

Chapter 1



The Origins of Plotinus' Philosophy

1.1 PLOTINUS' PREDECESSORS

A comparative study of the origins of Plotinus' philosophy presupposes, first, an investigation into his philosophical sources and, second, an analysis of his philosophical method. Modern scholarship recognizes the importance of both. In the last fifteen years many studies on Plotinus focus on his philosophical sources as well as the manner in which these sources are treated in the *Enneads*.¹ This new attitude towards Plotinus and Neoplatonism aims to illuminate not only the importance of this later period of Greek philosophy, but also the development of Greek thought within the history of ideas.²

Plotinus belongs to the later Greek philosophical tradition (AD 3rd c.) where Greek thought is characterized by mature intellection and divergent elaboration. The *Enneads* accordingly is an invaluable source material for philosophical argument and criticism.³ The philosophy of Plotinus' predecessors is incorporated and discussed within the flow of the text as a unified synthesis of thought that is underlined by inspired and sometimes obscure speculations. Plotinus' prose style includes a unique poetic rhythm of philosophizing with the arguments presented elaborately, but without an obvious systematic and organized structure. However, Plotinus was neither a historian of philosophy, nor did he aim to act in such a way as to present and preserve a literal account of the preceding sources.

Consequently, the modern scholar of the *Enneads* will often find it difficult to identify in Plotinus the hidden references to his predecessors. As M. L. Gatti observes, Plotinus' citations and allusions "are far more numerous than direct references, and these, along with biographical material, permit us both to deepen and to broaden significantly our knowledge of Plotinus' sources by tracing the trajectory of speculation through Plotinus' predecessors."⁴ Hence, the reader has to focus, as Plotinus himself did, more on the philosophical meaning of the text. Therefore, with suitable caution we may explore two interrelated parameters of Plotinus' philosophy: first, his philosophical method of inquiry, which incorporates his language, teaching, and writing practice, and second, his general attitude towards his philosophical sources.

1.2 PLOTINUS' PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD

The most important ancient testimony regarding Plotinus' philosophical method derives from Porphyry. According to Porphyry (*Life* 3.33 ff., and 14.14–16), Plotinus based his method of lecturing on the teaching method of his master Ammonius. When Plotinus, at the age of twenty-eight, felt a strong impulse to study philosophy, he was disappointed with the lectures of the Alexandrian philosophers until he attended the lectures of Ammonius (*Life* 3.6–19). Plotinus was so enthusiastic after hearing Ammonius lecture that he exclaimed approvingly: “this is the one I was looking for” and he stayed with Ammonius from AD 232 to 243 (*Life* 3.13). Among Plotinus' own students were Erennius, Olympius, the Platonic Origen,⁵ and Longinus. Erennius, Origen, and Plotinus had made an agreement to keep silent on the doctrines of Ammonius, but none of them kept their promise (*Life* 3.24 ff.).

Ammonius (AD c. 175–242) was an enigmatic but influential philosopher, a self-taught Platonist who wrote nothing.⁶ He founded a school in Alexandria probably at the beginning of the third century AD and, although his philosophy is regarded as a link between Middle-Platonism and Neoplatonism, in fact, we know very little about his thought. According to Hierocles and Nemesius, Ammonius held the view that “every reality derives from God,” and he seemed to distinguish reality in three different but successive levels of existence: (1) the supreme reality of God, the gods and the celestial realities; (2) the intermediate reality of the ethereal nature and the good spirits; (3) the lowest reality of humans and the terrestrial beings.⁷

Ammonius was a philosopher with a free and independent mind. If we interpret correctly Plotinus' reaction to Ammonius' lectures, his teaching probably revealed a unique and inspired way of philosophizing. This way seems to have been extremely influential and it was inherited by Plotinus. In an illuminating passage, Porphyry stresses the fact that his master based his distinctive line of investigation on the theoretical course of his teacher Ammonius. Porphyry testifies that, during his lectures, Plotinus did not speak directly from books or notes but adopted a distinctive personal approach, following Ammonius' ‘mind’ (νοῦς) (*Life* 14.14–16). But what exactly was the ‘mind’ of Ammonius? Gatti maintains that Porphyry refers to Ammonius' method of reconciliation between Plato and Aristotle.⁸ This claim is justified by Photius' testimony in the *Bibliotheca* (461a35–8) that Ammonius had tried to harmonize the doctrines of Plato and Aristotle, for the confrontation between Platonic and Aristotelian doctrines was a debatable matter in the Platonic and the Neoplatonic tradition.

But, *pace* Gatti, in Porphyry's passage, the ‘mind’ of Ammonius implies something more specific and technical in the lectures of Plotinus. As Porphyry continues in the next lines of his biographical work (*Life* 14.17 ff.), Plotinus

was not interested in the philological or textual implications of the sources but in the philosophical ideas to be derived from them. Plotinus, following Ammonius' method of teaching, referenced his sources quickly and then gave a short but profound account of the text before passing on to his own interpretation. In a previous chapter (*Life* 3.33–39), Porphyry informs us that Plotinus, during his prewriting period, followed in his oral lectures the lively discussions of Ammonius' seminars. In the spirit of these discussions, Plotinus encouraged the participants during the lectures to ask him questions freely, which resulted in “complete lack of order” and a “great deal of pointless chatter” (*Life* 3.37). This teaching method seems to be the ‘mind’ of Ammonius shown in a free, independent, inspired, and profound philosophical discussion, and it is this method of philosophizing that appears both in Plotinus' lectures and writings.

1.2.1 Lectures and Writings

Plotinus' oral teaching and writings were unique for their unsystematic way of philosophical investigation. The *Enneads* present a philosopher who seems to be more interested in the philosophical exegesis of a text than its philological analysis. Plotinus was more of an original thinker than a philosopher-commentator such as Proclus, Iamblichus, and Damascius, or a systematic scholar writing introductions like Albinus. That is why Plotinus disparagingly regarded Longinus as a scholar and not a philosopher (*Life* 14.20). Plotinus, like his master Ammonius, clearly preferred free-ranging philosophical discussion of a topic to the scholarly analytical observations of the philologists. This unsystematic attitude is probably a reaction to the scholastic interpretations of the ancient texts found especially in the scholars of the period. Plotinus' decision to study in Alexandria with Ammonius and then establish his school in Rome, far away from Athens, the center of Platonism, implies that he literally wanted to distance himself from the traditional Platonism of the Academy. He seems to have in mind a new approach to the study of Platonic philosophy, an approach which could not be developed freely in the Academy. In all probability, this was the reason for Plotinus choosing Ammonius' free and lively seminars and adopting his method. A comprehensive style of thinking characterizes the *Enneads*, so that the reader shares the experience of free and lively philosophical argument, and may well feel that reading the *Enneads* comes close to hearing Plotinus' lectures.

