Suzanne Stern-Gillet

Abstract. It is often claimed in the scholarly literature that Plotinus departs from Plato in mostly dispensing with the concept of anamnēsis (recollection). The essay is aimed at disproving such a claim. The supportive argument will proceed in five stages. First, a brief outline will be given of the role that recollection plays in the Phaedrus, a dialogue to which Plotinus returns time and again. Second, a critical reading will be offered of the most salient passages in the Enneads where Plotinus makes use of the notion. Third, the function of anamnēsis, in Plotinus’ understanding of the term, will be shown to enable the embodied human soul to become aware of the presence in herself of riches she had previously been unaware of possessing, namely logos of a reality higher than herself. Fourth, in building a normative element into the concept of anamnēsis, Plotinus, it will be argued, made it a key factor in the inward process through which human souls can reverse the self-forgetfulness that had led them to become alienated from their ontological source in Intellect. Fifth, despite having profoundly modified Plato’s concept of anamnēsis, Plotinus, it will be concluded, remained at one with him in presenting the apprehension of beauty as the stimulus most likely to lead the human soul back to her true self in Intellect.¹

Key words:
Soul, Intellect, Recollection (anamnēsis), Inwardness, Beauty.

****

Is to kalon (the beautiful) a Form? How is it related to to agathon (the good)? To answer these questions, Plato often relied on myth and allegory to suggest what philosophical argument was powerless to demonstrate. Plotinus, who had neither gift nor much taste for such stylistic devices, systematised Plato’s unsystematic answers and integrated them in the framework of his emanative ontology.

I Platonic Antecedents

Plato consistently presented both to kalon and to agathon as Forms, but was far from univocal on the relationship between the two. At times he intimated that they are identical (e.g., Meno, 77b6-7 and Timaeus, 87c4-5) while, at other times, he implied that they are different (e.g. Philebus, 64e5-6).² In book VI of the Republic he left the Form of Beauty altogether out of account in his description of the Form of the Good. In the Symposium, by contrast, he gave Beauty the key role, presenting it as the apex of the scala amoris and the supreme object of human love. In the Phaedrus, which contains his

¹ I should like to express my gratitude to José Baracat Jr, John Dillon and Marc-Antoine Gavray for doing me the great favour of reading, and commenting on, the final draft of this essay.
² See, e.g., Barnet (2010) and Riegel (2014), to whom I am here indebted.
most extensive reflections on the issue, he had Socrates argue that the universal power of attraction that beauty exerts on human beings makes it the paradigmatic object of the soul’s desire (247d).

Such power of attraction, Socrates proceeded to explain, manifests itself at both the sensory and the incorporeal levels, and is experienced by all souls, whether they are virtuously disposed or not. In his first speech, which he meant as an improvement on Lysias’ eulogy of the non-lover, Socrates characteristically embarks on a comparison between the various ways in which the human susceptibility to beauty manifests itself. He compares carnal love, which responds to the beauty of body, to a frenzied compulsion that takes hold of the epithumetic element in the soul and leads it to dominate the rational element (238b7-c4). When that happens, carnal love harms both lover and beloved. Not all attractive sensory objects, however, as we are soon made to understand, are similarly damaging; physical beauty, being directly apprehended by the keenest and clearest of all the senses, namely sight, has unmatched power to charm the human soul and to induce it to look beyond her immediate environment. The central part of the dialogue is devoted to a vindication of the anagogic power of beauty, in both its sensory and otherworldly guises.

The power of attraction of sensory beauty, Socrates explains, is not inherent in the beautiful object itself, but comes from the discarnate source of which it is a likeness (homoiōma), namely the Form of Beauty. Being the brightest star in the firmament of the Forms (250d2-4), Beauty transmits some of its radiance and unique power of attraction to its homoiōmata in the world of sense, making them shine more brightly than the homoiōmata of other Forms, such as Justice and Self-Control. As we know from the Symposium, it was Plato’s view that the human soul has the capacity to bridge the ontological gap between the beauties of sense and their preternatural source. In the Phaedrus the view is developed through the allegory of the charioteer. To account for the different erotic predispositions and cognitive abilities of embodied human souls, Socrates compares the soul to a charioteer who finds himself in charge of two winged steeds of unequal resilience and stamina. His task is to lead them on a voyage around the rim of the heavens, a voyage which may - or may not - lead them to the dwelling place of “true Being” (ousia ontōs ousa, 247c7). To account for the cognitive abilities specific to human souls, Plato has Socrates integrate into the allegory the concept of anamnēsis, of which there are variants in other dialogues.

