

Plotinus on Care of Self and Soul

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ABSTRACT

Plotinus' philosophical project includes an important Socratic element. Plotinus is namely interested in both self-knowledge and care of soul and self. In this study I examine how through his interpretation of three passages from Plato (*Timaeus* 35a, *Phaedrus* 246b and *Theatetus* 176a-b), Plotinus develops an account of the role of care in his ethics. Care in Plotinus' ethical thought takes three forms. First of all, care is involved in maintaining the unity of the embodied self. Secondly, situated in a providential universe, our souls – as sisters to the world soul – take part in the providential order by caring for 'lower' realities. Finally, Plotinus develops an ethics of going beyond virtue, a process which involves care for the higher, potentially divine, self.

Keywords: Plotinus; Care; Self; Soul; Self Knowledge; Virtue.

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At the very centre of Plotinus' philosophical preoccupations is a concern for understanding who we really are. Indeed, we might say that in addition to qualifying as a Neoplatonic philosopher, Plotinus is also in a crucial sense a Neosocratic philosopher.¹ This is not how Plotinus is usually perceived. In fact, Plotinus' thought has been characterized as "Platonism without Socrates" (Bröcker 1966). But a closer look at Plotinus' work suggests that Socrates' spirit is not absent from the *Enneads*. Not only does Plotinus pay heed to the command of the Delphic inscription *gnôthi seauton*, but his entire *oeuvre* may be understood as contributing to the Socratic project so pointedly elaborated in the *Apology*:

For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care (*epimeleisthai*) for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul (*Ap.* 30a4-b2).²

Of course Plotinus – whose borrowing has sometimes obscured his originality – makes significant contributions to the development of the theme of care for the self, much of which is explicitly Platonic in inspiration. I suggest that we can better understand Plotinus' development of a philosophy of care if we understand it as oriented by three passages from Plato which frame respectively three aspects of Plotinus' thought pertaining to care of self and soul.

The first section of this paper will be devoted to Plotinus' understanding of the self as developed with reference to Plato's *Timaeus* 35a. According to Plotinus the self is multi-layered: he often thinks of the layers of self in terms of the Platonic three-part model of the soul. But Plotinus works even more frequently with a model which simply juxtaposes

higher and lower soul. He develops his understanding of care for the self primarily against the background of the distinction between higher and lower soul. In this first section of the paper, I make reference to the problem which Plotinus' notion of the impassibility of soul represents for his understanding of care for the soul. The second section of this paper treats Plotinus' explicit remarks concerning care, most of which are made with reference to *Phaedrus* 246b. Care plays a key role in Plotinus' understanding of the metaphysical dynamics of procession and return, explaining both why the soul is in the world and why it must ultimately be detached from the world. Furthermore, in this second section I examine how Plotinus develops a cosmological perspective on self and care. Finally, in the third section of this paper, I examine the connection between Plotinus' understanding of virtue and his thought concerning care. This section returns to a more properly Socratic theme. Here I discuss Plotinus' doctrine of virtue in terms of what I call a "horizon of virtue" and show how the notion of "excellence" is taken up and transformed in Plotinian ethics. In the end, Heracles – who makes a brief appearance in Plotinus' texts – will tie up some loose ends. I conclude that there are three basic types of care in Plotinus.

I THE PLOTINIAN SELF

Plotinus understands the embodied self as characterized by multiple levels.³ Drawing on Plato's account of the creation of soul in the *Timaeus*, Plotinus formulates a position according to which soul – while remaining fundamentally unified – is the level of reality where multiplicity is most apparent. Plato describes the Demiurge's fashioning of the soul as

follows: “In between the *Being* that is indivisible and always changeless, and the one that is divisible and comes to be in the corporeal realm, he mixed a third, intermediate form of being, derived from the other two” (*Tim.* 35a.)⁴ Although he often returns to it in order to readdress its meaning, Plotinus generally takes this passage to mean that the soul is a substance both simple and complex. Accordingly, Plotinus conceives of the self as a microcosm, but a microcosm on the model of the intelligible universe rather than the physical universe. Plotinus writes,

For the soul is many things, and all things, both the things above and the things below down to the limits of all life, and we are each one of us an intelligible universe (*kosmos noëtos*), making contact with this lower world by the powers of soul below, but with the intelligible world by its power above and the powers of the universe; and we remain with all the rest of our intelligible part above, but by its ultimate fringe we are tied to the world below, giving a kind of outflow from it to what is below, or rather an activity, by which that intelligible part is not itself lessened (III 4 (15), 3, 21-27).⁵

When inquiring into the nature of the true self, Plotinus usually formulates his question in terms of the “we.”⁶ That is, rather than asking “who am I?” or “what is the self?” Plotinus asks “who are we?” Although for Plotinus the self, fluid as it is, is difficult to pin down, he does suggest that the “we” is the middle of the self which is conceived as a continuum of conscious and even unconscious states.⁷ However, we discern behind the multi-leveled self in Plotinus a basic two-part model.⁸ In I 1 (53), one of his most sustained investigations into the nature of the self, Plotinus writes,

So “we” (*to hêmeis*) is used in two senses, either including the beast (*thêrion*) or referring to that which even in our present life transcends it (*to hyper touto êdê*). The beast is the body which has been given life (*zôôthen to sôma*). But the true man (*ho d’alêthês anthrôpos*) is different, clear of these affections; he has the virtues which belong to the sphere of intellect and have their seat in the separate soul, separate and separable even while it is still here below (I 1 (53), 10, 6-10).

Plotinus goes so far as to refer to the soul as having something of an “amphibious nature” in the literal sense, that is, having “two lives.”⁹ Now, much of Plotinus’ work on the self represents so many attempts to clarify the nature of the relationship between the two main levels of self. The “beast” (*thêrion*) is to be understood as “another man” attached to the first man or true self (VI 4 (22), 14). It is the composite self which takes part in both soul and body. But the soul that is constitutive of the lower self is according to Plotinus really only an “image” (*eidôlon*) or “reflection” of soul (I 1 (53), 11, 12-13). By this Plotinus means that in no sense is the soul trapped in matter or body (although, he never ceases to revisit the notion – evidently philosophically challenging for him – that the lower soul is an *eidôlon*).

