

---

# *Plotinus on the Identity of Knowledge with its Object*

Stephen Menn

---

## I Introduction

Plotinus's insistence that knowledge is identical with its object has been a major obstacle to taking him seriously as a philosopher: as we will see, even later neo-Platonists such as Proclus either reject or minimize this part of Plotinus's thought. Plotinus says in V.9 7 that all ἐπιστήμαι 'inasmuch as they are ἐπιστήμαι, are the same as each of the things they know [νοῦσι].' This is, on the face of it, absurd: when I know a tree, do I become identical with that tree? Trying to interpret charitably, we might suppose that Plotinus is thinking, not of ordinary knowledge, but of a special cognitive state in which I am somehow identified with the things I know. But this is no solution: taken seriously, it would imply the absurd conclusion that (since the Platonic Forms are ἐπιστητά) I must myself be each of the Forms (it only *looks* like there is a solution here because we are tempted to cheat by weakening the meaning of 'identify'). How else can we make sense of what Plotinus is saying?

A crucial first step toward a solution is to recognize that (in V.9 7 and elsewhere) Plotinus is asserting, not that the *knower* is identical with the

- 
- 1 An earlier version of this paper was read to the International Society for Neo-Platonic Studies; I am grateful to that audience (and especially Steven Strange), as well as to Eyjólfur Emilsson and Paul Kalligas and an anonymous referee, for their comments

thing known, but that the *knowledge* or science is identical with the thing known. The hypostasis  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ , for Plotinus, is a single all-comprehending science, containing the particular sciences within itself;  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ , and the sciences it contains, exist separately from souls (just as the virtues exist separately from souls for Plato or for any Platonist), and souls have knowledge by participating in  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  or in the sciences it contains. Plotinus asserts that there are not two different Forms, the Form of Horse and the Form of Knowledge-of-Horse, but that these are one single Form. But this does not mean that the knowing soul (of Alexander) is identical either with Bucephalus or with the Form of Horse. Rather, Alexander participates in and imitates the Form of Knowledge of Horse just as Bucephalus participates in and imitates the Form of Horse. Since Horse and Knowledge of Horse are the same Form, this means that the same Form has two different kinds of likenesses or participants, one at the level of souls and one at the level of bodies.

The picture I have just sketched is plausible Platonic philosophy, it is accepted by later neo-Platonists such as Proclus, and it captures one side of Plotinus. But it is clearly inadequate to describe Plotinus's thought. Plotinus emphatically denies (notably in V.9 13) that souls are merely 'images of archetypes' among the Forms, as bodies are. Proclus posits a world of soul mediating between the intelligible and sensible worlds, but Plotinus recognizes no such intermediate ontological level. Rather, each individual soul *is* a 'soul-itself' belonging to the intelligible world, and that same soul (not an image of it) is also present in the sensible world. There are only two worlds, and souls cross the gap between them; and when they come into the sensible world, they come bearing Forms (not images of Forms) with them. So the V.9 7 text on the identity of  $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota\sigma\tau\eta\mu\alpha\iota$  with their objects is explicitly about 'the  $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota\sigma\tau\eta\mu\alpha\iota$  that exist in a rational soul,' not just about  $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota\sigma\tau\eta\mu\alpha\iota$  existing in the intelligible world for souls to imitate; and V.9 13 says 'there must be in each really existent soul a justice and temperance, and a true knowledge in our souls, and these are not images or likenesses of those [corresponding Forms], as in a sensible [body]; rather, these are those [Forms] themselves, present down-here in a different way.' The later neo-Platonists could not make sense of this mixing of ontological levels. Can we?

## II From Aristotle to Plotinus

I want to try explaining, first, the common neo-Platonist thesis that knowledge is identical with its object, and then the idiosyncratic Plotinian thesis that the individual knowing soul contains within itself the world of intelligible objects.