Indeed Porphyry informs us that in his lectures Plotinus used to focus on his own thoughts, being interested not so much in the formal and systematic interpretations of a philosophical question, but more on his own inspiration and philosophical originality (*Life* 8). Hence, in his writings, as Porphyry testifies, he was concise, full of thought and brief in philosophical expression,

concentrating more on the meaning of the words than the words themselves (*Life* 14.1–4). He was not concerned with the calligraphy of the letters, the correct spelling or the correct division of his text (*Life* 8.4–8 and 18.10 ff.). Plotinus preferred to be completely immersed in his train of thought, writing down his ideas continuously and spontaneously as if he were copying them from a book (*Life* 8.8–12). But, because of his problematic eyesight, reading and revision were difficult, and so his language appears complicated and obscure, with many grammatical and spelling errors (*Life* 8.1–6). This is probably the main reason why Plotinus entrusted Porphyry both with the editing and the arrangement of his writings (*Life* 7.50–52; 24.1–5).

Furthermore, Porphyry stresses Plotinus' remarkable ability to combine inner meditation with external activity; this ability was clearly shown not only in his writings, but also in his oral teachings (*Life* 8.19–23; 9.16–22). On this issue, R. T. Wallis mentions three major points common to Plotinus' lectures and writings: first, his preference to deal more with individual philosophical problems than to expound his thought in a formal system; second, his usual practice of starting his investigations from the traditional interpretation of a Platonic or Aristotelian passage and then trying to deny, correct, or develop this interpretation into his own interpretative line; third, his unique style of philosophical narrative in the form of a vivid dialogue with an imaginary interlocutor, using a rapid interchange between questioner and responder.⁹ From Plotinus' style of lecturing and writing, it is important to focus attention on his unique philosophical discourse and demonstrate how this discourse develops from his philosophical language.

1.2.2 *Language, Simile, and Metaphor*

Plotinus' philosophical language is fashioned upon the theoretical background of his metaphysics. His metaphysical thought moves either upwards following the resemblance of the perceptible image to the intelligible archetype, or downwards following the procession of the intelligible archetype to the perceptible image. Plotinus applies this process to the development of his writings. Frequently, his method is to start from his own experience and to proceed inductively to the self-justification of this experience in theoretical terms. An excellent example of this method appears in the opening lines of *Ennead* IV.8 where Plotinus describes his own autobiographical metaphysical experience and then proceeds to the explanation and evaluation of this experience through a theoretical analysis.

Plotinus' inductive way of reasoning is not a mathematical induction, but primarily associated with the evaluation of a dialectic inference. He collects empirical instances with metaphysical value and tries to harmonize the

results of this experience with the inherent structure of the intelligible world; he then proceeds to some general metaphysical conclusions. Hence, Plotinus' philosophical language serves as verbal representation of the intelligible world. As F. M. Schroeder comments, "the model of representation departs from the perceptible world and attempts to account for intelligible reality in such a way that the two realms will not be confused with each other."¹⁰

This is the reason why Plotinus' language, despite its prose style, manifests a poetic rhythm with complex linguistic schemata. In V.1.2.17–23, for instance, Plotinus stresses the need for the Soul to recollect the whole universe, to free itself from illusion and attain true quietude. At this higher level, the individual soul will be able to see the greater soul illuminating, animating, and ordering the world in divine quietness. Likewise, in *Ennead* VI.4.7, Plotinus, in order to express the simultaneous presence of the intelligible order throughout every part of the perceptible world, uses the illustrations of a "hand controlling a plank and a small body illumining a large sphere." In *Ennead* III.8.10, in order to describe the unending and unified power of the One, Plotinus uses similes, first, of the "spring" which spreads out its power to the rivers while itself remaining unexhausted and in unity and, second, of a "huge tree" which spreads out its life to the branches while its origins remain firmly settled in its roots. In *Ennead* VI.5.5, Plotinus uses his favorite metaphor of the "circle and the radii" in order to illustrate the expansion of the intelligible world from the undifferentiated center of the circle (the One) radiating into the multiplicity of the intelligible universe.¹¹ Moreover, Plotinus, in order to show through his language the "presence of being everywhere", provides as an analogy the example of the all-united-centers (or the one-center) radiating their lines to the next realities. But besides this extension the center remains one as the only source of all the lines. According to A. H. Armstrong, this metaphor "can be used at any level of the hierarchy to describe the combination of immanent presence and transcendent separateness which Plotinus sees when he is trying to describe the relationship of a relatively complex and multiple derived reality to its simpler and more unified one."¹²

From the above examples, it can be concluded that Plotinus recognizes the limitations of abstract expression and often turns to the construction of similes and metaphoric images which represent, as much as they can, his spiritual experience. Plotinus uses his philosophical language as a dynamic medium of expression and not as a strict formalistic system of justification. His linguistic expression represents a lively paradigm of his own metaphysical understanding of the world and focuses more on the meanings revealed through the words than the words themselves. Mindful of these considerations, we can now turn to the way in which Plotinus' quotes his predecessors throughout the *Enneads*.

1.2.3 Quoting Predecessors

Plotinus' modus operandi with his sources is based upon his philosophical dialectical method. According to Steven Strange, Plotinus' proper philosophical method could be regarded as a dialectical method of philosophy with a threefold structure:¹³ (1) stating the arguments—the position of the many; (2) analyzing and evaluating the arguments—agreements and disagreements; (3) resolving the arguments—minimizing contradictions in one position. In assessing these stages, Strange concludes that Plotinus' method adapts Aristotle's philosophical practice in the *Topics* (101a35–b4), the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1145b6–8), and the *Metaphysics* (995a28–31).¹⁴ Plotinus begins from the views of his predecessors by stating briefly their theories on a philosophical problem and proceeds to the evaluation of the problem itself. In this case, Plotinus uses the views of the ancients in the same way as Aristotle uses the “opinions of the wise” (ἐνδοξᾶ). First, Plotinus compares and contrasts these opinions, summarizing their inherent agreements and disagreements. Second, based on his own philosophical expertise, he develops dialectically the philosophical questions arising from the subject-matter. Third, he answers the questions by reconciling the various views and minimizing their contradiction and difficulties in a new Plotinian theory.