When discussing the nature of the “we” (*hêmeis*) Plotinus recognizes that we can orient and direct our selves in different ways. The self is capable of becoming more than the sum of the levels of soul. Kevin Corrigan has called the “we” in Plotinus “a kind of proportional mean between higher and lower faculties” (Corrigan 2005, 83). And this proportion, it is worth adding, is subject to adjustment. Plotinus writes,

But then does not the “we” include what comes before the middle? Yes, but there must be a conscious apprehension (*antilêpsis*) of it. We do not always use all that we have, but only when we direct our middle part towards the higher principles (*pros ta anô*) or their opposites, or to whatever we are engaged in bringing from potency or state to act. (I 1 (53), 11, 4-8)

In fact, Plotinus asserts that humans are what they are in virtue of their better part, and in such contexts he can speak of the directionality of the soul in terms of “escape” or “flight” (borrowing from *Theaetetus* 176a8-b1).¹⁰

In III 4 (15) Plotinus expresses the nature of this directionality of the self in terms of the *daimon* (of unmistakably of Socratic inspiration).¹¹ According to Plotinus the *daimon* is the level of the self which is immediately above the dominant principle in us. In a certain sense, we choose our *daimon*, Plotinus tells us. Consequently, it belongs to us in one sense, but another does not. For it guides us, while we do not possess it as a layer of the self in a strict sense. Rather, it points beyond the self.

In IV 3 (27) Plotinus explains that the dominance of the better part of the soul must be maintained if only simply to preserve the mere unity of ordinary consciousness. Towards the end of a long investigation into the faculty responsible for memory Plotinus concludes that it is the imagination (*to phantastikon*) which performs this function.¹² This conclusion is not particularly surprising; however, through the course of his argument Plotinus is forced to concede that both the higher and the lower soul have imagination. That is, there are two faculties of imagination in a single human. This is very problematic particularly if, as Plotinus asserts, the imagination also corresponds the level of everyday consciousness. He explains:

Now when one soul is in tune with the other (*sumphônê hê hetera tê hetera*), and their image-making powers are not separate (*oude khôris tôn phantastikôn*), and that of the better soul is dominant (*kra-tountos te tou tês kreittonos*), the image becomes one, as if a shadow followed the other and as if a little light slipped in under the greater one; but when there is war and disharmony (*makhê ...kai diaphônia*) between them, the other image becomes manifest by itself, but we do not notice what is in the other power, and we do not notice in general the duality of the souls. (IV 3 (27), 31, 9-14)

The fissure which can open up between the higher and lower souls, hence, may become apparent in a disunity of consciousness.

In light of this anthropology, an outline of what care for the self might look like according to Plotinus starts to take shape. Caring for the self is a matter of recognizing the plurality of levels of self and organizing them in such a way that a certain part – the higher part – dominates. But Plotinus sees domination by the higher part of soul in a very specific and qualified way, since the dominating part is itself not the highest kind of thing in the whole of reality. Moreover, this highest part of the soul is not always clearly discernable as a single separate element in the self as a whole. Therefore, rather than the notion of dominance, notions like “directionality” and “aspiration” better capture the significance of the Plotinian picture of hierarchy in the soul. Furthermore, while care for the self at some level involves “separation” of the soul from body, this does not mean the separation of the two levels of soul. Rather, care for the self involves maintaining the unity of the living being in face of the threat of fissure, rupture or disintegration. Moreover, care for

the living being involves the proper maintenance and training of the lower soul.¹³ Hence, notions such as harmony and symphony are of key importance in Plotinian psychology. Much of this is, of course, an elaboration of Platonic and Aristotelian thought.

Now there is some tension in Plotinus' account here, since the lower soul is also for its part responsible for another kind of caring. It is the lower soul which cares for the body. Yet care in this sense is according to Plotinus like a shadow of the higher contemplative activity of the soul. This tension raises questions which will concern us in the next section of this paper.

But before proceeding to the second section of this paper we should briefly consider Plotinus' position on the impassibility of the soul. The impassibility of the soul in Plotinus is related to the doctrine that the soul is not entirely descended. Plotinus asserts namely that the soul is always partly attached to the intelligible realm even when it inhabits a body. In IV 3 (27) he paints the following picture borrowing the image from Homer: "For they did not come down with Intellect, but went on ahead of it down to earth, but their heads are firmly set above in heaven." (IV 3 (27), 12, 4-5)¹⁴ In III 6 (26) Plotinus elaborates his doctrine of the impassibility of soul in dialogue with the Stoics. He develops a theory of the soul as fundamentally unaffected even though sensation and thought do involve process and change relating to a world which transcends the individual.¹⁵ Here Plotinus draws on the Aristotelian idea of the soul as a form, and combines it – clearly departing from Aristotle – with the Platonic idea of the soul as self-moved.¹⁶

Plotinus' account in III 6 (26) concerning how the embodied soul interacts with its environment is complex and this is not the place to go into the details of his discussion. What is important in the present context is that Plo-

tinus' position on the impassibility of the soul seems to represent a challenge to a coherent notion of care of the self. For if the soul cannot be affected in any real way, it is not clear why it should require any care at all. Indeed, the impassibility of the soul might seem to undermine any notion of active ethical engagement and instead promote quietism. Plotinus does not fail to deal with this issue. He writes,

Why, then, ought we to seek to make the soul free from affections (*apathê*) by means of philosophy when it is not affected to begin with (*mêde ex archên paskhousan*)? Now, since the mental image (so to call it) (*hoion phantasma*) which penetrates it at the part which is said to be subject to affections produces the consequent affection (*pathêma*), disturbance (*tarakhê*), and the likeness of the expected evil is coupled with the disturbance, this kind of situation was called an affection and reason thought it right to do away with it altogether... it is as if someone who wanted to take away the mental pictures seen in dreams were to bring the soul which was picturing them to wakefulness, if he said that the soul had caused the affections, meaning that the visions as if from outside were the affections of the soul. (III 6 (26), 5, 1-13)

Plotinus' discussion of the importance of images in this passage opens a view toward a very complex domain of his thought, that of the "image making power" or "imagination" (*phantasia*). According to Plotinus what appear to be affections are in fact to be attributed to the power of the soul itself. The soul creates images in association with the physical world, but, as Plotinus insists, these images are not affections.