Plotinus takes from Aristotle the thesis that knowledge is identical with the object known, or with the object known stripped of its matter, if the object originally had matter (*de Anima* III 4, 430a3-5; III 5, 430a19-20; III 7, 431a1-2; III 8, 431b20-2a1; *Metaphysics* Λ 9, 1074b38-5a5). It is not easy to extract Aristotle's full meaning here; I will bring out some aspects that were important for Plotinus. The knowledge of X is something by whose presence or activity a subject S comes to be knowing-X. Aristotle thinks, at a minimum, that S knows X because of the presence or activity of X, and not because of the presence or activity of something other than X. In the case of sensation, the object X is a sensible quality, and S perceives X whenever the quality X is present in S (whether Aristotle thinks this happens by a part of S's body having the quality X in the usual way, or by a special 'intentional' presence of X, is disputed); here the quality X, present in an external object, *causes* S to have the same quality X, and so causes S to know X. In this case the knowledge that is identical with the known quality (or with the qualified thing stripped of its matter) is not a separately existing individual, but a universal type; and it is not identical with the knowing subject, but inheres as an accident within the knowing subject.

The case of sensation is the simplest; but Aristotle tries to analyze other kinds of cognition (as far as possible) by analogy with sensation (*de Anima* III 4, 429a13-18; III 8, 431b21-8). In the case of intellectual knowledge (νοῦς or νόησις), Aristotle thinks that the form that is known also comes to exist, in a different way, within the rational soul. Here it is less plausible that, in every case, the soul is immediately *caused* to know X by an instance of X existing outside the soul. But here too, as long as the object X is something other than the knowing subject S, the knowledge of X must also be something other than S; it must be *present* in S (so that it can qualify S as knowing), but as an accident of S rather than as the essence of S. This means that S does not, simply in virtue of its own nature, know X. Rather, S, in virtue of its own nature, is *potentially* knowing X; but it needs some external cause to make it *actually* know X.

Aristotle distinguishes the case of the rational soul, which is by its nature potentially knowing or potentially νοῦς, from the case of νοῦς in the strict sense, which is essentially actual νοῦς, or essentially actually

knowing. If S is, by its essence, actually knowing X, then it follows that S's knowledge of X is not an accident inhering in S; rather, S is *itself* its knowledge of X. So Aristotle says of the divine νοῦς, not merely that its substance is νοῦς, but that its substance is νόησις (*Metaphysics* Λ 9, 1074b21-2); in this case, the act of knowledge is not an accident of a different underlying subject, but constitutes a substance in its own right. We may find it strange to describe any kind of knowledge as a self-subsistent substance, but in fact Aristotle is only following a broad tradition, from Anaxagoras to Plato and the Old Academy, that describes the world-governing divinity as νοῦς or νόησις. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> all of these philosophers mean to assert, not that God is a knowing *soul*, but that he is Reason or knowledge *itself*: human beings have rationality or knowledge through participation in this divine νοῦς, and the physical world is rationally ordered to the extent that this νοῦς dominates it. Aristotle develops Plato's conception of God as νοῦς by applying his distinction between potential and actual knowledge, and insisting that God is not knowledge in the sense of a *power* or habit, but is essentially *actually* knowing, or is himself an act of νόησις. This claim is an instance of Aristotle's general thesis of the priority of actuality over potentiality: Aristotle claims that actual knowledge is prior to potential knowledge, so that the *first* knowledge must be an entirely actual knowledge, and a rational soul which is 'potentially νοῦς' or is 'potentially all things [that it potentially knows]' must have, prior to it and acting on it, a νοῦς that 'makes all things' or that is 'essentially actuality' (*de Anima* III 5, 430a10-18; I accept, and Plotinus accepted, the interpretation of Alexander of Aphrodisias, that this essentially actual νοῦς is the God of *Metaphysics* Λ). The premiss that God is not only a knowing subject but also himself an *act* of knowledge, together with the claim that actual knowledge is identical with the known object, imply that, in this one special case, the knowing subject is identical with the known object — that is, that God's knowledge is simply knowledge of himself. Aristotle intends this conclusion to be (in part) a criticism of the demiurge of the *Timaeus*, who, though he is himself νοῦς, knows by looking at νοητά external to himself,

---

2 In *Plato on God as Nous* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, for the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* Monograph Series, 1995) and 'Aristotle and Plato on God as Nous and as the Good', *Review of Metaphysics* 45 (1992) 543-73.

namely the Platonic Forms. Aristotle's conclusion is that intelligible objects separate from matter cannot be other than  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  itself.