An excellent example of the above methodological practice can be found in *Ennead* III.7. This treatise presents a careful and critical demonstration of preceding accounts of the philosophical problem of eternity and time. In the first chapter of the treatise (1.8–17), Plotinus stresses the need to investigate the subject-matter in question with regard to the “ancient philosophers” (οἱ παλαιοί) before proceeding to his own interpretation and evaluation. Plotinus finds it unhelpful to construct a theory on a philosophical problem or to present a solution to an enquiry without previously analyzing the philosophical background of the subject-matter. The “statements” (ἄποφάσεις) of the ancient philosophers form the philosophical background of the philosophical question, but they do not resolve the problem immediately.

On the other hand, the ancient philosophers may have found the truth but not in its absolute purity—they are not unquestionable authorities of truth. Plotinus, while he fully recognizes the opinions of the ancients, is not willing to follow this uncritical method. Since there is no definite and immediate answer to a serious philosophical problem, the problem still remains debatable. Just “parroting” the views of the ancients is a sterile and unacceptable attitude for a philosopher, for it is not in the nature of philosophy to reply to a question by just presenting the earlier answers. On this basis, in III.7.7.10–17, Plotinus stresses again the need to examine the earlier theories of the ancients. Since there has been a thorough investigation by them, then the initial consideration of their account is absolutely necessary. The philosopher should be aware of

the philosophical background of his subject-matter and not proceed unwarily to new arbitrary theoretical conceptions. The philosopher has to maintain a balance between critical thinking and theoretical awareness.

As in *Ennead* III.7, Plotinus follows this attitude towards his predecessors frequently throughout the other treatises of the *Enneads*. He refers to the ancient philosophers both in relation to their "accounts"¹⁵ and to the "ancients"¹⁶ themselves. In all cases, Plotinus speaks of his predecessors with admiration and respect. Actually, in the early Platonic tradition, the expression "the ancient philosophers" (οἱ παλαιοὶ φιλόσοφοι) usually denotes a specific group of philosophers, especially the early Platonists. For instance, Antiochus of Ascalon (1st century BC) indicates with this expression Plato and Aristotle as well as their contemporary philosophers of the Old Academy (Cicero *De finibus* 5.23). In the *Enneads*, the use of the "ancients" (παλαιοί) indicates something much more extensive. Plotinus' expression is not only limited to Plato and Aristotle, but also includes the Presocratics and the early Pythagoreans, and in some cases the Stoics and the Epicureans.

Prima facie Plotinus' approach is almost the same as that of Aristotle. Yet, according to Strange, it is likely that Plotinus recognized in Aristotle's methodology the shadow cast by Plato's practice in the Academy, so that he regarded Aristotle's method more as that of an Academic student than an autonomous philosopher.¹⁷ Because of this, Plotinus' mode of investigation needs to be placed in the wider context of Platonic dialectic and not restricted to the Aristotelian version. In addition, it should be noted that there are fundamental differences between Aristotle and Plotinus in their method of reference. First, for Plotinus, the ancient philosophers were ex hypothesi wise and with the right approach in their observations and initial considerations. For instance, as we have seen, Plotinus significantly calls the earlier thinkers "god-like men" (θεῖοι ἄνδρες), using a similar expression for Plato (ὁ θεῖος Πλάτων).¹⁸ Second, Plotinus stresses the authority of the ancients in order to prove the continuation of Greek thought and to justify his own theoretical background. Third, Plotinus, as is his philosophical method, refers to his predecessors without presenting a literal account of their ideas; he gives us only fragments of their theoretical vocabulary and the main lines of their accounts. In contrast, Aristotle sometimes gives lengthy accounts of his predecessors' views but without affirming any special reverence or respect. Aristotle tends to see his predecessors as taking faltering steps towards the goal he has now reached, and to interpret their ideas in terms of his own philosophy and terminology. In Plotinus' case, this arrogant attitude is clearly missing from the *Enneads*; his criticism is more a return to his philosophical roots than a radical abolition or replacement of the earlier views. This difference in attitude between Aristotle and Plotinus is mainly seen in the treatment of philosophical sources.

1.3 PLOTINUS' PHILOSOPHICAL SOURCES

Plotinus' philosophy is characterized by the following fundamental principle: *reality exists in a successive triadic hierarchy of Being*. The structure of his system is founded on two axes: (1) the Three Hypostases of Being, named the One (ἓν), the Intellect (νοῦς), and the Soul (ψυχή), and (2) the dual productive phases of each Hypostasis, named the phases of Procession (πρόοδος) and Return (ἐπιστροφή). Whereas the former has its origins partly in Plato's ontological distinction between being and becoming, intelligible and perceptible world, the latter derives from Aristotle's dynamic interrelation between actuality and potentiality, priority, and the posterior.

Plotinus demonstrates the outline of his metaphysics in *Ennead V.1 On The Three Primary Hypostases*. According to this treatise, any higher Hypostasis of Being participates in a purer degree of ontological perfection, unity, and intellection; any lower Hypostasis is generated by contemplating the higher Hypostasis in itself. At the highest level of purity, unity and simplicity resides the One, the primary causal principle of every existence.

The Plotinian One (comparable to the Platonic Good) is absolutely ineffable and transcendent; it is the simplest non-composite and unified prior principle that generates all composite and multiple posteriors. Since the existence of the One is more unified and simple, every posterior depends on, aims at, and refers to the One. The Intellect, the Second Hypostasis, a synthesis of Plato's world of Forms and Aristotle's self-thinking Intellect, derives from the One by a timeless self-contemplation. The Intellect is for Plotinus the Indefinite Dyad, the divine level of Being where all the Platonic Forms are self-included in the most perfect and truest condition. The Intellect possesses perfect self-knowledge and infinite eternal life. The Soul, the Third Hypostasis, is a by-product of the Intellect. The Soul restlessly produces, animates, formulates, and governs the perceptible world by shedding its intelligible light on the insubstantial impassability of matter.

