Plotinus (204-270 AD) has been described as ‘the father of the mind-body problem’ and ‘the first Cartesian.’ How apt are the descriptions? To bring elements of answer to the question I here turn to his views on sense-perception and consciousness.

Two provisos need to be registered at the start. Firstly, Plotinus’ style is notoriously obscure: he wrote for a live audience of disciples and associates, did not rework what he had first written, relied on metaphors to express what discursive language cannot express and favoured a dialectical manner of exposition that reflected his close engagement with the views of his predecessors. The large body of work that he left at his death was edited by his disciple Porphyry, who organised it thematically in six sets of nine (ennea) tractates, the Enneads, and gave them the individual titles under which we know them today. The highly complex metaphysical system developed in that work constitutes the framework outside which no aspect of Plotinus’ philosophy can be understood. The outline of the system given below, although minimal, will, it is hoped, provide sufficient information to make sense of his diversified concept of consciousness. Secondly, Plotinus’ self-perception as a Platonist, whose task was to expound as faithfully as he could the philosophy of the master, is so modest as to be inaccurate. Not only had the six centuries elapsed since Plato’s death seen very considerable philosophical activity, all of which is reflected in the Enneads, but Plotinus was also a highly original philosopher who, by re-thinking and systematising the views

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1 Porphyry, On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of his Books, 13, trans. A.H. Armstrong. It is generally agreed that Porphyry wrote the biography of Plotinus in 301 AD, when he was c. 67 years old. He died in c. 305 AD.
2 See, e.g., Emilsson (1988: 148) and Dillon (1990: 149). I am indebted to both authors, although I am not wholly in agreement with their respective conclusions.
3 As testified by Porphyry in his Life of Plotinus, 8.
4 Even the system of referencing the Enneads is complex. Take, as an example, I 2 [19] 3. 1-5: the Roman numeral denotes the Ennead, the first Arabic number the tractate, both of which are in Porphyry’s classification system, the number in square brackets that follows gives the place of the tractate in the chronological order, and the last Arabic numbers give chapter and lineation.
expounded in the dialogues, transformed Platonism and prepared it for revival at the Renaissance.

In so far as ancient Greek thought was, to a large extent, driven by the search for a singular principle that could explain the ever-changing diversity of the world of sense, it viewed unity as a condition of intelligibility and, in some cases, of reality. In this, it found its last and purest expression in Plotinus. To account for all reality, metaphysical and physical, he brought into play three immaterial realities (or hypostases), the One, Intellect and Soul, which follow each other in descending order from unity to diversity, each principle being the timeless ontological parent as well as the destiny and model of the principle that is emanated from it. Thus, by an eternal and necessary process, the One causes Intellect to be, Intellect emanates Soul and Soul, in turn, produces the celestial bodies and the physical world as a whole. Underlying the procession of the hypostases is a vertical and non-reciprocal principle of causality, which operates from the top down and according to which no emanated entity can initiate changes in the reality from which it is an emanant.

The One, ‘potency of all things’ (dunamis pantōn), font of value and prime object of desire for all subsequent beings, is beyond determinacy and thought since the ascription to it of any substantive quality or property would introduce limitation and plurality into a principle that is both all-embracing and so simple as to transcend the duality of thinker and object of thought. Unlike Aristotle’s prime mover Plotinus’ One does not think itself. Active in the fullness of its perfection, the One overflows eternally and, in the way in which a luminous source sends out a ray of light, it emanates a product that is external to itself. The product, which aspires to the perfection of its source, turns to it in contemplation. Through this movement of conversion, in which subject and object of contemplation are differentiated, the product constitutes itself as a separate and determinate reality, which Plotinus calls Intellect (Nous). In thinking the simplicity of the One in accordance with its own nature and constitutive activity, Intellect apprehends as distinct the ‘real beings’ or Forms that are eternally united in the One. In so far as it is constituted of all Forms, Intellect can without paradox be described as a ‘one-many’ (hen polla) or a one-all (hen panta). However, if it apprehends the Forms as distinct, it nonetheless beholds them all together in contemplation as a totum simul. As a knower which directly accesses the manifold of which it consists, Intellect has full and uninterrupted consciousness and knowledge of itself. Plotinian Forms, which share their essential characteristics with Platonic Forms, are the models of all that
exists in the sublunary world and, as such, constitute the guarantors of all intelligible discourse.

