulness is praised as something much better than memory. This seems more than enough to explain why Plotinus would not write his autobiography (but still, it appears to be too easy an answer).

In the second chapter (“Memory and forgetting”), a more positive view of memory is presented. And yet, memory stands in opposition to contemplation, since the latter is always present, timeless and immediate, while memory, like consciousness, creates a distance between the subject and the object; it is always of past objects which are no longer there or which do not exist anymore. M. interprets a passage on “being” and “having” from *Enn.* IV 4, 4, one of the too often neglected and absolutely crucial texts concerning the fall of the soul in Plotinus. He notices that it implies the existence of the “subconscious or unconscious” in the soul (p. 32). The closer the soul is to the

<sup>1</sup> *Plotinus’ Philosophy of the Self*, Shannon 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. P. CARY, *Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of Christian Platonist*, Oxford 2000.

intelligible realm, the less it has and needs memory, but the more it falls into the sensible realm, the more there is room for remembering. And yet, in the fallen condition, it is memory which preserves the intelligible world in the soul and enables it to awaken and return to the spiritual realm. There is an apparent contradiction in Plotinus' view of memory: it is partly good and partly bad, depending on the context and the existential situation.

Chapter three ("Ignorance, love and play"), deals with the appreciation of the physical world. The author compares Plato and Plotinus, arguing that Plato's view is more positive towards the world, since his Demiurge delights in the created world, while Plotinus' Demiurge looks towards the Forms and delights in them instead. Nonetheless, Plotinus seems to come "close to the position of the orthodox Christians, maintaining the value of the physical world", as an image of intelligible beauty and goodness (p. 43). M. also reminds us of Plotinus' attacks on the Gnostics and places him somewhere between Plato and the Gnostics with regard to his attitude towards the material world. Later in the chapter, we find a meditation on the concept of ignorance, starting from Plato's image of an aviary and a wax tablet (from *Theaetetus*; there is also a reference to *First Alcibiades*). Towards the end, the author briefly touches upon the motif of acting and *theatrum mundi* in Plotinus.

In chapter four ("Plotinus' Eros"), there is again an attempt to compare Plato's and Plotinus' views, this time, on the role of Eros. The author argues that in Plotinus there is a great intimacy between the soul and beauty, unlike in Plato (Aristotle and Heidegger are used to cast light on this intimacy). In Plotinus, Eros is not only a Platonic desire for what is absent, but it is the very eye that enables us to contemplate what is present. Further on in the chapter, M. points to interesting aspects of the Plotinian concept of Eros, focusing mainly on his view on procreation. While Plato sees procreative desires as naturally coming from Eros, Plotinus insists that since procreation is caused by a lack, the self-sufficient, contemplative human self does not need or want, for that matter, to procreate. (This is also put in the context of Late Antiquity's generally negative view of sexuality.)

In chapter five ("The self: 'and we too are kings'"), M. focuses on the Intellect as it is presented by Plotinus in *Enn.* III 5. The Intellect is called "our king", but "we too are kings". The image of an intellect-king is traced down to Plato's *Philebus* as well as to ancient political theories, according to which the law is identical to the king. So it is in Plotinus: his Intellect is intelligible law and measure for everything in the sensible realm. The Intellect is not only beyond or above us, it is "ours" and precisely because of that, "we too are kings".

In the next chapter ("Being and having"), this subject is elaborated further. Starting from Gabriel Marcel's thoughts on "I" and "mine", M. links possession, being, and contemplation. He analyzes the ancient philosophical notion of *to oikeion*. Possession guarantees being and it is the goal of contemplation, it is above thinking. Nevertheless, the One does not possess at all; it is above possessing, which enables it to possess everything. Towards the end of the chapter, the author argues that the Plotinian self needs to be understood in terms of belonging, ownership and possession, or rather of "ownness", as he calls it. In Plotinus' thought, this forms a bridge between the self and otherness.