The perfection and purity of the three levels of being are designated by the everlasting illumination of the One. The outflowing illumination of each Hypostasis is accompanied almost simultaneously by an ascending contemplative attendance to its higher Hypostasis. This organic order of being underlies Plotinus' concept of the Hypostases and signifies his philosophical originality. His scheme of ontological hierarchies underpins the fundamental principle of Neoplatonism: *that reality consists in a hierarchy of degrees of unity*.

But the idea of unity is not unique to Plotinus. As R. T. Wallis observes, the scheme is a "systematization of the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition's identification of goodness and order with form, measure, and limit, which in their turn imply number and mathematical ratio and hence, ultimately the presence

of an organizing unity.”¹⁹ On this basis, relating Plotinus' metaphysics to the Greek philosophical tradition, H. Dörrie characterizes Plotinus as both “traditionalist” and “innovator.”²⁰ Every innovation in Plotinus' system has its roots in the tradition, and traditional accounts can be clearly observed in the *Enneads*. The criteria that Plotinus used to criticize or evaluate the ancient theories were also the criteria of his originality.²¹ In fact, Plotinus' fundamental objective was to harmonize, systematize, and primarily subsume his metaphysical thought in the context of Greek philosophical tradition. Plotinus was not able to realize this aim by following an uncritical and eclectic way of philosophizing. As with his predecessors, Plotinus set out to search for the truth and not just reiterate, parrot-fashion, the opinions of others. From a historical point of view, the truth for Plotinus was known initially by the ancients, and, since the ancients had found the truth, he needed initially to speculate on them and their theories.

In order to understand the relationship of Plotinus' philosophy to the Greek philosophical tradition, it is essential to observe briefly the influences of his predecessors in the *Enneads*. These influences cannot be reduced merely to Platonic/Middle-Platonic metaphysics or the Pythagorean/Neopythagorean mathematical mysticism. It is also important to draw attention to Aristotelian psychology and metaphysics and to Stoic psychology and cosmology as well as to Plotinus' general attitude to the contemporary movements of the third century AD.

1.3.1 Plato

Among Plotinus' predecessors, Plato is undoubtedly the leading philosophical authority—he is the one who above all attained the truth. Plato is the philosopher whose work underlies the fundamental theoretical principles of Plotinus' metaphysical, psychological, and cosmological investigations. Throughout the *Enneads*, Plotinus refers to Plato by name fifty-six times.²² In all these cases, Plotinus, like the later Neoplatonists, uses Plato's work as his principal source, and most of his theories are a deep and original insights into Platonic theories. For instance in V.1.8.11–14, Plotinus states clearly that his accounts are depended on Plato's writings. Plotinus actually defines himself as an “interpreter” (ἑξηγητής) of Plato and his philosophy as an exegesis of Plato's accounts (τοῦ Πλάτωνος γράμματα).²³ Plotinus clearly states that his own accounts are neither new nor of the present time but rather that his philosophical views are old, belonging to the Platonic teaching.²⁴

Plotinus systematizes Plato's metaphysical theories, especially those found in the *Parmenides*, the *Republic*, the *Sophist*, and the *Second Platonic Epistle*.²⁵ In the *Parmenides*, Plato's Parmenides develops a series of hypotheses concerning the nature of the ‘one’ and its relation to the ‘many’. The first

two hypotheses were of central importance to Plotinus' account of the three Hypostases.²⁶ In the first hypothesis at 137c–142a, where Parmenides states in negative terms that “if there is one in absolute unity then nothing can be predicated of it,” Plotinus discovers the absolute ineffability of his own transcendent One, the First Hypostasis.²⁷ In the first part of the second hypothesis (142b–155e), where Parmenides states in affirmative terms that “if one exists all predicates can be ascribed to it,” Plotinus finds the nature of Intellect, his Second Hypostasis. Finally, in the last part of the third hypothesis (155e–157b), where Parmenides deals with the idea of temporal becoming, Plotinus formulates a distinct hypothesis which is related to the Soul, his Third Hypostasis.²⁸

As a result of this, it would seem that Plotinus considers the *Parmenides* to be a crucially important dialogue in Plato's metaphysics. However, the purpose of this particular dialogue was not clear during the history of Platonism. For some Platonists such as Albinus (*Isagoge*, 3) it was only a “logical exercise” (γυμνάσιον λογικόν), while for others it was a manifestation of Plato's metaphysical teaching.²⁹ After Plotinus, later Neoplatonists focused on the latter interpretation and considered the *Parmenides* to be one of the most important metaphysical dialogues in Plato's works. According to Proclus' testimony (in *Timaeus* I.13.14–17), Iamblichus regarded the *Parmenides* along with the *Timaeus* as the only dialogues which contained Plato's original metaphysical teaching, while Proclus himself considered the *Parmenides* to be the dialogue that included the “truth on gods” and, by extension, the complete system of Platonic theology (*Platonic Theology* I.2.4–6).³⁰

However, the *Parmenides* is not the only Platonic work where Plotinus sees an appropriate reference for the systematization of the three Hypostases. In an obscure passage of the *Second Platonic Letter* (312d–313a), Plotinus discovers the triadic reality of being, while in the *Republic* (509b), he finds the prime nature of the One identified with the Good ‘beyond being’ (ἐπέκειντα τῆς οὐσίας).³¹ From a consideration of the *Timaeus* (30c ff.) and the *Sophist* (248e–49d), he interprets the nature of the Intellect as intelligible living being, eternal perfect life, and true being. Plotinus therefore inherits from the *Sophist* (244b–45c) the five Genera of Being, Rest, Motion, Sameness, and Otherness, and uses them instead of the ten Aristotelian Categories (VI.1.1–24), or the Stoic Genus (VI.1.23–29) as more appropriate to the nature of the intelligible world (VI.2.2). Finally, with regard to the perceptible world, Plotinus' cosmos reflects the structure of the Platonic cosmos, the world of becoming set against the world of being.