Charioteer and horses symbolize the tripartite human soul as described in books I to IX of the Republic, and the tribulations of the voyage represent the likely difficulties caused by the “dark” horse, which stands for the epithumetic part of the soul. Unlike the chariots/souls of the gods, which are well-

---

3 See also the strongly worded condemnation of carnal love in 250e.
4 The same point is developed at greater length in the Timaeus 47a-d, where sight and sound are singled out for having greater affinity to the soul than the other senses.
balanced and therefore able to climb effortlessly “to the summit of the arch of heaven” (247a8-b1), human chariots/souls are prone to be held back in their progress. The unruly steed’s refusal to trot obediently alongside its “noble and good” companion causes many an equipage to fall by the wayside. Hinderer in their attempt to lead their chariot upwards, charioteers cannot avoid clashes with other, similarly hampered, chariots. Stampedes inevitably ensue in the course of which most steeds have their wings broken and most charioteers are frustrated of a full vision (phasma) of the “plain of truth.” There are, of course, exceptions, of which Socrates mentions two. Some “dark”, epithumetic, steeds, showing greater docility than their fellows, remain winged long enough to make it possible for their charioteer to lead the chariot upwards so as to enjoy a glimpse of the Form of Beauty. More rarely even, there are chariots/souls, whose progress is not impeded and whose vision, therefore, is on a par with that of the gods; these will be spared the troubles of embodiment and forever remain on the summit in full contemplation of true Being.

All other souls, once they become wingless, fall down to earth, associate with a body and henceforth feed on “the food of semblance.” Their ability to recover the vision enjoyed by their discarnate selves depends on how close to the summit they were able to get and how long they could feast their eyes on the vision. Those who had the longest vision remember (anamnméskhein) the Forms more keenly and become “lovers of wisdom (philosophoi) and beauty (philokaloit), or devoted to the Muses and to love” (248d2-4). Leading a philosophic life, they prove capable of loving chastely and well. All other souls lead the kind of life proportionate to the keenness and duration of their discarnate vision, with the second or third best of those leading one or the other of the worthier kinds of life listed later in the dialogue (248d-e). At the dissolution of the compound, the great majority of these souls enter a cycle of re-incarnations, each one of which is determined by the merit, cognitive and moral, of their former life. Those who had led an altogether unworthy life are liable to be re-incarnated in non-human animal bodies.

Anamnēsis, therefore, as presented in the Phaedrus, is an enabling condition that reverses the loss of memory suffered by the soul at the time of its fall to earth and embodiment. In the soul’s first incarnation, the extent of the recollection is determined by the level of control that the charioteer exercised over the steeds; in subsequent incarnations, it depends on the worthiness of the life led by the soul up till the death of its associated body. At whatever level it occurs, anamnēsis itself is not entirely self-induced, but needs to be triggered by some feature of the physical environment in which the embodied soul finds herself.

---

5 All quotations from the Phaedrus are drawn from Rowe’s 1986 translation.
The benefits that anamnēsis brings to the embodied human soul are of two kinds. First, on a
general level, it reminds the soul of her discarnate acquaintance with ontological realities external to,
and higher than, herself. Typically, the sight of a “godlike face” or a beautiful body (251a2-3) reminds
her of the radiance of the Form of Beauty and causes the wings to begin to re-grow (245c1), thus
stimulating philosophical development. To be sure, the occurrence of anamnēsis does not always
prevent the recollecting erastēs from becoming frenzied with erotic passion at the sight of his erōmenos’
beautiful body. In those cases, the madness of sexual passion calls for a renewed intervention on the
part of the rational element in the soul to initiate a process of what post-Freudians call sublimation, a
process that transforms sexual passion into the kind of spiritualized relationship that Plato took to be
the preserve of philosophers.6