Chapter seven ("Self-knowledge") deals with the question of self-knowledge. The author starts from the image of the mirror (traced back to Plato's *Charmides* and *First Alcibiades*) as well as with Plotinus' remarks on consciousness functioning as a mirror. Further on, M. emphasises that the body belongs to us and is "ours", but that it does not determine us as individuals. It is rather an intelligible Form that is responsible for that. Towards the end, there are also some thoughts on the image of a "wandering" Intellect (from *Enn.* VI 7, 13). The conclusion is Plotinus' positive view of the All (the world): the Intellect embraces everything, otherness as well as sameness, and it finds itself everywhere it "goes".

The next chapter ("Art and the seduction of beauty") is concerned with art. Again, M. begins with Plato, his *Ion* and *Republic*, emphasising especially the seductive dangers of art. Art is appreciated more in Plotinus than in Plato. The author shows that art is an image of the divine, but an image retaining something of its prototype, thus stressing the continuity between the image and

the essence; this is absent from Plato's views. Further on, M. refers to André GRABAR's article on Plotinus and the art of his age (ideas of art as a mirror, derived from realistic paintings of Egypt, Plotinus' fatherland). GRABAR suggests Plotinus influenced Christian art, but M. disagrees, emphasising that Plotinus is essentially hostile towards images. The only kind of image he values is what M. labels "onto-image", that is, a living being reflecting the beauty of the intelligible Form. There is, however, ambiguity towards art in Plotinus and the author tries to explain it by referring to changing perspectives. It depends on whether Plotinus looks at art from "below" (as revealing something of the intelligible) or from "above" (as diminishing the essence). Ultimately, for Plotinus works of art are mere toys. The author comments: "Plotinus remains the prototype iconoclast, but iconophiles may have made some use of some of his writings" (p. 125).

The last chapter ("Face, image and the self") begins with an interesting comment on Plotinus' fascination with faces. The philosopher marvelled at the luminosity and beauty of the human face, especially the eyes. M. returns to Plotinus' hostility towards the Gnostics and provides us with a beautiful and insightful comparison: Plotinus "sees the engendered world as a kind of temple flooded with light. This contrasts with the Gnostic view of the world as a kind of prison, shrouded in darkness" (p. 130). The chapter ends with a thought of the self being "in the middle" (which, one can guess, should not be confused with Plotinus' famous statement, later repeated by Augustine, that the soul is *en mesō*; the author, however, does not refer to that in any way). "We" possess both the Intellect and the body, they are indeed "ours", not as material possessions, but forming a part of our very being, as the author suggests.

In the "Conclusion", the author summarises his enquiry: "Despite Plotinus' personal discomfort with it, the body and the physical world is fully embraced in his philosophy" (p. 140).

M.'s book is an important contribution to our understanding of Plotinus, and especially to his attitude towards the material world. This seems to be the most valuable part of the work, since many of the other brief analyses of selected concepts do not provide so much insight into Plotinus' philosophy. The book is written in a very clear, elegant, and interesting way, which should always be emphasised when we are dealing with such a difficult philosopher as Plotinus. When the reader accepts the author's method of enquiry (again, "exploratory and dubitative"), the lecture proves to be not only inspiring, but also, simply, pleasant (which makes us think that references to acting and beauty are not incidental in M.; he seems to actually enjoy Plotinus and wants the reader to enjoy him too).

What I find the most important idea in the book is that Plotinus was not entirely in harmony with the dominant atmosphere of his time, which was hostile towards the material world, sensible beauty and pleasure; that he was "at home in the All", as the author puts it. It is pity that M. does not take this thought further, because, indeed, with all the inner tensions, contradictions even, in the philosophy of Plotinus, a positive attitude towards everything that exists (in this sense, as M. says, "almost Christian", almost Genesis-like) prevails<sup>3</sup>. Of course, the negative perspective is also present, but it is, perhaps, too often taken for granted by readers<sup>4</sup>.

However, M. restrains himself from following in that direction, partly because of his reliance on Porphyry's biography as a source to understanding Plotinus' mind. I do not deny that it is an important source, but it should be read carefully for several reasons. If we have Porphyry claiming that Plotinus was ashamed to be in the body and Plotinus himself writing so powerfully about the beauty of the world, I do not understand why we should cling to Porphyry. But M., for some reason, hesitates to follow his own intuitions.