In addition to the central importance of the Platonic dialogues for Plotinus' philosophy, another aspect of Plato's teaching, the famous “unwritten doctrines,”³² seems to play a considerable role in the *Enneads*. Plotinus and especially the later Neoplatonists accepted Aristotle's testimony for the existence

of unwritten doctrines and reached the conclusion that Plato's philosophy was propounded within the dialogues but also elsewhere. H. J. Krämer presents serious evidence for the influence of the unwritten doctrines in Plotinus.³³ According to his research, the unwritten doctrines are especially relevant to Plotinus' doctrines of the One beyond being and the multilevel plurality of being. In a similar context, and putting in one and the same framework the whole Neoplatonic tradition, L. P. Gerson states that the unwritten doctrines were part of Neoplatonism's Plato and since, he continues, "the interpretation of Plato is so much a part of Neoplatonism, it is extremely useful to have available an understanding of the material outside the dialogues that led the Neoplatonists to read the dialogues as they did."³⁴

However, despite the above evidences, the exact contribution of Plato to the *Enneads* remains a debatable manner for modern scholars. Whereas some regard Plotinus merely as a disciple or uncritical interpreter of Plato, others regard him as an autonomous thinker with respect to Plato and his predecessors, an original representative of a long tradition of Greek metaphysical thought who was aware of his own innovations and arguments.³⁵ But there is no doubt that Plotinus was fully aware of Plato's dialogues and, as G. Faggin observes, no one can deny his original philosophical creativity.³⁶ On this interpretive line, R. Arnou and P. R. Blum observe that Plotinus' philosophy is Platonism in process—a process which underlies a new progress in the development of Platonic teaching.³⁷ Indeed, Plotinus' thought derives fundamentally from a systematic and careful reading of Plato. As J.-M. Charrue maintains, Plotinus' work is a synthetic representation of the ancient texts, a careful elaboration of his sources and a mature reconsideration of Plato's dialogues that leads to a new perspective of Platonic philosophy.³⁸

On the other hand, Plotinus is not, like Plato, a careful writer who refines the linguistic quality of his text, nor a faithful disciple who follows his master in all the aspects of his thought. Plotinus is more interested in metaphysics than mathematics, ethics, or politics, and, even though Plotinus had a competent knowledge of geometry, arithmetic, mechanics, optics, and music, his main concern was the metaphysical dimension of these disciplines and not the disciplines themselves (*Life* 14. 7–10). In addition, Plotinus was not completely uncritical of Plato. In some cases he seems to question Plato's account (as for example at *Ennead* II.1.2). In other cases he does not hesitate to point out contradictory accounts in Platonic dialogues. For example, in *Ennead* IV.8, where the problem of the descent of the soul into the bodies is discussed, Plotinus notes that two contradictory positions are taken by Plato: on the one hand, the negative or pessimistic view given in the soul's descent in the *Phaedo*, the image of the cave in the *Republic*, and the *Phaedrus*' myth and, on the other, the positive or optimistic view of soul and cosmos in the *Timaeus*.³⁹

Consequently, Plotinus should not be understood as an eclectic or a mere interpreter of Plato. The originality of Plotinus is confirmed by the testimonies of his contemporaries and later Neoplatonists. Proclus, for instance, was impressed by his originality and names his philosophy as a “divine revelation to men” (*Platonic Theology* I.6.16ff), and St. Augustine characterized Plotinus as the “man in whom Plato lived again” (*Contra Academicos* 3.18).⁴⁰ Thus, Plotinus’ philosophy cannot be reduced to a mosaic of Platonic or other earlier ideas. He must be regarded both as a devoted Platonist and as an original philosopher who contributed with his radical thought to a new perception of Platonism, that of Neoplatonism.

1.3.2 Aristotle

Aristotle is also an important influence in Plotinus’ thought, although not to the same degree as he was for the later Neoplatonists, and Plotinus refers to Aristotle by name only four times (II.1.2.12, 4.11; II.5.3.18; V.1.9.7). On the other hand, Porphyry testifies to the presence of concealed Peripatetic doctrines in the *Enneads* and in particular to the extensive use of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (*Life* 14.5–6).⁴¹ Yet, whereas Plotinus seems to prefer Plato’s dialectic ontology to Aristotle’s logic, later Neoplatonists tended to construct their system on both Aristotelian logic and Platonic ontology, fusing, as far as they could, Plato and Aristotle into one unified account.⁴² But Plotinus followed a middle course of interpretation. In many cases, he used Aristotelian terminology to defend Plato’s doctrines and the validity of his ideas. This practice presupposes a sound knowledge of Aristotelian philosophy, which is clearly manifest throughout the *Enneads*.

Furthermore, whereas Plotinus accepts the Aristotelian doctrines of Intellect and Intelligible Matter as well as Aristotle’s psychological vocabulary and the dynamic philosophical antitheses of “matter-form,” “potentiality-actuality,” and “prior-posterior,” he criticizes Aristotle’s psychology in identifying inseparably the soul with the body (IV.7.8[5]); his ethics in making happiness dependent on external prosperity (I.4.5); and his theology in denying a supreme principle beyond Intellect (V.6.2–6, VI.7.37–42). He also disagrees with Aristotle’s theory in both metaphysics and physics in applying wrongly the Categories to both the intelligible (VI.1.1–24) and the perceptible world (VI.3.3). As we mentioned before, the ten Aristotelian Categories could be easily reduced to the five Platonic Genera.⁴³

1.3.3 Stoics and Epicureans

With regard to the Stoics and Epicureans, the former are of greater significance for Plotinus than the latter. A. Graeser offers an invaluable comparison

between Plotinus' philosophy and the Stoic tradition.⁴⁴ According to his study, Plotinus seems to be aware of the Old Stoa, Poseidonius and Epictetus as well as other major Stoic philosophers. Porphyry testifies to the appearance of concealed Stoic writings, along with the Peripatetic ones, in the *Enneads* (*Life* 14.5). Indeed, Plotinus accepts the Stoic accounts of cosmology, human nature, and *logos*, and especially their theories of the seed-principles, cosmic sympathy, theodicy, the vitalistic conception of the intelligible world, and the forms of individuals. On the other hand, Plotinus is completely opposed to the Stoic accounts of the world soul as highest deity, the soul as a material entity being spatially present in body, God as a mode of matter, and Fate governing the cosmos.⁴⁵ Finally, of great interest is Plotinus' adaptation of the Platonizing Stoicism of Poseidonius, especially concerning the notion of the cosmos as a spiritual continuum extending through a definite series of ontological media from God to matter.⁴⁶ The main difference between the theory of Poseidonius and that of Plotinus can be located in the theory of divinity as "spirit incorporeal and fiery." For Plotinus, Poseidonius' definition implies a materialistic and unstable notion of divinity incompatible with the nature of Intellect (Stobaeus, *Eclogae* I.2.29).⁴⁷