Although Aristotle developed his account of the divine  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  as an unchanging pure actual knowledge, with the corollary (as Aristotle thinks) that the only object of this  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  is itself, largely in criticism of Plato's *Timaeus*. Aristotle's account is nonetheless enthusiastically adopted by the Platonic school at least from the time of Alcinous in the second century AD. Alcinous and Plotinus accept Aristotle's arguments about  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  chiefly in order to use them against what they see as the inadequate Stoic conception of God, which describes God as  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  but then identifies him with the rational soul of the world. By distinguishing between souls, which (even if they happen to be always knowing) are still by their nature only potential  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ , and  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  in the strict sense which is essentially actual  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ , Alcinous and Plotinus argue against the Stoics that God is something distinct from and prior to the soul of the world.

In general, the Platonists accept Aristotle's theology of  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  because it gives them a way to argue for the existence of things beyond the sensible world, and also because it gives them a way to form more adequate conceptions of what these intelligibles are like. Even Aristotle's conclusion that God's objects of thought are not Forms outside him was not unwelcome; Plotinus takes this, not as denying Platonic Forms, but as forcing a reconception of what the Forms (as objects of God's thought) must be like. As V.5 1 shows, Plotinus is especially concerned to reject the Stoic view that the objects of God's thought are  $\lambda\epsilon\kappa\tau\acute{\alpha}$ , non-substantial propositional contents, or, more generally, that they are 'unintelligent and lifeless' (V.5 1 38-9, echoing *Sophist* 248e6-9a2); whereas, prior to the argument that  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  must know its objects by identity, we might well have thought that the Form of horse was unintelligent, and that the Form of triangle was lifeless. Against conceiving these Forms simply as an immortal horse and a rigid triangle, or as eternal propositions about horses and triangles, or as abstract units symbolizing 'horse' and 'triangle', Plotinus argues, from the intrinsic perfection and non-dependency of  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ , that  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  is what it knows, and therefore that the  $\nu\omicron\eta\tau\acute{\alpha}$  are themselves  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ .

Plotinus in fact makes it rather clearer than Aristotle himself what Aristotle's basic argument is: 'since  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  knows, and knows the  $\nu\omicron\eta\tau\acute{\alpha}$ , if it knows them as something other than itself, how will it encounter them? It will be possible [on this assumption] that it should not, so it will be possible that it will not know them, or that it will know them only after it has encountered them, and it will not always have knowledge' (V.5 1 19-23). So, since  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  'if we are true to the word' must be actually and

always νοῦς' (V.9 5 1-4; that is, it must be essentially actually knowing what it knows), its knowledge cannot depend on its 'encountering' things outside it, since then of its own nature it would be only potentially knowing. So, 'if it does not have its intelligence [φρονεῖν] as something borrowed, then if it knows [voεῖ] something, it knows it of itself, and if it possesses something, it possesses it of itself; but if it knows of itself and from itself, it is itself the things it knows' (V.9 5 4-7, correctly developing the implicit argument of Aristotle *Metaphysics* Λ 9, 1074b17-21). If, by contrast, a given so-called νοῦς knows its objects only by having encountered them outside itself, then it is only 'potentially νοῦς,' νοῦς of the kind that 'has passed from unintelligence [ἀφροσύνη] to νοῦς' (V.9 5 2-3); and if so, we must 'search for yet another νοῦς prior to it' (V.9 5 3), which actualizes this first νοῦς, or which the first νοῦς participates in to become νοῦς; and this prior νοῦς will be identical with what it knows.

But even while accepting this basic Aristotelian conclusion, Plotinus wants to defend the claim that νοῦς has a plurality of contents, and that there are intelligible paradigms of a wide variety of things in the sensible world. The thesis that νοῦς is identical with what it knows does not settle the question whether νοῦς knows only a single structureless object, since it does not settle the question whether νοῦς itself has an internal part-whole structure. Aristotle, after arguing at the beginning of *Metaphysics* Λ 9 that νοῦς's object is itself, goes on at the end of the chapter to ask the further question whether its object is composite; he answers that it is not, but his reasons (that 'it would change [its object of contemplation] among the parts of the whole' and that 'everything that does not have matter is indivisible') depend on the Aristotelian claim that composition requires potentiality and so cannot exist in eternal things, a claim that Plotinus has no reason to accept. To put it another way: Aristotle's thesis that νοῦς is what it knows forces Plotinus to identify the demiurge of the *Timaeus* and the animal-itself he contemplates, but it does not force him to deny the internal complexity of the animal-itself. Rather, it leads him to reinterpret the different Forms in the intelligible paradigm as the knowledges or sciences of the different kinds of beings, all contained in the one all-comprehending science, νοῦς. The claim is not that the different Forms are God's thoughts (as if each Form came to exist because God thought it: denied V.9 7 12-18), but rather that they are separately existing sciences, which are different parts or aspects of what God is.