Plotinus addresses the problem of impassibility again at I 1 (53), 12 with an account somewhat less nuanced than that of III 6. He explains, “so the soul becomes compound (*sunthetos*), the product of all its elements, and is affected as a whole (*paskhei dê kata to holon*), and it’s the compound which does wrong (*hamartanei*), and it is this which for Plato is punished, not the former.” (I 1 (53), 12, 10 Armstrong translation slightly modified). Here it is the compound (*sunthetos*) – the combination of soul and body – which is the subject of affections, not the soul proper. This account of affection is much more readily adapted to the larger context of Plotinus’ psychology, for, as we have seen, the body is ultimately animated only by an “image” of the higher soul.

So it turns out that we have in Plotinus two accounts of how to solve the impassibility problem: (1) the image making power of the soul working in a complex parallel relationship with the world (III 6 (26)) and (2) affections are relevant to the soul only insofar as it is part of the compound (I 1 (53)). Both accounts of how in the face of the impassibility of the soul preserve a place for ethics. To be sure, the Plotinian self does benefit from a great deal of security, since no matter how far it “descends” it always remains attached to the intelligible. In V 3 (49) Plotinus asserts that real self-knowledge does not occur at the level of soul but rather only at the level of intellect. But as far as the undescended soul is really with the intellect, it too has self-knowledge, even if this knowledge is mediated. We might say that, insofar as self-knowledge is at least partly constitutive of selfhood, for Plotinus the self is self thanks to its undescended soul. In any case, Plotinian ethics are oriented on the figure of this higher soul which cannot but lead one back to its source. But then what of this impassible self, which in a sense does not need care? In the next section

I look at Plotinus’s account of the power of soul and how in certain contexts this power manifests itself as power to care.

II PLOTINUS ON SOUL AS CARE

In the first section of this paper I attempted to outline Plotinus’ philosophy of self and indicated how the Plotinian multilayered self, partly impassible, can be understood as an object of care. In the present section, I turn to Plotinus’s more explicit accounts of care formulated largely through his reading of the *Phaedrus* where Plato writes: “all soul cares for (*epimeleitai*) all that lacks a soul and patrols all of heaven, taking different shapes at different times” (246 b).¹⁷ Plotinus’ reading of this passage brings into the discussion of care two new elements. First, it explicitly addresses the world soul, such that we can speak here of a cosmic aspect of care. Secondly, Plotinus addresses a certain ambiguity of care that arises at the human level of the cosmic project of care. I will suggest, somewhat provocatively, that Plotinus understands soul in this context to be equivalent to care itself. That is, the goodness which derives ultimately from the One-Good and which is manifest as timeless substance at the level of Intellect, is manifest as care at the level of soul, a temporal reality. This is namely the level at which intelligible reality interfaces with physical realm and the needs inherent in it.¹⁸ In fact, it is plausible that Plotinus read the *Phaedrus* passage on the soul’s care as an elaboration of the “definition” of the soul as self-mover which appears only a few lines earlier in the *Phaedrus* (245c).

Plotinus addresses the key *Phaedrus* passage cited above in various contexts. In general, he reads it as indicating how the world soul governs the world. But Plotinus sees the powers

and activities of individual souls as very close to, even in some sense coinciding with those of the world soul. Plotinus' first reference to the *Phaedrus* passage is in an early work IV 8 (6) (one of his most cited works because it begins with the passage describing a mystical experience). Already in the second chapter, however, he turns to cosmology, writing:

So that what happens to us when we seek to learn from Plato about our own soul is that we have also to undertake a general enquiry about soul (*peri psuchês holôs zêtêsai*), about how it has ever become naturally adapted to fellowship with body, and about what kind of a universe we ought to suppose that it is in which soul dwells ... Plato says that our soul as well, if it comes to be with that perfect soul (the world soul), is perfected itself and "walks on high and directs the whole universe"; when it departs to be no longer within bodies and not to belong to any of them, then it also like the Soul of the All will share with ease in the direction of the All, since it is not evil in every way for soul to give body the ability to flourish and to exist (*tên tou eu dunamin kai tou einai*)¹⁹, because not every kind of provident care (*pronoia*) for the inferior deprives the being exercising it of its ability to remain in the highest. (IV 8 (6) 2, 1-26)

It is worth making a few comments before looking at the remainder of this passage. First of all, it is striking how closely Plotinus links self-knowledge at the level of soul with knowledge of the cosmos: to know the self one must also know the universe. Not only does he link self-knowledge to knowledge of the cosmos, he also presents the cosmic soul as a model for human striving. The world soul is engaged in a

kind of "care" (here *pronoia* usually translated as "providence"²⁰) precisely for something "inferior" which according to certain principles might seem to be a task unworthy of the soul. Indeed, we have already seen in the previous section how a certain "care of the self" is precisely a matter of organizing the self such that, on the one hand, the higher self dominates whole self and on the other, the higher self is itself is oriented according to what is above it – the *daimon*. Plotinus certainly does qualify his assertion that provident activity is good: "it is not in every way evil" (*mê pasa pronoia tou cheironos*).²¹ Nevertheless, the work of providence here is precisely a matter of transmitting "the Good and Being" to further levels in the order of reality. One might be reminded of the return to the cave in the Plato's *Republic* Book VII.²²