1.3.4 Middle-Platonists, Aristotelians, and Neopythagoreans

According to the testimony of Porphyry (*Life* 14.10–14),⁴⁸ Plotinus seems to be aware of the works of several contemporary Platonic and Aristotelian commentators. Among Platonists were the second-century Middle-Platonists Severus, Cronius, Numenius of Apamea, and Atticus,⁴⁹ and among the Peripatetics, the second-century Aristotelian commentators Aspasius, Adrastus, and Alexander of Aphrodisias (the latter was the head of the Athenian Peripatetic School at the beginning of the third-century AD). Cronius and Numenius of Apamea were two central Platonic figures whose work was an amalgamation of Middle-Platonic and Neopythagorean doctrines. However, due to the lack of Middle-Platonic sources, an adequate comparison between Plotinus and these Platonists is extremely difficult.⁵⁰ Nothing survives from the work of Gaius and any information on his philosophy derives only from the works *Epitome* and *Didaskalikos* of his pupil Albinus (AD c. 153) who taught at Smyrna. In these works we find a strong Aristotelian influence.⁵¹ Albinus' main doctrines seem to be: the identification of the Supreme Deity with the Aristotelian Intellect, the consideration of the Platonic Forms as thoughts of God, the characterization of the Supreme Deity as ineffable, the denial of the temporal beginning of the world, and the denial of the production of matter and the world soul by God.⁵² The second doctrine, which originally derives from Philo of Alexandria (*De Opificio Mundi*, 5), prefigures Plotinus' synthesis in his Intellect of the Platonic Forms and the Aristotelian Intellect (*Epitome* IX), while the third doctrine anticipates Plotinus'

doctrine of the One (*Epitome X*). On the other hand, Atticus was the chief anti-Aristotelian Middle-Platonist. Some of his criticisms involve Aristotle's denial of virtue's self-sufficiency for happiness, his doctrines denying the soul's immortality, his theory of the heavens as composed of the fifth element, and his denial of a temporal beginning for the cosmos. These criticisms seem to have been followed by Plotinus, especially in the Aristotelian polemics of his middle period.

Numenius of Apameia was also a strong influence on Plotinus' thought. He prefigures Plotinus on the following topics: in considering the absolute incorporeality of being, in articulating the structure of being in a hierarchical triad of gods, in positing the presence of everything in everything, in enhancing the mystical union of human with God, and in suggesting the idea of contemplation as creation.⁵³ In fact there were so many similarities between the doctrines of Plotinus and Numenius that the former was accused of plagiarism. For this reason, Plotinus asked his pupil Amelius to write a defense with the title *The Doctrinal Differences between Plotinus and Numenius* in order to reinstate Plotinus' originality (*Life* 17.1–6).

Apart from the Middle-Platonic Neopythagoreans, another influential Neopythagorean figure who anticipates Plotinus' philosophy is Moderatus of Gades (AD 1st century).⁵⁴ As Porphyry describes his system in his work *On Matter* (quoted by Simplicius in *Physica* 230.34 ff.),⁵⁵ the three main lines in Moderatus' philosophy which prefigure Plotinus are: Matter as produced by God, the theory of three divine Hypostases, named, as in Plotinus, as the One, the Intelligible World, and the Soul, and the interpretation of Plato's *Parmenides*.

With regard to the Neopythagorean influence in Plotinus, it should be noted that the Neoplatonist lived in one of the most disturbed periods of the Roman Empire, between the death of Marcus Aurelius (AD 180) and the accession of Diocletian (AD 284)—the imperial period that E. R. Dodds characterizes as the "age of anxiety."⁵⁶ It was in this period that there appears to have been a genuine rebirth and rethinking of the Pythagorean tradition, which was embodied in the movement known as Neopythagoreanism. The characteristics of this movement were a reaffirmation of the soul's immortality, a reconsideration of universal immateriality and incorporeality, and the mystical union with the God.⁵⁷ The fundamental doctrine underlying Neopythagoreanism was based on a hierarchical successive system of the Monad, the Indefinite Dyad, and Numbers. Nicomachus of Gerasa (AD c. 150) was one of the most influential Neopythagoreans who played a central role in the development of the later Neoplatonic mathematical mysticism, especially that of Proclus and Iamblichus.⁵⁸ Nicomachus' *Theological Arithmetic* (preserved in Photius *Bibliotheca*, 187), a peculiar work in which there is a metaphysical identification of numbers with the traditional gods, could be regarded as the initial and maybe the most influential starting point for this Neopythagorean rebirth.

Finally, with regard to the Aristotelians who appear to have been read in Plotinus' school, Adrastus, Aspasius, and Alexander of Aphrodisias were three of the most important commentators of the period. Adrastus was the commentator of the *Categories* and Plato's *Timaeus* as well as the author of some lexicographical and historical studies of the Aristotelian *corpus*. Aspasius, the earliest of the commentators (AD second century), who wrote on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, was also the commentator of Aristotle's *Categories*, *Metaphysics*, and *De Caelo*. Alexander of Aphrodisias, perhaps the most significant Aristotelian commentator, was the author of commentaries on the *Metaphysics*, *Prior Analytics*, and *Topics* (among others), as well as a series of shorter philosophical works, including *On Fate* and *On Mixture*.⁵⁹ Plotinus seems to be deeply influenced by Alexander's interpretation of Aristotelian psychology and metaphysics.⁶⁰ In the field of metaphysics, Plotinus follows especially Alexander's unification of God with the Pure Thinker in *Metaphysics* XII and the Active Intellect in *De Anima* III,⁶¹ as well as Alexander's development of Aristotle's identification of Intellect with its thoughts. In the field of psychology, Plotinus agrees with Alexander's fundamental denial of the spatial presence of the soul in the body (*Ennead* IV.3.20 and *De Anima* 13.9 ff.).