Plotinus's dispute with Aristotle, then, is about whether the arts and sciences exist separately from matter; or rather, about *which* arts and sciences exist separately from matter, since Aristotle agrees that at least one does, and since Plotinus agrees that not all do. So Plotinus, in V.9,

rephrases the traditional Platonist questions about whether there are Forms of the various kinds of natural and artificial things (or whether these kinds of things exist 'There', in the intelligible world) by asking whether the corresponding *arts* can exist in the intelligible world, or whether these arts depend essentially on the conditions of matter (so especially V.9 3 and V.9 11). (Since natural things are artifacts, being produced by an art in the world-soul, they can be treated in the same way as human artifacts.) If the art exists separately, the art will be the separate Form of the artifact, and the artifact will be an imitation of the art, either a successful imitation, or thwarted to some degree by the conditions of matter.

This way of posing the question, at least for Forms of artifacts, is Aristotelian (Aristotle says that the forms of artifacts do not exist apart from the composite substance εἰ μὴ ἡ τέχνη — 'except as the art', or 'unless the art does', *Metaphysics* Λ 3, 1070a13-15). But Aristotle's answer is that natural and artificial things are 'said like the snub', meaning not only that they cannot *exist* separately from the matter they involve (nose or its analogue), but also that they cannot be *known* or scientifically conceived apart from their matter and from the sensory process by which we know the matter (thus *Metaphysics* E 1, *de Anima* III 4). If this is right, the art as well as the artifact will be inseparable from matter. Plotinus' vindication of the Forms against Aristotle thus turns on his claim that (some) natural and artificial things are not said like the snub, so that they can be known by a separate νοῦς. Plotinus's account has one clear advantage over Aristotle's, in that, since his νοῦς contains knowledge of many different intellectual contents, it can cause the soul to have many different arts and sciences (how Aristotle's simple νοῦς does this, if indeed it does, is a mystery). Plotinus too admits that νοῦς is a single unified knowledge; but it contains the knowledge of particular Forms as many particular theorems within a science, each implying the others (where theorems here are not propositional contents but the knowledge of these contents). Cosmic and individual souls, not being able to consider all theorems simultaneously, direct their attention at different times to different parts or aspects of the science, and so produce the sensible world as a series of partial sensible imitations of the intelligible model, νοῦς.

### III Why Plotinus Rejects Intermediate Souls

What I have said so far accounts only for the general neo-Platonist doctrine that the intelligibles are not outside  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ , not for the specifically Plotinian doctrine that the intelligibles themselves (rather than images of them) are present in the rational soul.

Plotinus tries to reconstruct the existence and nature of separate intelligible things, against the Stoics, by following Aristotle, tracing the forms in artifacts (including works of nature) back to the arts as forms in the soul of the artisan, and then back to Forms in  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ . The later neo-Platonists accept this procedure too. But for the later neo-Platonists from Iamblichus to Proclus and his school, forms in soul are forms *intermediate* between the forms in bodies and the Forms in  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ ; and soul itself occupies a fixed level of being intermediate between the sensible and intelligible worlds. To put it another way: Platonic tradition (as far back as Xenocrates) accepts a tripartition of beings as body, soul, and  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ , and also (as far back as Plato) accepts a bipartition of sensible and intelligible worlds. All the neo-Platonists, besides identifying the sensible world with body, follow Plotinus in identifying the intelligible world with  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ . But while the later neo-Platonists suspend soul halfway between the sensible and intelligible worlds, Plotinus makes each soul a numerically single being inhabiting *both* worlds at once, at home in the intelligible but descending to the sensible. Why?

As we will see, Plotinus knows and rejects the Iamblichus-Proclus position. But, as Plotinus sees it, his own interpretation of the status of soul (and the forms in soul) follows from the procedure (which the later neo-Platonists too accept) of tracing back forms from body through soul to  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ ; and Plotinus thinks that the thesis that souls occupy a level of being inferior to the intelligibles (together with premisses that all the neo-Platonists accept) would imply repugnant consequences about souls and about the physical world.