The remainder of the passage is dedicated to drawing a clear distinction between two kinds of caring (with rather obvious reference to Gnostic views). It reads as follows:

For there are two kinds of care of everything (*dittê gar epemeleia pantos*), the general (*to men katholou*), by the inactive command of one setting in order with royal authority, and the particular (*to de kathékasta*), which involves actually doing something oneself and by contact with what is being done infects (*anapimplasa*)²³ the doer with the nature of what is being done. Now, since the divine soul is always said to direct the whole heaven in the first way, transcendent in its higher part but sending its last and lowest power into the interior of the world, God could not still be blamed for making the soul of the All exist in something worse, and the soul would not be deprived of its natural due, which it has from eternity and will have for ever, which cannot be against its

nature in that it belongs to it continually and without having beginning. (IV 8 (6) 2, 26- 38)

In this passage Plotinus contrasts an *epimeleia katholou* (“universal care”) with an *epimeleia kathekasta* (“particular care”). There are several ways in which we might understand this dichotomy. First, Plotinus might mean that, on the one hand, we tend to care for our own particular selves whereas, on the other, the world soul is preoccupied with the whole of nature. Or, second, he might mean by “particular care” (*katheskasta*) that we are confined to act in a particular time and place in association with those with whom we happen to come into contact. Or, third, it is possible that by “particular” Plotinus refers also to the fact the individual actor has only restricted means at his or her disposal when it comes to caring.

There is an unmistakable echo of Stoic ethical thought in the reminder to look at the world from the standpoint of the universal *logos*.²⁴ Although Plotinus is certainly influenced by the Stoic view, he working in a fundamentally Platonic paradigm in which the soul is an immaterial reality distinct from reason, possessing a capacity to “care” (to my knowledge Stoics would not really say that the world soul “cares”), and providing goodness and being to that for which it cares. Indeed, what characterizes care in, say, the *Apology* is the fact that it represents a commitment grounding a relation which is free from the conditions that govern other varieties of association. Not only does one provide for the object of care, but one also recognizes the existence and goodness of that for which one cares. The object of care has being and goodness independent of that proffering the care.²⁵

In another context where he invokes the *Phaedrus* passage Plotinus writes, “And the text

“All soul cares for that which is without soul” applies especially to the world soul, and to the other souls in another way” (III 4 (15), 2, 1). The meaning is not entirely clear. Perhaps Plotinus is reaffirming the distinction between universal and particular care that he had made in the passage cited above. According to this reading, ‘in another way’ means *epimeleia kathekasta* (‘particular care’). Or perhaps, on the contrary, Plotinus is in fact suggesting that the difference between the respective ways that world soul and individual soul care does not correspond strictly to the distinction between *epimeleia katholou* with an *epimeleia kathekasta* (despite the fact that Plotinus does tend to associate *epimeleia katholou* with the world soul).²⁶

Indeed, latter on in his *oeuvre* Plotinus weakens the distinction between the caring activities of the world soul and those of the individual souls. In his extended work *On difficulties about the soul* (*Enneads* IV 3-5 (27-29)) Plotinus addresses the *Phaedrus* passage twice (IV 3 (27), 1, 34 and 7, 13). The context is rather complex, since Plotinus’ references to the *Phaedrus* occur in the course of objections to a series of arguments made by his opponents with a view to proving that individual souls are parts of the world soul. Plotinus argues that individual souls are not parts of the world soul. Rather, they have exactly the same status and powers as the world soul. Plotinus explains as follows:

And what about the passage in the *Phaedrus* “All soul cares for all that is soulless”? What could it be, then, which directs the nature of body, and shapes it or sets it in order or makes it, except soul? And it is not the case that one soul is naturally able to do this, but the other not. Plato says, then, that the “perfect” soul, the soul of the All, “Walks on high”, and

does not come down, but, as we may say, rides upon the universe and works in it; and does; and this is the manner of every soul which is perfect. (IV 3 (27), 7, 12-19)

It seems strange enough that there could be more than one soul which governs the universe but Plotinus asserts that “every soul which is perfect” has the fundamental capacity to govern the universe. And this includes, at least in principle, our souls (IV 3 (27), 6). However, although they ultimately do have the power to function like the world soul, our souls have “departed to the depths” (*apestêsan eis bathos*: IV 3 (27), 6, 26), that is, descended deeper into bodies than has the world soul. But even in this later reading of the *Phaedrus* passage the nature of the individual soul’s care is not entirely clear. Plotinus adds later in the same Ennead,

So the great light abides and shines, and its radiance goes out through the world in rational order and proportion; the other lights join in illuminating, some staying in their places, but others are more attracted by the brightness of what is illuminated. Then as the things which are illuminated need more care (*phrontidos*), just as the steersmen of ships in a storm concentrate more and more on the care (*phrontidi*) and are unaware that they are forgetting themselves, that they are in danger of being dragged down with the wreck of the ships, these souls incline downwards more with what is theirs. Then they are held fettered with bonds of magic, held fast by their care (*kêdemonia*) for [bodily] nature. But if every living creature was like the All, a perfect and sufficient body and not in danger of suffering, then the soul which is said to be present would not be present in it,

and would give life while remaining altogether in the upper world. (IV 3 (27), 17, 18-31 translation Armstrong, slightly modified)

In this passage the vocabulary of care shifts away from the notion of *epimeleia* of the *Phaedrus* passage (and the *Apology*) towards other terms. *Phrontis* means in its primary sense “thought” and “reflection,” but usage evolved such that it came to designate “care,” often a fretful care, and hence, in some contexts in can be translated by “anxiety” and even “hypochondria.” Perhaps we could translate it here as “anxious care.”²⁷ *Kêdemonia* can mean “care,” of course,²⁸ but the primary sense of *kêdemon* is “protector,” “guardian” or “one who has charge of another.” And the older sense of the verb *kêdô* and the noun *kêdos* both of which are found in Homer seems to have a lot to do with “trouble.” In brief, these lexical items seem to have more pejorative connotations than *epimeleia*. The displacement in vocabulary corresponds to the difference between humanity and the universe.²⁹ As the last line in the passage cited above suggests, we are – at least in our embodied state – “in danger of suffering,” in contrast to the world soul which is *akindunon pathein* “in no danger of being affected.”