1.3.5 Gnostics, Christians, the Orient, and Other Contemporary Movements

Equally important is the relationship between Plotinus and some of the philosophical and religious movements of his time. Porphyry testifies (*Life*, 16) that at Plotinus' lectures there were many Christians and other heretics of the old philosophy, probably belonging to the movement of Gnosticism.⁶² These people seemed to have caused difficulties in Plotinus' school. According to Porphyry, they used to compose revelations based on Zoroaster, Zostrianus, Nicotheus, Allogenes, and Messus, and then re-interpret Platonic teaching accordingly (*Life* 16.1–9). For this reason, Amelius wrote a book against Zostrianus, and Porphyry similarly against Zoroaster (*Life* 16.12–18). But the most important polemic against the movement of Gnosticism derives from Plotinus' *Ennead* II.9, *Against the Gnostics*.⁶³ Plotinus strongly attacks the Gnostics for taking the doctrines of Plato and other Greek philosophers and misinterpreting them according to their own deceptive doctrines. For Plotinus (II.9.6), the Gnostics are lying when they speak of the divine creator as an ignorant or evil Demiurge who produced an imperfect material world. They are also completely false when they regard the creative activities of the Demiurge as the result of a spiritual fall in the intelligible hierarchy (II.9.10–12). They are melodramatic and wrong when they speak about the influence of the cosmic spheres (II.9.13); they are blasphemous when they lay claim to the higher powers of magic (II.9.14); and completely misleading when they believe in

immortality achievable through the complete rejection of and abstention from the material world. Even worse are their denial of the divinity of the Word Soul and the heavenly bodies, the rejection of salvation through true virtue and wisdom, the unphilosophical support of their arguments, and the arrogant view of themselves as saved by nature, that is as privileged beings in whom alone God is interested.⁶⁴

Concerning the Christians, Plotinus never refers to them directly. In contrast to the well-known polemic by Porphyry, *Against the Christians*, Plotinus keeps silent about the Christian movement. In all probability Christians and Gnostics appeared to belong to the same group of heretics who infiltrated his school, and his anti-Gnostic treatise perhaps is also addressed to some Christians.

The Oriental influence in Plotinus' thought is extremely obscure and difficult to evaluate. Apparently Plotinus wanted to become acquainted with the philosophy of the Persians and the Indians, and so joined the expedition of the Emperor Gordian (*Life*, 3).⁶⁵ But Gordian's expedition was unsuccessful and Plotinus escaped with difficulty to Antioch. It is not known if Plotinus then delayed there to foster his interest in Oriental thought, but in any case the *Enneads* follow the traditional Greek ways of thought and argumentation without any clear reference to Oriental philosophical systems.

On the other hand, it is indisputable that Greek philosophy, from the earlier days of its development, had links with some Oriental doctrines. Here M. L. West's influential work, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*, is an invaluable guide,⁶⁶ and Wallis' argument on the subject follows his line of interpretation: "from their earliest days Greek philosophy and science had drawn freely on the ideas of the Near East, to which they had habitually given new meaning by organizing them in a conceptual system hitherto lacking, and it is therefore to be expected that the Neoplatonists should have done the same."⁶⁷ In addition it should not be forgotten that Plotinus' family originated in all probability from Lycopolis in Upper Egypt, and many other Neoplatonists had their roots in Eastern regions: Porphyry was a Phoenician from Tyre, Iamblichus and Damascius probably had Syrian origins, and Proclus was a Lycian. And there is the well-known story of the Greek philosophers who went to Persia after the closure of the Platonic Academy (AD 529) as preserved in Agathias' *History* (II.30–1).⁶⁸

Finally, Plotinus' philosophy seems to stand outside the influence of the *Chaldean Oracles*. Although Michael Psellus (*Patrologia Graeca* CXXII.1125 C–D) finds a Chaldean influence in the beginning of *Ennead* I.9, Plotinus seems to pay scant attention to the *Chaldean Oracles*. Whereas the later Neoplatonists regarded the *Chaldean Oracles* as divine revelation applicable to their theurgic practice, Plotinus appears to ignore them, although he was aware of some related Orphic and Pythagorean doctrines.

1.4 PLOTINUS AND THE PRESOCRATICS

The philosophical importance of the Presocratics in the *Enneads* has been generally overlooked by modern scholarship.⁶⁹ Apart from the lack of consideration of the Presocratic sources in the *Enneads*, the general attitude of some eminent modern scholars also seems to be deflationary. For instance, A. H. Armstrong, the translator of Plotinus' *Enneads* in the *Loeb* series, considers the Presocratic references in the *Enneads* as mere citations of little importance and less interest. According to this scholar, Plotinus recognizes the Presocratics as thinkers who do not require any independent study and in most cases appear only as indirect citations through the testimony of Aristotle.⁷⁰ Similarly, J. M. Rist only briefly reviews the Presocratics and suggests that, even if Plotinus regarded the most important of them, they are "at best props, and sometimes mere names traditionally listed when a new doctrine comes up for discussion."⁷¹ Following a similar line of interpretation, C. Kahn, commenting on Heraclitus' fragment 84a–b (preserved only by Plotinus), surmises that the Neoplatonic philosopher quotes from memory and so "we have no way of telling how far his memory reflects his own reading of Heraclitus or some more traditional account."⁷² Furthermore, this negative attitude towards Presocratic sources in Plotinus has led most contemporary Presocratic commentators to exclude the *Enneads* from their studies. It is worth noting that H. Diels, for instance, includes only limited citations from Plotinus' *Enneads*, and omits apparent references to the Presocratics which could easily serve as later testimonies to these philosophers.

But, in contrast to these judgments, the text of the *Enneads* leads us in the opposite direction. As J. Mansfeld observes, Plotinus gives a positive account of the early Greek philosophers and "some of his quotations may point to a reading of the originals."⁷³ Indeed a careful and objective reader is able to recognize that Plotinus' references to the Presocratics are not without purpose and significance. In many cases, Plotinus refers to the Presocratics by name along with Plato and sometimes with Aristotle with the same respect and without making any special distinction.⁷⁴ As T. Gelzer observes, Plotinus quotes the Presocratics either referring to them by name individually (as for instance IV.8.1 and V.1.8–9), or in a group as "the ancients" (as for instance II.9.6 and III.7.1, and 7).⁷⁵ In the latter case, there is also a unique but important reference to the Presocratics as "natural philosophers" (περὶ φύσεως εἰρηκότες) at *Ennead* II.1.2.6–9. Plotinus' references to the Presocratics can therefore be divided into direct and indirect: direct when Plotinus refers to an individual Presocratic by name and indirect when he refers to a Presocratic quotation or account.