For the whole Platonic school, the sensible world is an artistic imitation of intelligible Forms, and the forms present in the sensible world are not the intelligible Forms themselves, but only images of them. Plotinus's Platonic Forms are every bit as separate from the sensible world as Aristotle's  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  is; indeed, they are a specification of Aristotle's  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ , specifying that it consists not in a single structureless intellectual intuition but in a complex of interrelated sciences. The advantage of Plotinus's interpretation of  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  over Aristotle's is that it is supposed to allow the sensibles to be an *imitation* of separate intelligibles in a more robust sense than Aristotle could admit (without concerning these sepa-

rate intelligibles as immortal horses). Plotinus explains this by saying that the sensibles contain likenesses of the arts that produce them; you may say, 'likenesses of the paradigms that the arts contemplate,' but Plotinus explains what these paradigms are by saying that the art or science *is* what it contemplates, so that the paradigm is simply the art or the knowledge itself.

Given these basic neo-Platonic assumptions, we can ask about the status of the things existing in souls: thoughts of all kinds, sensation, imagination, opinion, knowledge. Are these identical with the intelligibles, or are they merely likenesses of the intelligibles, as the things existing in bodies are? Plotinus's answer is that not all the things in souls have the same status: while opinions and sensory states are merely likenesses (and are not themselves things that exist in the intelligible world), the knowledge of X that exists in any given soul is itself the intelligible Form of X, and not a likeness of it. Plotinus claims that if the Forms themselves were not present in us, we would not have *knowledge* of the Forms (and therefore, since only the Forms are properly knowable, we would not have knowledge at all). I have already quoted Plotinus's conclusion from V.9 13, that 'there must be in each really existent soul a justice and temperance, and a true knowledge in our souls, and these are not images or likenesses of those [corresponding Forms], as in a sensible [body]; rather, these are those [Forms] themselves, present down-here in a different way.' The stress here is on *knowledge* and *virtue*: if there were in us only an imitation of knowledge, we would have not knowledge but opinion (and an imitation of virtue would be the kind of virtue that is based on true opinion); and, as Plotinus insists elsewhere (in V.9 7 and V.5 1), although opinion, being an imitation of knowledge, is an imitation of the object in the soul, true knowledge must be the object itself.

Plotinus develops this position in response to what Parmenides, in Plato's *Parmenides* (133b), calls the 'greatest difficulty' in the theory of Forms, namely a difficulty in how we could *know* the Forms (133c-4d). Since Forms (when relational) are correlative with Forms, and imitations of Forms are correlative with imitations of Forms, it follows that knowledge-itself is knowledge of Forms, whereas the so-called 'knowledge' of the imitations of the Forms is only an imitation of knowledge, i.e., it is only opinion. Throughout this passage, Parmenides insists that the Form of X, or X-itself, does not exist *ἐν ἡμῖν* or in the *παρ' ἡμῖν*, among us or in our (sensible) world, but only *παρὰ τῷ θεῷ*, with God or in the divine (intelligible) world; what things in our world possess, in virtue of which they are called by the same names as the Forms, are not the Forms but

only likenesses of them. But if this is so, then knowledge-itself is not present among us, and so we do not know the Forms themselves, but only 'know' (or rather opine) the imitations of the Forms in our own world.

Thus far Plato. There is a striking contrast between the neo-Platonists and twentieth-century commentators on how seriously to take this argument. Cornford calls the argument 'almost grossly fallacious' (98),<sup>3</sup> and, despite Parmenides's calling it the greatest difficulty for the theory of Forms, expresses surprise that 'some commentators have ... taken the argument as really damaging' (96). But we can see why Plotinus (and, after him, Proclus) took the argument so seriously, if we look at what Cornford thinks the fallacy is. Cornford thinks that the argument wrongly identifies knowledge-itself with 'a perfect instance of the activity called knowing, which can exist only in a mind' (98; Cornford thinks that the Form of knowledge, like other Forms, 'is not an activity existing in a mind, and cannot know anything,' *ibid.*). This confusion of the Form of knowledge with a perfect knowledge is particularly damaging, Cornford thinks, because it allows Parmenides to infer that since 'the knowledge that is  $\alpha\alpha\rho'$  ἡμῖν' (134c6-8) is inferior to knowledge-itself, we therefore do not 'participate in [or have a part of] knowledge-itself' (134c10-11, Cornford 99) but possess only something that is not knowledge-proper, and is therefore not knowledge of the Forms.