But the idea that the soul of the universe is for us a “sister soul” (*adelphê psukhê*: IV 3 (27), 6, 14) implies precisely that we are like it. At the very end of his notorious polemic against the Gnostics in II 9 (33), Plotinus returns once again to his favourite *Phaedrus* passage. Having thoroughly scolded members of his school for believing that the world could be the product of a “bad” demiurge and hence deficient, Plotinus concludes:

As we draw near to the completely untroubled state (*eggus de genomenoi tou*

aplêktou) we can imitate the soul of the universe and of the stars, and, coming to a closeness of resemblance to them hasten on to the same goal and have the same objects of contemplation, being ourselves, too, well prepared for them by nature and cares (*epimeleiais*)³⁰ (but they have their contemplation from the beginning). Even if the Gnostics say that they alone can contemplate, that does not make them any more contemplative, nor are they so because they claim to be able to go out of the universe when they die while the stars are not, since they adorn the sky for ever. They would say this through complete lack of understanding of what “being outside” really means, and how “universal soul cares for all that is soulless.” (II 9 (33), 18, 30-40 translation Armstrong, slightly modified)

This decisive passage shows that it is precisely having been an object of care (“well prepared for them by nature and cares (*epimeleias*)”) that makes our souls capable of caring in the way that the world soul does. Care engenders care. And it is only soul that cares. Moreover, this caring activity of soul counts among its highest activities.

III THE HORIZON OF VIRTUE

When Socrates in the *Apology* incites his hearers to care for the best possible state of their souls he seems to see this care of soul as coinciding with care for virtue.³¹ If, as I have suggested, Plotinus’ work contributes to a Socratic project, how does it stand with virtue? Does care for the self coincide with a care for virtue in Plotinus?³² The answer will be both

“yes” and “no.” On the one hand, care of the embodied self does more or less coincide with virtue for Plotinus. On the other hand, when discussing virtue Plotinus always has in mind a goal beyond virtue.³³ Plotinus often recalls how in *Theatetus* 176a-b Plato speaks of the ultimate goal of the philosopher as *homoiôsis theô* “becoming like God.”³⁴ However, while in Plato one might perceive a relative continuity between virtue and likeness to God, Plotinus makes it very clear that virtue is a concept relevant only at the level of embodied human reality, not beyond. We can, then, speak of a “horizon of virtue,” that is, a limit shaping our experience beyond which we cannot entirely remove ourselves in our current condition. As a horizon there is implicitly a realm beyond it, to which by way of certain philosophical practices we can have some kind of access. In fact, according to Plotinus, the realm beyond the horizon of virtue is that to which we should ultimately be aiming ourselves.

Just as he adopts the two level model of the soul from Plato and Aristotle, Plotinus makes use of the Aristotelian distinction between “moral” and “intellectual” virtue. However, Plotinus modifies the Aristotelian position in three principle ways. First, he rejects calling what in Aristotle is referred to as “intellectual virtue,” virtue at all. Second, he interprets the distinction between moral and intellectual virtue with reference to Platonic structures of mimesis and participation, asserting that what is above virtue (in intellect) is a paradigm for virtue in embodied reality. Third, he situates this account of virtue in his own metaphysical system, which includes an account of the movements of souls from one level to the next in “procession” and “return.” According to Plotinus virtue is a necessary goal in life at the level of embodied reality, but loses its significance as the soul moves to higher levels of reality.

Plotinus discusses virtue most extensively in I 2 (19) *On Virtues*. He states his basic position clearly at the end of chapter 3: “And virtue belongs to the soul, not to Intellect or That which is beyond it” (I 2, (19), 3, 31). And Plotinus does not tire of reminding his reader that the ultimate goal for the philosopher lies beyond virtue. Plotinus even suggests that, at least at some level, virtue is simply equivalent to the avoidance of error. He writes, “Our concern, though, is not to be out of error, but to be god” (I 2, (19), 6, 2-3 trans. Armstrong modified). The implication is that narrow concern with right misses the point of virtue altogether. Plotinus thus warns against a legalistic view of virtue. Of course, Aristotle would agree. But Plotinus generally goes further in relativizing the importance of virtue, making what we could take to be a strong “Platonic” claim: Plotinus proscribes the practice of any virtue in isolation from contemplation (*theôria*).

Plotinus also seems to wish to alert his reader to the possibility that certain types of virtue ethics become “egoistic”³⁵:

There are two kinds of wisdom, one in intellect, one in soul. That which is There [in Intellect] is not virtue, that in soul is virtue. What is it, then, There? The act of the self, what it really is; virtue is what comes Thence and exists here in another. For neither absolute justice (*autodikaïosunê*) nor any other moral absolute is virtue, but a kind of exemplar (*hoion paradeigma*); virtue is what is derived from it in the soul. Virtue is someone’s virtue (*tinós gar hê aretê*); but the exemplar of each particular virtue in the intellect belongs to itself, not to someone else (*auto de hekaston hautou, oukhi de allou*). (I 2, (19), 6, 13-19)

The true self transcends the particular instances of virtue we cultivate in the physical world. Plotinus understands these this-worldly virtues in good Platonic manner as copies of something better.³⁶ Furthermore, this passage asserts that the intellect grounds virtue by housing the exemplars of virtue, while not being virtuous itself.