In the second stage of emanation, structurally similar to the first, Intellect sends out a product which is an ‘image’ or ‘expressed thought’ of itself. The product, Soul, establishes itself as a separate reality by turning towards its source and being perfected by it. However, because Soul is less internally cohesive than Intellect, it also desires to deploy its capacities upon a product that is other than itself. It thus unfolds itself into several manifestations, each of which is characterised by a progressive distancing from the source, a process that Plotinus calls the descent or fall of the Soul as it enters ‘the realm of becoming.’ (II 3 [52] 10.4) The gradual dimming of the light that Soul receives from above and the consequent blurring of the imprints of the Forms that it holds within itself result in a progressively diminishing ability to contemplate and a corresponding decline in the quality of its products. Thus, while Soul is mostly intellective in its highest manifestation, having ‘within itself and as its own’ the thinking of Intellect (V I [10] 3.7-8), the World Soul, although remaining contemplative in Intellect, turns outwards to generate and order the cosmic framework into which other souls, which are partial and individual, descend to associate with a body which they animate and sustain in existence for the duration of its natural life. Be it noted, however, that if soul animates body, it does not do so in the sense of ever forming a unity with it, for the soul always remains transcendent. Predictably, as will now be seen, the transitory association of soul and body raises some of the most intractable problems in the Enneads, from the nature of the moral life to the precise nature of the cooperation between body and soul in sense-perception. In the penultimate stage of its descent, hypostatic Soul takes the form of Nature, from whose indistinct contemplation come the lower reaches of the physical world. At the ultimate point of Soul’s descent, when the emanative process has all but exhausted itself, matter is produced, which Plotinus equates with indefiniteness, passivity and negativity. All in all, therefore, the emanative process, as Plotinus theorizes it, consists in a single causal chain that goes from the ‘potency of all things’ to the non-being of matter.

In that ontological chain, the role of Soul is to be an intermediary between the higher hypostases and the world of sense. Being both a member of the intelligible realm and the originating principle of the world below, Soul is an amphibious reality. By projecting onto its product, the world of generation and corruption, such reflections of the Forms as it retains within itself at each stage of its descent, Soul is the agency through which beings of that world receive form, shape and unity as well as the powers (dunameis) that they need in order
to function as it is in their nature to function. The power of sense-perception, to which we now turn, is paradigmatic of the manner in which Plotinus conceived of the part played by the soul in the empowerment of the body. In so far as sense-perception cannot but be a joint undertaking between body and soul, it is a test case for determining the nature and strength of his position on what post-Cartesians call the mind-body problem. How do sense-organs receive and process data from the physical environment? How are such data, in turn, transmitted to the soul so as to become conscious? The complex, if not convoluted, theory that Plotinus evolved to account for these processes is to be understood as stemming directly from his concept of causation and the kind of body-soul dualism that goes with it. Operating vertically from the top down, as we saw, Plotinian causation effectively rules out that the embodied soul be the direct recipient of affects (pathē) or impressions (tupoi) coming from body. In Plotinian terms, this means that the soul is, strictly speaking, impassible (apathēs) in relation to the body, to the extent of being unable to inter-act with it directly. Two features of such dualism bear directly on sense-perception: (1) unlike body, soul qua soul is not extended in space. It is therefore indivisible; (2) unlike body, which is subject to alteration and decay, soul qua soul is eternal. From the two premises conjoined it follows, not only that the soul is separable from the body, but also that it can wholly and simultaneously be present to the various parts of the body that it animates.

If Plotinus conceived of soul and body as essentially different he nonetheless situated them on the single causal chain that goes from the One to matter. Accordingly, he conceived of all that Soul animates in the world of sense, from Socrates to the smallest blade of grass, as connected to the world of the higher hypostases. He took it as axiomatic that there is no form of life, no individual being or thing here below that does not reflect, to however minute an extent, the higher world of the Forms, which are themselves reflections of the One. As a result, he viewed the cosmos as a whole as one living being, whose parts are inter-related or, as the Stoics would have put it, ‘sympathetic’ to each other:

This one All, moreover, is sympathetic (sumpathes), indeed as one living thing, and the far is near, just as in one of the individual animals, nail, horn, finger, and any other of the limbs that are not contiguous, even though the part between them is discontinuous and is not affected at all, the non-near part is still affected … Since it is a living thing having unity as its end, nothing is so distant in place as
not to be near, by the nature of a single living thing to be sympathetically affected. (IV 4 [28] 32. 13-17 and 20-22, trans. Gurtler)\(^5\)