Given Plotinus's interpretation of the Forms, however, he is right to take Parmenides's challenge seriously. The usual modern view has been that the Form of X is something like the Fregean *Begriff* of X: sensible X's do not resemble this *Begriff*, nor do they contain either all or part of it; to say that a sensible thing imitates the Form of X, or possesses or participates in the Form of X, are merely technical expressions meaning that the thing *instantiates* the *Begriff* of X (that is, that the thing is an X). By contrast, Plotinus thinks that Forms are *objects*, which exist by themselves, and not *in* sensible things, and that sensible things do not contain or possess [ἔχειν] or even strictly participate in [μετέχειν, cf. I.7 2] these objects, any more than, on Aristotle's account, sensible things bear these relations to the separate νοῦς. Nor do the sensibles perfectly *instantiate* the Forms (this could only mean that what is predicated of the Forms is equally predicated of the sensibles, and this is not true); at best they

---

3 All references to Cornford are to his *Plato and Parmenides* (London: Kegan Paul 1939).

*imperfectly* instantiate them, that is, imitate them. Thinking of the Form of X as the science or art of X helps to make clear why the sensible X's do not instantiate the Form (the science) and do not have the Form (the science) within them; it also helps to reconstruct a way that the sensible could be an *imitation* of the Form, the way an artifact is produced in imitation of the art existing in the artisan's soul.

Cornford wants to solve Parmenides's 'greatest difficulty' by saying that we have in ourselves what can technically be called a 'likeness' of knowledge-itself, but that a 'likeness' of a Form is simply an *instance* of the Form, so that by having a 'likeness' of knowledge-itself we would be genuinely knowing (and knowing the Forms, since these are what knowledge is of). But given Plotinus's interpretation of the Forms, and of the 'likeness' of sensible things to the Forms, Cornford's solution is impossible. For Plotinus, the Form of X is the art or science of X, and a sensible X is an imitation of this Form because it has been produced (or affected and shaped into an X) by some agent that has this knowledge and takes it as its paradigm in acting. If we now say that S's soul contains only a likeness of knowledge (or a likeness of knowledge-of-X), we would be saying that the soul too is related to the knowledge of X only by being affected by some other agent that has this knowledge and uses it as its paradigm in acting on the soul. But this is absurd. Plotinus has been trying to explain how bodies could bear any relation (call it 'likeness') to the Forms, beings as separate from bodies as Aristotle's God; he has solved this by saying that bodies are shaped by souls that contain the knowledge that the Forms are. If souls too contain only likenesses produced in them by some higher agent, then souls have failed to explain the relation between bodies and Forms, and there will be (*pari ratione*) an infinite regress of mediators. Souls can in fact contain likenesses of the Forms: this is what happens in opinions and sensory impressions, where the soul is affected by an external agent, from which it receives not X but an impression or image of X (V.9 7 1-12, V.5 1 50-68). But it would be absurd to conclude that *all* the so-called knowledge in the soul is merely such a reception and imitation.

But something much worse than a regress would follow if souls contained only likenesses of knowledge and of the Forms: the souls that shape the physical world would not be truly knowing or virtuous, and would shape the world not in the likeness of the Forms but in the likeness of a mere imitation of the Forms; they would therefore make the world badly, producing a work that is *αἰσχρόν* and not *καλόν* (cf. *Timaeus* 28a6-9b2). In other words, if we admitted Parmenides's premiss that the 'substance itself-by-itself of each thing' is not *ἐν ἑαυτῷ* (Parmenides 150c3-

5), neither in our bodies nor in our souls, then we would have to admit the Gnostic claim that the world and its maker are evil. Precisely in vindicating this world and its maker against the Gnostics, Plotinus feels compelled to confront Parmenides's 'greatest difficulty' and to insist that knowledge-itself is in our souls; where, for Plotinus, this is not a single Form of knowledge, but many Forms, knowledge-of-X and knowledge-of-Y, and these are all the Forms there are. As Plotinus says in the *Against the Gnostics*, 'when someone makes λόγος come from νοῦς, and then generates from this in soul another λόγος from this λόγος itself, so that this is in between soul and νοῦς, then he deprives soul of knowing [νοεῖν], if it is supplied not by νοῦς but by something in between, the λόγος; and it will have an image of λόγος, not λόγος; and it will not know [εἰδήσει] at all' (II.9 1 57-63). This is why the Gnostics introduce so many intermediaries: they want to say that the maker of this world (with all the souls that share in animating bodies), cut off by a series of intermediaries from contemplating the highest beings, creates the world out of ignorance and incompetence, imitating a defective model. Plotinus's burden in the *Against the Gnostics* is to show that the souls' knowledge, not their ignorance, is responsible for creating the world; so he must resolve Parmenides's difficulty, which would confine souls to a lower realm cut off from the realm of knowledge and the Forms.