Plotinus often writes of “political virtue” (*politikê aretê* or “civic virtue” as Armstrong tends to translate it) referring all the same, I think, to moral virtue in general. Such virtues both provide limit and as forms in the Intellect are themselves limited. Plotinus explains:

The political virtues (*politikai aretai*), which we mentioned above, do genuinely set us in order and make us better by giving limit and measure to our desires (*hORIZOUSAI KAI METROUSAI TAS EPITHUMIAS*), and putting measure into our experience (*HOLÔS TA PATHÊ METROUSAI*); and they abolish false opinions (*PSEUDAS DOXAS APHAIROUSAI*), by what it altogether better and by the fact of limitation, and by the exclusion of the unmeasured and indefinite in accord with their measuredness; and they are themselves limited and clearly defined. (I 2, (19), 2, 13-18 translation Armstrong modified)

It is interesting that the moral virtues seem also seem to have an intellectual function insofar as they “abolish false opinions.” We must admit, then, that the distinction between moral and intellectual virtue which Plotinus borrows from Aristotle is modified such that moral virtue very clearly includes certain intellectual operations.³⁷ This is at least in part a consequence of Plotinus’ engagement with Stoic thought.

In general, one might be tempted to assert that the notion of virtue (*aretê*) in Plotinus had in some sense lost its original, more general,

meaning “excellence” and come to designate something closer to what is often intended by the term virtue in our day, something like “respect for a certain code of behaviour.” It would indeed seem a little odd for Plotinus to talk of the *aretê* of a flute player as does Aristotle.³⁸ Yet what Plotinus does preserve of an earlier Greek notion of virtue is precisely the sense that the measure or criteria of excellence is ultimately internal to the person and is not a matter of adopting an external code.

In several different contexts Plotinus works with what could be called a heroic model of virtue which had been at play in Greek philosophical ethics since almost the beginning.³⁹ Heroism is a key way by which Plato expresses the nature of excellence in moral achievement. Already in the *Apology* (36d-37a) Socrates compares his achievements to those of the Olympic victors, asserting that he deserves the free meals of the Prytaneum at least as much as those athletes. He justifies his claim thus: “The Olympian victor makes you think yourself happy; I make you happy (*eudaimon*)” (36d9-10). The comparison of the ethically successful person to the victorious athlete has important parallels in Cynic thought.⁴⁰ Other decisive parallels can be found in Plato himself. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates concludes his second speech (the last of the three speeches) thus: “After death, when they have grown wings and become weightless, they have won the first of three rounds in these, the true Olympic contests” (256b).⁴¹ Less explicit, but clearly in the same vein, are the remarks at the very end of the *Republic*. Having just concluded his narration of the myth of Er, Socrates says to Glaucon that, if they act in accordance with the philosophy he just developed, “we’ll be friends to both ourselves and to the gods while we remain here on earth and afterwards – like victors in the games who go around collecting their prizes – we’ll receive our rewards” (621c-d).

Plotinus adopts such a figure of thought at the end of IV 3 (27) (and in I 1 (53)) where he evokes the figure of Heracles. Heracles (never mentioned by Plato) is of course, a key figure in Stoic thought, a paradigm of the sage. He is an interesting figure for Plotinus, not only because he exemplifies the struggle for excellence necessary for moral progress, but also because the myths surrounding Heracles suggest a double destiny: on the one hand, as a shade in Hades and, on the other, as a deified hero. Plotinus thought of these two eschatologies as in some sense representing the nature of our higher and lower souls. It seems that for Plotinus Heracles is like the Olympic victor for Socrates. Plotinus writes somewhat disparagingly of Heracles’ accomplishments:

And Homer’s Heracles might talk about his heroic deeds (*ekeinos andragathias heautou*); but the man who thinks these of little account (*tauta smikra hêgoumenos*), has migrated to a holier place (*metatetheis eis hagiôteron topon*), is namely in the intelligible, having been stronger than Heracles in the contests in which the wise compete (*athleuousei sophoi*), - (IV 3 (27) 32, 24-28 trans Armstrong modified)⁴²

What will he say? And what will the soul remember when it has come to be in the intelligible world, and with that higher reality?... (IV 4 (28), 1, 1-2)

The figure of Heracles brings together the three perspectives that I have attempted to distinguish in this investigation of care for self and soul in Plotinus. That is, Heracles clearly represents the divided self discussed in the first section of this paper and allows Plotinus to define and point beyond the horizon of virtue. But what of the notion of caring which is the very centre of this study? I suggest, further, that

the figure of Heracles also serves in Plotinus's discourse as it did in popular Hellenistic thought: Heracles was the benefactor of mankind.⁴³ He *cared* for mankind. It seems, then, that virtue and care in some sense coincide. The notion of care is only relevant at the level of soul, just as virtue *per se* is relevant only at the level of soul. Perhaps for Plotinus care and virtue are ultimately the same thing: they are a commitment to good actions which propagate goodness in the physical universe. If virtue has its paradigm in the intelligible, so too must care. Although Socrates does not put things quite this way, care and virtue arguably cannot be dissociated from one another in Socrates' thought any more than they can in Plotinus'.

In his penultimate treatise Plotinus returns to the figure of Heracles and in this context we hear a clear reference to the problems examined above in the context of Plotinus' reading of the *Phaedrus* passage. Plotinus writes,

The soul is said to go down or incline (*katabainein kai neuein*) in the sense that the thing which receives light from it lives with it (*zunezêkenai autê*). It abandons its image (*to eidôlon*) if there is nothing at hand to receive it; and it abandons it not in the sense that it is cut off but in that it no longer exists; and the image no longer exists when the whole soul is looking to the intelligible world. The poet seems to be separating (*khôrizen*) the image with regard to Heracles when he says that his shade is in Hades, but he himself among the gods. He was bound to keep to both stories, that he is in Hades and that he dwells among the gods, so he divided him. But perhaps this is the most plausible explanation of the story (*takha d'an houtô pithanos ho logos eiê*): because Heracles had this active virtue (*praktikên aretên*) and in view of his no-

ble character (*kalokagathian*) was deemed worthy to be called a god – because he was an active (*praktikos*) and not a contemplative person (*theoretikos*) (in which case he would have been altogether in that intelligible world), he is above, but there is also still a part of him below. (I I (53), 12, 27-39))