The second, more specific, benefit that the recovered vision of the plain of truth brings to the soul
is the ability to perform basic intellectual operations on the data received by the senses. Such operations
include the formation of concepts and judgments as well as the drawing of inductive generalisations:
... a soul that has never seen the truth will not enter this shape [man’s]. A man must
comprehend what is said universally, arising from sensations and being collected together
into one through reasoning.7

For other, worthier, souls, who had enjoyed a better or longer sight of the vision, anamnēsis gives access
to a higher truth, a truth that remains hidden to other souls:
... it is not easy for every human soul (pasa anthrōpou psychē) to gain from things here a
recollection of those other things, either for those which only briefly saw the things there
at that earlier time, or for those which fall to earth and have the misfortune to be turned to
injustice by keeping certain kinds of company, and to forget the holy things they saw then.
Few (oligai) souls are left who have sufficient memory; and these, when they see some
likeness of the things there are driven out of their wits with amazement and lose control of
themselves, though they do not know what has happened to them for lack of clear
perception. Now in the earthly likenesses of justice and self-control and the other things

6 256 b7-b3: "... if the better elements of their minds get the upper hand by drawing them [the lovers] to
a well-ordered life, and to philosophy, they pass their life here in blessedness and harmony, masters of themselves
and orderly in their behaviour, having enslaved that part through which evil attempted to enter the soul, and freed
that part through which goodness enters it."

7 249b5-c1: οὖ γὰρ ἢ νε μὴ ποτέ ἐν δύοσατην ἀλῆθειν αν εἰς τόδε ἡξει τὸ σχῆμα. δει
γὰρ ἀνθρωπον συνεὶς κατ’ ἐν δος λεγόμενον, ἐκ πολλῶν ἢ φη σθησεων εἰς ἐν
λοιμασθαι ὑμεῖν. See also “... every human soul has by the law of its nature observed the things
that are, or else it would not have entered this creature, man: but it is not easy for every soul to gain from things
here a recollection of those other things.” (249c4-250a2). The above interpretation sets me at variance with
Dominic Scott (1999), who takes anamnēsis, in this dialogue as well as in the Meno and the Phaedo, to be the
preserve of philosophers. Although a detailed discussion of the issue would go beyond the remit of this essay, it
seems to me that Socrates’ twice repeated assertion that all human beings are capable of a basic range of
intellectual operations goes a long way to support my interpretation.
that are of value to souls, there is no illumination, but through dulled organs just a few (oligoi) approach their images and with difficulty observe the nature of what is imaged in them.8

The contrast between pasa psyche and oligai/oligoi is telling: while the many, who lead pedestrian lives and feed on the food of semblance, cannot be made to remember the Forms they once saw, the few, who become lovers of beauty and philosophers, can descry the Forms through the haze of their earthly simulacra. A similar contrast would appear to be drawn again later in the dialogue when Socrates describes the complementary methods of collection and division, collection consisting in “bringing into one items that are scattered in order to define each thing” and division consisting in cutting the definition up “again, form by form, according to its natural joints” (265d-e and 266b-c). Admittedly, Plato does not here state that while every human being - pasa psyche - is proficient in the method of collection, philosophers - oligoi - are the only ones capable of using the method of division. However, his claim that whoever has the capacity “to look to one and to many” is worthy to be followed “as if he were a god” (266b5-7) shows the high value that he places on the exceptional ability to map out definitions inductively obtained onto the structure of the reality that rare souls contemplated in “the region beyond the heavens” (247c3). If this assumption is correct, it would explain why, for those select few, anamnēsis is not only a cognitively enabling condition, but also a mystical experience that encourages them to lead the best life that is possible for a human being to lead.9

Because it is embedded in an allegory, Plato’s conception of anamnēsis inevitably leaves a few loose threads and open questions, one of which is directly relevant to the focus of this essay. The description of the soul’s vision of the Forms, fall to earth and subsequent embodiment as sequential suggests that Plato conceived of anamnēsis as an extended form of memory. So much is confirmed by Socrates’ repeated use of “mnēmé” (memory)10 to refer to the soul’s vision of Beauty and his description of the soul at the point of its fall as still ignorant of the evils that awaits it “in later time” (en hysterōi chronōi, 250c2). The assumed continuity of consciousness between (discarnate) vision and (incarnate) recollection suggests that, at the time of writing the Phaedrus, Plato’s conception of the soul as