I said before that Plotinus was aware of something like Proclus's view, that souls occupy an ontological level midway between bodies and νοῦς, and that souls therefore do not contain νοῦς and the νοητά, but only images of them. As I have suggested, Plotinus rejects this view chiefly because it involves succumbing to the 'greatest difficulty', and accepting the quasi-Gnostic consequences. Both Plotinus and Proclus understand what is at stake. When Proclus in his commentary on the *Parmenides* comes to the 'greatest difficulty' passage, and in particular the argument that we cannot know the Forms, Proclus says that Parmenides is right, and that Plotinus's attempts to evade the conclusion are a failure. 'The separate [ἐξηρημένα] Forms are in themselves [καθ' αὐτά]; things that are in themselves and belong to themselves are not in us; things that are not in us are not coordinated [σύστοιχα] with our knowledge; things that are not coordinated with our knowledge are unknowable by our knowledge; so the separate Forms are unknowable by our knowledge; they are contemplated only by the *divine* νοῦς' — Proclus is not only explaining but endorsing this argument and its conclusion (*in Parmenidem* 949).<sup>4</sup> Plotinus's assertion, not only that knowledge is identical with its object, but that the soul (and even the human soul) contains the objects of knowledge, so that the intelligible world is within us (a solution that

Proclus has just cited and criticized, 948) should be seen as an attempt to avoid this conclusion.

In explicating Plotinus I have concentrated on the ontological status of the knowledge in souls, rather than on the ontological status of souls themselves. But for Plotinus these two questions go together. 'Not all things that are down-here are images of archetypes, nor is soul an image of soul-itself, but one soul differs from another in value [i.e., in degree, not as a reality differs from an image], and soul-itself exists also down-here, even if not the way things are down-here; and there must be in each really existent soul a justice and temperance, and a true knowledge in our souls, and these are not images or likenesses of those [corresponding Forms], as in a sensible [body]; rather, these are those [Forms] themselves, present down-here in a different way' (V.9 13). It is only because the soul down-here is an intelligible soul-itself that it can contain the intelligible virtues, and not mere likenesses of them: if the soul of Socrates were a mere image, it could not contain real virtues and sciences, any more than a man's shadow on a wall can contain the real qualities of his body (*Sophist* 238c5-6 forbids us to 'attach' [predicate] something that really exists to something that does not). Souls and the Bed-itself both have their home in the intelligible world; what is distinctive about souls is that they can *also* come down to inhabit and shape the sensible world, themselves and not their images, although they cannot cease to be in the intelligible world any more than the Bed-itself can. Or rather, the Bed-itself, like souls, can come down to inhabit and shape the sensible world, but it can do so only in and through souls: the Bed-itself comes down as the art of carpentry present in souls that are present in the sensible world, and this art is an efficient cause working on sensible wood and forming it into beds and other artifacts. This, I think, is the fundamental thesis of Plotinus's 'Großschrift',<sup>5</sup> thus of both the *That the Intelligibles are not outside* Νοῦς and the *Against the Gnostics*: that the Forms themselves, being arts or sciences, are present in souls and directly

---

4 I cite Proclus from *Procli philosophi Platonici opera inedita*, ed. Victor Cousin (Paris: Durand 1864).

5 The 'Großschrift' comprises the treatises III.8 *On Nature, Contemplation and the One*, V.8 *On the Intelligible Beauty*, V 5 *That the Intelligibles are not outside* Νοῦς, and II.9 *Against the Gnostics*. Porphyry lists them as treatises #30-33 in chronological order, but they are in fact a single long treatise that Porphyry has broken up and distributed among different Enneads

produce the sensible world in their own image. And this is only an attempt to explicate and defend Plato's thesis that  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  or knowledge-itself is the demiurge of the sensible world, and that it 'wanted all things to come to be, as much as possible, like itself' (*Timaeus* 29e3).

Department of Philosophy  
McGill University  
Montréal, QC  
H3A 2T7  
spmenn@philo.mcgill.ca