According to Plotinus' reading of the *Theaetetus*, care for the self ultimately requires us to become like God. The lower soul is not cut off or sent to Hades in Plotinus, but as a reflection, simply departs with that which it imitates. As far as virtue is concerned, we are to do a better job than Heracles who – although of noble character – failed to sufficiently cultivate his contemplative self. Heracles, as it were, failed to aim beyond the horizon of virtue.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to illuminate Plotinus' thought on care for self and soul from three vantage points related to three passages in Plato's dialogues. These perspectives taken together provide a relatively comprehensive view of the Plotinian understanding of care for self and soul. I have attempted to show how the multilayered Plotinian self is cared for by the adoption of a certain directionality plotted against the background of the levels of Plotinus' metaphysical system. To care for the self is to identify with the best part of one's self and to aim beyond one's self to higher realities. By doing so, one unifies the self, preventing fissures from opening up in it, such as emerge in the context of Plotinus' doctrine of the double imagination. The soul is nevertheless essentially a caring reality and therefore undertakes to look out for the good of reality even below itself. That the soul should both care for what is lower than it and yet aim for

that which is higher than it means that the soul is active in two directions. One might even speak of a “tension” here. In fact, the multi-layered self is in some sense held together by the activities of the soul which extend outward in two directions. Nevertheless, the human soul’s activities of caring for that which is below it can represent a danger for it, since our souls do not have the sovereignty which is exemplified by the world soul. The world soul cares without running any risk of suffering and is hence the model for the activities of our souls. This impassible care represents the paradigm of caring for Plotinus. Or, in other words, according to Plotinus, we should be the world soul of our microcosm. Finally, Plotinus’ notion that virtue is meaningful and relevant only at the level of soul suggests that the realms of care and of virtue correspond. I have suggested that we can think of Plotinus doctrine of virtue as elaborating a realm defined by a horizon of virtue beyond which virtue itself points. The figure of Heracles serves to bring together the notion of virtue as both excellence and beneficence with the idea that we should struggle to go beyond virtue itself in striving to be “like God.” In the end we can distinguish three kinds of care in Plotinus: 1) a care for self proper, which involves balancing levels of soul and working out techniques to maintain proper consciousness; 2) a cosmic care which involves a care for other as embodied (in self, nature and other people); and finally 3) what we might call a hyper-virtuous care, one which is manifested in the desire to be “like God.”

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Endnotes

- 1 Cf. *Ap.* 28e5-6 and 29e. Compare Song 2009 who argues – correctly, I believe – against interpretations of Plotinus that attribute to him an entirely otherworldly ethics.
- 2 Translation Grube in Cooper, 1997.
- 3 For recent discussions of self in Plotinus see Remes 2007, Aubry 2011 and Mortley 2013.
- 4 Translation Zeyl in Cooper 1997. In fact, the passage and the process it describes are longer and more complex but these are the lines to which Plotinus repeatedly makes reference. Compare Plotinus III 9 (13) 1, 36.
- 5 This and all subsequent translations from Plotinus's *Enneads* shall be (unless otherwise indicated) from Armstrong 1966-1988.
- 6 I 1 (53), 7, 6ff.; III 3 (15), 5, 19-23; VI 4 (22) 14, 16; VI 5 (23), 7, 1 IV 4 (28), 18, 11-15; I 4 (46), 9, 25-10; V 3 (49), 3, 31-39; II 3 (52), 9, 13-15.
- 7 See e.g. I 1 (53), 11.
- 8 See in this context Stern-Gillet 2009.
- 9 IV 8 (6), 4, 32-38: "Souls, then, become, one might say, amphibious, compelled to live by turns the life There, and the life here: those which are able to be more in the company of Intellect live the life There more, but those whose normal condition is, by nature or chance, the opposite, live more the life here below. Plato indicates this unobtrusively when he distinguishes again the products of the second mixing-bowl and makes parts of them; then he says that they must enter into becoming, since they became parts of this kind."
- 10 See III 4 (15), 2, 4-15: "For the dominant part of it makes the thing appropriate to itself, but the other parts do nothing, for they are outside. In man, however, the interior parts are not dominant but they are always present; and in fact the better part does not always dominate; the other parts exist and have a certain place. Therefore we also live like being characterized by sense-perception, for we, too, have sense-organs; and in many ways we live like plants, for we have a body which grows and produces; so that all things work together, but the whole form is man in virtue of its better part. But when it goes out of body if becomes what there was most of in it. Therefore one must "escape" to the upper world, that we may not sink to the level of sense-perception by pursuing the images of sense, or to the level of the growth-principle by following the urge for generation and the "gluttonous love of good eating," but may rise to the intelligible and intellect and God."
- 11 For Plotinus' understanding of *daimôn* see Timotin 2012, 286-300.
- 12 IV 3 (27), 29, 31-32.
- 13 See IV 3 (27), 32. Although I agree with many of the conclusions in Stern-Gillet 2009, I do not agree that "In Plotinus' ethics, therefore, every single virtue, whether civic or purifactory, is, directly or indirectly, focused on the care of the (higher) self of the virtuous person rather than on the care of the self (higher or lower) of others" (p. 338).
- 14 Cf. IV 8 (6), 8, 1-11 and Homer, *Iliad* 4, 443. Most latter Neo-Platonists rejected the Plotinian doctrine of the undescended soul. Cf. for example Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, 211.
- 15 For a recent discussion of impassibility in Plotinus see Noble 2013.
- 16 *Autokinêton* Phaedrus 245c.
- 17 Translation Nehamas and Woodruff in Cooper 1997, modified.
- 18 Compare Song 2009 who writes correctly, I believe, "Hence, in Plotinus' view, benevolence is part of the very nature of soul, apart from the question whether she is conscious of it or not" (p. 38).
- 19 Literally: "the power of the Good and of Being."
- 20 In this paper I will not discuss the obvious Stoic influence on Plotinus here.
- 21 Armstrong's translation is misleading here. It should read "not all providence removes from the provident being the ability to remain in what is better." That is, it is the type of providence which is at issue. On my reading some forms of providence may be entirely free from "evil" (a word which does not appear in the passage!)
- 22 This in fact is the central argument in Song 2009.
- 23 The word literally means "to fill." See also Plato *Philebus* 42a. Armstrong translates here perhaps too clearly the pejorative sense which may be understood in the context of occurrences in Plato such as *Phaedo* 67 a.
- 24 See for example Stobaeus (2.75, 11-76,8) on Zeno. (Translation in Long and Sedley 1987, 394.)
- 25 Socrates tries to show precisely how Meletus does not care about the youth. See *Ap.* 25c-26b.
- 26 I am inclined to prefer Bréhier's reading to Armstrong's. Bréhier translates as follows: « Les paroles de Platon : « l'âme en général prends soin de tout ce qui est inanimé » s'applique surtout à l'âme universelle. Mais chaque âme le fait de sa manière. » Armstrong sees the contrast otherwise, translating, "And the text "All soul care for that which is without soul" applies to this [the power of growth] in particular; other kinds of soul [care for the inanimate] in other ways." Armstrong has some good support for his reading on the basis of what follows in the chapter. However, Armstrong's read-