Plotinus refers directly four times to Heraclitus (II.1.2.11, IV.8.1.12, IV.8.5.6, V.1.9.3), five times to Empedocles (II.4.7.1, IV.8.1.19–20, IV.8.1.34,

IV.8.5.5, V.1.9.5), twice to Parmenides (V.1.8.15, VI.6.18.42), and Anaxagoras (II.4.7.2, V.1.9.1), four times to Pythagoras and the early Pythagoreans (IV.7.8[4].3, IV.8.1.21, V.1.9.28, V.5.6.27), and once to Pherecydes (V.1.9.29) alongside Pythagoras. In addition to the above direct references, the *Index Fontium* of Henry-Schwyzler and E. N. Roussos (1974) notes that in the *Enneads* Plotinus refers indirectly or alludes thirty-seven times to Anaxagoras,⁷⁶ three times to Anaximander,⁷⁷ eleven times to Democritus,⁷⁸ fourteen times to Empedocles,⁷⁹ thirty-five to Heraclitus,⁸⁰ once to Leucippus,⁸¹ twenty-six times to Parmenides,⁸² twice to Philolaus,⁸³ four times to Pherecydes,⁸⁴ fourteen times to the Pythagoreans as a group,⁸⁵ and once each to Thales,⁸⁶ and Xenophanes.⁸⁷

These references should still be treated with caution; the Presocratic list of references is neither complete nor undisputed. For instance, some references such as that to Xenophanes fr. 25 in *Ennead* V.8.7.25–31 can hardly be accepted as an indirect allusion to the Presocratic; the passage is more a Platonic one. In addition, while Presocratic terminology appears in the background of Plotinus' thought, some terms had already become technical and popular in the philosophers before Plotinus. An excellent example is that of Anaxagoras' *dictum* ὁμοῦ πάντα, an expression which is frequently used by Plotinus to express the "all-togetherness" of the intelligibles within Intellect. Whenever this expression appears in the *Enneads*, it should be treated carefully, whether it reflects Anaxagoras or is just another case of the commonly used term. Finally, some other Presocratic references are defective; for instance, reference to Heraclitus at *Ennead* IV.8.1.11–17 includes also an indirect reference to Heraclitus' fr. 101 which remains unnoticed, as well as the citation of Pythagoras at *Ennead* IV.8.1.20–22.

In general, concerning the Presocratic sources of the *Enneads*, the issue is obscure and controversial. On this problem, there are three possible alternatives: (1) Plotinus has direct contact with the original copy of some leading Presocratics; (2) Plotinus collects his information from secondary sources such as philosophical anthologies or handbooks of the period; (3) Plotinus derives his Presocratic material intermediately from the Aristotelian *corpus*.

The clearest example of the first case is the passage on Parmenides in *Ennead* V.1. The accuracy of Parmenides' fr. 3 in 8.14–23, unique as regards any other Presocratic fragment in the *Enneads*, is strong evidence for this position. It has to be mentioned that Plotinus in this passage refers clearly to Parmenides' "own writings" (ἐν τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ συγγράμμασιν), using the same expression again in *Ennead* III.7.13.1–18 when he criticizes the Peripatetic theory of Time and stresses the obscurity of some Aristotelian "writings." Unfortunately, Plotinus never refers to the "writings" of any other Presocratic. Can we suppose that Plotinus had a copy only of Parmenides' poem in his library? It is difficult to give a definite answer.

With regard to the second case, Rist states that Plotinus' general usage of the Presocratics implies that the Neoplatonist "is going to a handbook rather than bothering with the original texts."⁸⁸ Similarly M. Atkinson maintains that Plotinus "was familiar with a handbook rather than with the original text."⁸⁹ But this case cannot be justified either from the *Enneads*, or any biographical sources.

Concerning the third case, the position seems to be much more hypothetical. With regard to the Presocratic sources, the main position of some leading modern scholars is that Plotinus' information derives directly from Aristotle or other Peripatetic sources and the doxographical tradition.⁹⁰ According to Armstrong, Plotinus does not indicate any independent study of the Presocratics but bases his account on Aristotle in an entirely Peripatetic spirit.⁹¹ Again this position is unjustified. Aristotle occasionally seems to be the main source for Plotinus, as in the case of Anaxagoras in *Ennead* V.1.9.1–2, but not always. In fact, Plotinus never gives us clear evidence for using Aristotle or any other Peripatetic author intermediately as a secondary source but rather refers to the Presocratics by name as individual philosophers with knowledge of their theories. Thus, no certain conclusion can be drawn, but the first option, that Plotinus did have direct access to Presocratic texts, is closer to the available evidence and so preferable.

Finally, it has to be mentioned that Presocratic texts to a considerable extent derive from the fragments preserved in the Neoplatonists and especially in Simplicius, who is, of course, later than Plotinus. But, as Roussos observes, since Plotinus is the most important later contributor to the Greek philosophical tradition, the investigation of the earlier sources in the *Enneads* would be extremely interesting.⁹² Neoplatonic quotations from the Presocratics undermine Eusebius' testimony that books of philosophers before Plato were "rare to find" (*Praeparatio Evangelica* X.3.468).⁹³

On the one hand, a possible objection concerning the study of the Presocratics in Plotinus might stem from the fact that the Neoplatonists developed their doctrines within a different philosophical framework from that of the Presocratics, but, on the other hand, it is clear that the Neoplatonists were aware of Presocratic theories. If we allow some uniform progress to the history of Greek philosophy, then the Presocratic origins have a right to be studied in the light of Neoplatonism, and, since Neoplatonism begins with Plotinus, the need of a comparative study between Plotinus and the Presocratics is even more pressing. We can begin our research by exposing and analyzing the Presocratic references in Plotinus' theory of the One; the ultimate principle of his metaphysics.