Illuminating the cosmos as a whole, Soul is the agency through which all things bodily, the sense-organs included, are ‘so to speak, connatural and continuous’ \((\text{hoion sumphuôn ē sunechôn})\) with all things in the physical world. (IV 5 [29] 1.1)

These two tenets of Plotinus’ metaphysics - top-down causation and \(\text{sympatheia}\) - are brought together in the definition of sense-perception given in the tractate \(\text{On the Impassibility of the Bodiless}\):

We say that sense-perceptions \((\text{aisthēseis})\) are not affections \((\text{pathē})\) but activities \((\text{energeias})\) and judgments \((\text{kriseis})\) concerned with affections; affections belonging to something else, say, for instance, to the body qualified in a certain way \((\text{to sōma to toionde})\), but the judgement belongs to the soul, and the judgment is not an affection – for if it was, there would have to be yet another judgment, and we should have to go back for ever to infinity. (III 6 [26] 1.1-6)\(^6\)

These carefully written lines contain \(\text{in ovo}\) Plotinus’ theory of sense-perception. ‘Qualified body’\(^7\) here denotes a body that has been made sentient by soul, that is, a living being capable of being affected by its surroundings. As for the distinction between affection \((\text{pathos})\) and sense-perception \((\text{aisthēsis})\), it is of crucial significance: while affections are passively received by ‘qualified bodies’, sense-perceptions are cognitive activities which involve the judging element in the soul.\(^8\) Two tracts later, Plotinus would spell out the implication:

We must posit that the perception \((\text{to aisthanesthai})\) of sense-objects is for the soul or the living being an act of apprehension \((\text{antilepsis})\), in which the soul understands the quality attaching to bodies and takes the impression of their forms \((\text{eîdê})\). (IV 4 [28] 23.1-3)\(^9\)

The definition of sense-perception as an act of cognition in which the embodied soul gains awareness of external objects and receives their forms within itself brought an \(\text{aporia}\) in

\(^{5}\) For the Stoic origin of the concept of \(\text{sumpatheia}\), see Graeser (1972: 68-72).

\(^{6}\) Except when otherwise stated, all quotations from the \(\text{Enneads}\) are in A.H. Armstrong’s translation, with occasional modifications.

\(^{7}\) The phrase is borrowed from Aristotle, \(\text{De anima}\), II 412a16-17.

\(^{8}\) As testified by a very long entry in Sleeman and Pollet (1980), \(\text{aisthēsis}\) is a protean term in Plotinus. Amongst the several senses in which he uses the term are:(1) the capacity to sense; (2) sense-perception and (3) sensation, whether or not accompanied by consciousness.

\(^{9}\) See also V 5 [32] 1.15-18.
its wake. It required of Plotinus that he explain what his kind of dualism would appear to make inexplicable, namely how the soul in us, which he had declared to be impassible by definition, can receive the impressions of forms imaged in the physical objects apprehended by the sense-organs. Perhaps as a result of Porphyry’s relentless prompting, Plotinus was not unaware of the problem. Because the soul is impassible, the judgement of perception, he acknowledged, ‘has nothing in it of what it is to judge.’ (III 6 [26] 1.7) Such would remain his firmly held view: ‘when the soul is alone’, he wrote two tractates later, ‘even if it is possible for it to direct its attention to the world of sense, it will end up with an understanding of the intelligible; what is perceived by sense will escape it, as it has nothing with which to grasp it.’ (IV 4 [28] 23.13-15) To drive the point home, he resorted to analogies: to assume that the soul interacts directly with the physical world, he wrote, would be like trying to map the intelligible line onto a physical one (ibid., 9-10) or ‘talking about a line being mixed with white.’ (I 1 [53] 4.11-12)

To account for the manner in which soul and body are jointly involved in sense-perception, Plotinus postulated the existence between them of ‘a third thing which will be affected (to peisomenon) and … will receive the form (ten morphēn dexomenon).’ (IV 4 [28] 23.20-21) As he conceived it, this ‘third thing’ is ‘a proportional mean somehow connecting the extremes to each other, with the capacity both of receiving and of transmitting information, suitable to be made like (homoiōthēnai) each of the extremes.’ (ibid., 25-28, trans. Armstrong, modified) To fulfil the first condition, the go-between must be of ‘one matter’ (hylēs mias) with physical objects and hence be capable of being affected (sympathēs) by them. To fulfil the second condition, the go-between must be both receptive of the forms imaged in the sense objects perceived and be capable of transmitting these forms to the judging agency in the soul. ‘If what we are saying now is sound’, Plotinus continues, ‘sense-perception must take place through (dia) the sense-organs’ (ibid., 31-33). Each sense organ, being part of the body, or coinciding with it in the case of touch, has received from the soul ‘the appropriate power (dunamis) for its task, so the power in the eyes is called that of sight, the power in the ears that of hearing etc.’ (IV 3 [27] 23.3-6). Since such power goes