- ing makes Plotinus' interpretation of the *Phaedrus* passage in this Ennead inconsistent with essentially all of the other interpretations of it that he offers in his oeuvre. I think it is clear that the overall context should trump the particular in this case.
- 27 Plotinus discusses the care of individual souls in terms of *phrontis* also in IV 3 (27), 13 and in chapter 18 where he talks of souls coming down "full of care and in a state of greater weakness" (*phrontidos plêroumenês kai mallon ashtenousês*). To be sure, the *Apology* links both *epimeleia* and *phrontis* at 29 e such there are grounds to see these terms as having a similar meaning in Plato. See also *Ap.* 25c.
- 28 Compare *Republic* 463d.
- 29 There are two further elements of the vocabulary of care in Plotinus which we will not be able to address here *ôpheleia* which has in an important place in its etymology a notion of service and aid: "There came into being something like a beautiful and richly various house which was not cut off from its builder, but he did not give it a share in himself; he considered it all, everywhere, worth a care (*ôphelimou*) which conduces to its very being and excellence (as far as it can participate in being)" (IV 3 (27), 9, 29-33). And *therapeia* see I 1 (53) 3, 11; VI 8 (39) 5, 19; II 9 (33) 14, 21 and IV (27), 4, 36.
- 30 Armstrong translates *epimeleias* as "training" here, a rendering which I think undermines the logic of the passage.
- 31 For care of the best possible state of the soul, see 29e (*tês psyches hopôs hôs beltisê estai*). For care of virtue see 31b and 41e. Cf. *Ap.* 36c: "I went to each of you privately and conferred upon him what I say is the greatest benefit, by trying to persuade him not to care for any of his belongings before caring that he himself should be as good and as wise as possible" and 38 a where it is suggested that "the greatest good for man [is] to discuss virtue every day."
- 32 For a discussion of the relation between care ethics and virtue ethics see Halwani 2003.
- 33 On the connection between virtue and happiness in Plotinus see McGroarty 2006 and Gerson 2012.
- 34 The context is quite important. Socrates says, "But it is not possible, Theodorus, that evil should be destroyed – for there must always be something opposed to the good; nor is it possible that it should have its seat in heaven. But it must inevitably haunt human life, and prowl about this earth. That is why a man should make all haste to escape from earth to heaven; and escape means becoming as like God as possible; and a man becomes like God when he becomes just and pure, with understanding. But it is not at all an easy matter, my good friend, to persuade men that it is not for the reason commonly alleged that one should try to escape from wickedness and pursue virtue. It is not in order to avoid a bad reputation and obtain a good one that virtue should be practiced and obtain a good one that virtue should be practiced and not vice; that, it seems to me, is only what men call 'old wives' talk." (*Tht.* 176a-c). For an insightful discussion of how Plotinus appropriates the Platonic notion of *homoiôsis theô* in terms of the One see Beierwaltes 2002.
- 35 A robust defense of Plotinus ethics against the charge of egotism can be found in Stern-Gillet 2009.
- 36 "He will leave that behind, and choose another, the life of the gods; for it is to them, not to good men, that we are to be made like. Likeness (*homoiôsis*) to good men is the likeness of two pictures of the same subject to each other (*eikôn eikôni*); but likeness to the gods is likeness to the model (*paradeigma*), a being of a different kind to ourselves" (I 2, (19), 7, 26-30).
- 37 This is not to say that intellect is not part of the Aristotelian notion of moral virtue; however, Aristotle is in his ethics not interested in opinions *per se*.
- 38 *Nicomachean Ethics* I 7.
- 39 This model is related to the less metaphorically loaded model of the sage which plays an important role both in Socratic and in Plotinian thought. For discussions of this element in Plotinus' ethics see Schniewind 2003 and Dillon 1996.
- 40 Diogenes reports of his Cynic homonym, "To someone boasting 'At the Pythian games I am victorious over men,' Diogenes said, 'I am victorious over men, while you are victorious over slaves'" (Diogenes Laertius VI, 33) Almost exactly the same anecdote is reported of Diogenes at the Olympic games (Diogenes Laertius VI, 43).
- 41 Compare *Phaedrus* 247 b 5-6. Plotinus makes reference to this at I, 6 (1), 7.
- 42 Armstrong seems to have missed a few words in his translation here.
- 43 These conceptions of Heracles as benefactor do, of course, go back to classical Greece. See for example Euripides *Heracles* 177ff., 853, 1194.