---

<sup>3</sup> There is not much about this in literature. I tried to link this aspect of Plotinus' philosophy with his mysticism in my *Mystical Experience and Philosophical Discourse in Plotinus* (Poznań 2008).

<sup>4</sup> I do not remember who said that people so often emphasise Plotinus' negative attitude towards the world, in terms of his "flight of the alone to the Alone", because this quotation is so easy to find... (being the last sentence of the last treatise of the last ennead in Porphyry's order); certainly, there is a grain of truth in this saying.

There are some minor weaknesses in the book that I want to address briefly. In chapter one, the author describes two types of memory in Plotinus, lower (affective) and higher (disaffected). But the lack of reference to contemplative literature of the West (not to mention the East) makes him misinterpret the higher memory as “analytic and clinical”. Both traditional mystics (e.g. Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross) and contemporary contemplatives (Philip St. Romain, James Arraj etc.) confess that, in later stages of spiritual growth, memory indeed becomes disaffected in the sense that events are remembered as images without emotional content. One quote from Teresa of Avila will suffice:

He has made my life to me now a kind of sleep; for almost always what I see seems to me to be seen as in a dream, nor have I any great sense either of pleasure or of pain. If matters occur which may occasion either, the sense of it passes away so quickly that it astonishes me, and leaves an impression as if I had been dreaming, and this is the simple truth; for if I wished afterwards to delight in that pleasure, or be sorry over that pain, it is not in my power to do so: just as a sensible person feels neither pain nor pleasure in the memory of a dream that is past<sup>5</sup>.

It can be debated what the advantages and disadvantages of that state are, but it is not about memory becoming abstract or analytic<sup>6</sup>.

References to Freud and Jung when M. deals with Plotinus’ intuition of the unconscious are completely mistaken. Freud’s unconscious is presented as a “reservoir of painful memories” which return in “perverse behaviour” (which is partly true of the early writings of Freud from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but this concept was soon abandoned by him and is not a part of his psychoanalytical theory) and Jung’s unconscious (called, for some reason, “subconscious”) is pictured as a reservoir of “universal and transcendent truths”, which is not a good description of the Jungian archetypes either.

M. also often draws conclusions from an interpretation of one single treatise of Plotinus. For instance, in *Enn.* V 3 the Intellect is seen as something above “us”, the “king”. But it is not always so in Plotinus. In VI 7 the individual selves are described as “gods” and “intellects” which have fallen into the bodies. Focusing on one treatise only gives us a limited perspective on what Plotinus was thinking, at least. M.’s view on the “we” as embracing the body along with other levels of our existence is untenable, since the “we”, in the view of many scholars, including the author of this review, is a mobile centre of attention and intention which identifies with various activities of the human self, but certainly cannot be equated with the totality of the embodied individual. What M. says is not entirely mistaken; on the contrary, it shows something important, but it should be nuanced and elaborated upon.

All in all, M.’s book is as inspiring as it is enjoyable, and its final thought on Plotinus being “at home in the All” is worth further consideration and popularisation, also in non-academic world.

*Mateusz Stróżyński*  
*Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań*

---

<sup>5</sup> *Life of St. Teresa of Jesus* 40, 31 (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/teresa/life.viii.xli.html#viii.xli-p0.2>, accessed 31 August 2015).

<sup>6</sup> This disaffected memory is a part of what James Arraj described in Jungian terms as “the loss of affective ego” and demonstrated that this state was reported not only by mystics from the East and the West, but also by some contemporary Westerners without any specifically religious orientation. See the chapter on this in his book: J. ARRAJ, P. St. ROMAIN, *Critical Questions in Christian Contemplative Practice* (available online: <http://www.innerexplorations.com/chmystext/isit.htm>, accessed on 31 August 2015). See also very clarifying descriptions of this sort of change in memory functioning in the first, autobiographical chapter of Philip St. ROMAIN’s book: *Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality*, New York 1991, pp. 10–34.