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10 Constraints of space here rule out a critical examination of the view that Plotinus held a realist conception of sense-perception. Although generally accepted by scholars (e.g., Emilsson 1988 and Chiaradonna 2012), that interpretation has recently come under attack (e.g. Magrin 2010).

11 It is worth noting at this point that if Plotinus did not make the brain and the cranial nerves the loci of interaction of soul and body, it was not out of ignorance of their role in the functioning of the sense-organs. His familiarity with the works of Galen (130-210 AD) had made him aware of progress recently achieved in the knowledge of the nervous system after it had first been described by Hellenistic physicians in the third century.
together with ‘a kind of knowledge’ (gnōseōs tinos, IV 4 [28] 23.28), Plotinus concludes, somewhat cagily, that the soul gains knowledge of sensible objects ‘through bodily organs … which are connatural and continuous [with sensible objects]’ and that ‘the soul somehow (pōs) comes, so to speak (hoion), to unity with sense objects themselves and so a certain common affection (homopatheias tinos) occurs between them.’ (IV 5 [29] 1.10-13, trans. Gurtler)

Plotinus’ cagey tone, as evident from his repeated use of qualifiers (‘somehow,’ ‘so to speak,’ ‘if what we are saying is sound’), suggests a level of uneasiness on his part over the solution he was putting forward. He had reasons to be uneasy. While the description of sense-perception in terms of ‘a certain common affection (homopatheia)’ between soul and body would appear unexceptionable coming from most other philosophers, it was not so for Plotinus. Had he not elsewhere in the Enneads consistently and forcefully described the soul as essentially other than body and therefore impassible (apathēs) to affects from the physical nature? Furthermore, the ascription of ‘a kind of knowledge’ to the sense-organs, besides being mildly paradoxical, left unclear the manner in which the discursive soul in us gains consciousness of data received and processed by the sense-organs. Is it through the operation of the sense-organs themselves and, if so, how are the data from different senses coordinated so as to ensure the unity of perception? Or is a different and separate agency responsible for the two functions? Plotinus was not the first philosopher to be exercised by the question; as the history of philosophy shows, the nature and operation of consciousness constitutes one of the most intractable philosophical problems.

Plotinus’ solution was to posit the existence of yet another intermediary soul-power, imagination (phantasia or to phantastikon), whose function consists in forming incorporeal images or representations (phantasmata) directly accessible to the soul in us and readily stored in memory. In so far as it functions as the terminus of sense-perception, imagination enables the embodied soul to unify the data from several senses and to become aware of itself as their recipient (IV 3 [27] 29, passim). Plotinian imagination, however, be it noted, can also operate at a higher level, a level at which it makes it possible for a variety of pure mental

BC. Thus, in IV 3 [27] 23, Plotinus willingly concedes to the science of his time that the brain is the point at which the capacity (dunamis) for perception that the lower soul gives to the sense-organs is set in motion. Although it is impossible to be certain as to why he rejected the Galenic account, there is no reason to doubt the explanation he gave: the soul is the real source of the power of the sense-organs while the brain is but the place where that potency begins to be actualised. On this issue, see Tieleman (1998).
acts and activities to become accessible to the whole of the embodied soul. At that higher level, imagination operates by transposing into quasi-pictorial images such acts of intellection as are hidden within the higher element of the soul. At that level, imagination brings to the attention of the whole embodied soul contemplative activities of which it would otherwise remained unaware.

If Plotinus gave imagination a significant role to play in the mental life of embodied souls, it was mainly to explain how the knowledge gained by the sense-organs could become conscious. It was not because he set a high value on the contribution that imagination makes to the mental life of the embodied soul. Imagination, in Plotinus’ view, is an unreliable faculty, prone to suffer lapses and to distract the soul from its higher destiny. Lapses occur when outside preoccupations, unmindfulness or indeed disease unsettle the imagination, thereby preventing the formation of mental images. At such times, mental activities, sense-perception included, do not unfailingly reach consciousness:

When what is perceived makes no difference, or the perception (aisthēsis) is not at all personally relevant, but is provoked involuntarily by the difference in the things seen, it is only the sense-perception which has this experience and the soul does not receive it in its interior, since the difference is not of concern to it either because it meets a need or is of some benefit in some other way. (IV 4 [28] 8.9-13)\(^\text{12}\)

As put forward in those lines, the claim that sense-perception does, on occasion, remain below the level of consciousness is at odds with the view, as outlined earlier,\(^\text{13}\) that sense-perception is conscious by definition. Although there appears to be no way to ease out the discrepancy, an attempt has been made to do so by calling attention to Plotinus’ distinction between, on the one hand, affects (pathē), which are passive and therefore not unlikely to remain unconscious, and, on the other hand, sense-perceptions (aisthēseis), which involve the judgment of the soul and, as such, cannot escape consciousness.\(^\text{14}\) Unfortunately, the attempt is unconvincing: not only is Plotinus, as we saw, somewhat careless in his use of words, but in most of the passages concerned, including the one quoted above, it is sense-perception that he is concerned with. A more likely explanation of the discrepancy, I submit, is his

\(^\text{12}\) See also ibid, 25. 5-7 and IV 9 [8] 2. 16-19; the cluster of issues are discussed in Stern-Gillet (2007).
\(^\text{13}\) See footnote 7.
conviction that lower-level imagination tends to divert the soul’s attention to the here-and-now of embodied existence. By contrast, he held, a soul that is mindful that its nature and destiny are in the higher world is more likely to remain unaware of what takes place in the surroundings of the body to which it is conjoined. The purer the soul, the less likely it is to attend to the world of sense. Plotinus’ distrust of imagination, therefore, reflects the other-worldly nature of his ethics.15

Equally symptomatic of Plotinus’ ambiguous stance on imagination is his reluctance to deplore lapses in second-order consciousness:

One can find a great many valuable activities, theoretical and practical, which we carry on in our contemplative and in our active life even when we are fully conscious, <and> which do not make us aware of them. (I 4 [46] 10.21-24)

Example of such valuable activities include that of a reader who: ‘is not necessarily aware that he is reading, least of all when he is really concentrating nor the man who is being brave that he is being brave.’16 ‘Conscious awareness’, Plotinus concludes, ‘is likely to enfeeble the very activities of which there is consciousness.’17

Plotinus’ denial that mental states are refulgent by definition puts him at odds with the Descartes of tradition. Furthermore, as seen above, Plotinus would have had no time for Descartes’ claim that the seat of interaction of mind and body is ‘une certaine glande fort petite’ in the brain. Why then has Plotinus been called the first Cartesian? There is, admittedly, one striking doctrinal similarity between the two philosophers: they take the soul to be indivisible and therefore able to be simultaneously present to the various parts of the body that it animates. But the similarity does not go deep. The concept of causation built into Plotinus’ emanative ontology and the notion of sumpatheia that it entails combine to making the bodily nature as a whole a function of hypostatic Soul. For Plotinus, body is not a

15 On the nature of Plotinus’ ethics, see Stern-Gillet (2014).
16 I 4 [46] 10. 24-27. Such Plotinian passages are likely to ring a bell with modern readers brought up in the analytic tradition. Gilbert Ryle (1949), in his analysis of self-knowledge, notes that ‘a walker engaged in a heated dispute may be unconscious … of the sensations in his blistered heel, and the reader of these words was, when he began this sentence, probably unconscious of the muscular and skin sensations in the back of his neck.’ Such examples, it will be recalled, are aimed at invalidating the view, which Ryle ascribes to Descartes, that ‘… the states and operations of a mind are states and operations of which it is necessarily aware.’ (157) It is interesting here to register Plotinus’ agreement with the chief anti-Cartesian of modern times.
17 Ibid., 28-29. For a helpful discussion of the different levels of consciousness in Plotinus, see Smith (1973).
separate reality existing alongside Soul. While Descartes’ difficulty was to explain how mind affects body and body mind, Plotinus’ difficulty, therefore, was to account for the daily experience of sense-perception while denying that body could affect soul. While in Descartes’ system it is a bodily organ that enables body and soul to interact, in Plotinus’ anthropology it is Soul that does all the work, including the work that common-sense largely ascribes to the body. Rather than the first Cartesian, Plotinus, therefore, is less misleadingly described as ‘the father of the mind-body problem’.

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18 The reader will have recognised the allusion to Myles Burnyeat’s 1982 seminal article, ‘Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed’.
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