---

8 250a1-b5: ... ἀναιμι μνήσκεσθαι δὲ ἐκ τῶν δὲ ἐκείνα οὐ ράδιον ἀπάρη, οὗτε δια βραχέως εἶ δον τότε τάκεῖ, οὔθε άι δεύρο πεσούσα εὕστεχασαν, ὡστε ὑπό τίνων ὅμιλων ἐπὶ τὸ διδὸν τραπόμεναι λήθην ὅλες τοτε εἶ δον ἑρῶν ἔχειν. διὶ γαὶ δῆ λείονται αἳς τὸ τῆς μνήμης ικανῶς πάρεστιν αὐταὶ δὲ, ὅταν τι τῶν ἐκεί δυμοι ωμα ἰδωσιν, ἐκπληττούνται καὶ οὐκέτ’ ἐπί <έν> αὐτῶν γίγνονται, ὃ δ’ ἐστὶ τὸ πάθος ἄγνουσας δι’ τὸ μὴ ἱκανῶς διαθάνεσας, δι’ αἰ διαθανήσας καὶ δια σφυγνής μὲν οὐν καὶ σφυγνής καὶ δια ἀλλατιμά με αψυκαῖς οὐκ ἐνεστὶ φέγγος οὐδὲν ἐν τοῖς τῇ δέ ὁμί άθανατ, ἀλλὰ δι’ ἀμυντων ὄργανων μόνις αὐτῶν καὶ διὶ γοι ἐπὶ ταῖς εἰκοναίς ἀντεκεθαι τὸ τοῦ εἰ καθάσθεντος νένοις. (250a5-b5).

9 As Scott (2006: 94) notes, “... in the Phaedrus,” recollection is presented as “the process of expiation that ultimately releases us from the cycle of incarnations.”

10 249c5-7; 250a5; 253a3; 254b5 and 244d3.
“deathless (athanatos)” and as being “forever in motion (aeikinētos, 245c5)” is best understood as implying that the soul is sempiternal in the sense of existing “at all moments of time.”

Enter Plotinus.

II Plotinus on Beauty

One of Plotinus’ most significant departures from Plato’s concept of beauty was to do away with the Form of Beauty. As will now be seen, his reasons for doing so include a concept of beauty so semantically wide that no single Form could encompass it and a conception of anamnēsis as an inward turn on the part of the soul.

Plotinus’ most stylistically accomplished tractate, I 6 (On Beauty), which Porphyry claims to be the first in the chronological order, presents a carefully structured argument in support of a thesis that is as original as it is counter intuitive. It opens with an attempted refutation of a view that was as widely shared in antiquity as it is today, namely that beauty stems from measure (metriotēs) and proportion (symmetria) between component parts. The view soon comes under fire on the ground that it excludes “the simple and the single” (to haploun and to monon) from the field of beauty. At first, we might find the objection to be so obviously wrong-headed as to verge on the preposterous, and it is probably because he realised this that Plotinus took care to qualify and nuance it in later tractates. But he never changed his mind on the substance of the refutation. Indeed, as we shall see, claim and refutation contain in ovo his whole philosophy of beauty.

Plotinus’ first move to uphold the beauty of the single and the simple is to dissociate beauty from perceptible appearances. His argument proceeds in seven stages: (1) Since physical objects can appear now beautiful and now ugly to the beholder, they cannot be held to be beautiful either in themselves or through their outward appearance, taken to include proportion and symmetry. Instead, we are then told, participation (methexis) in Form is the norm of beauty both for the object, as it is in itself, and for the beholder, who judges it beautiful (2.13). The more closely an object reflects the Forms, the greater its beauty and ability to please human souls, who bear within themselves traces (typoi) of

11 As the term is defined by M. Kneale (1969: 223). The evidence of Timaeus 37c sqq. may suggest that Plato would later draw a distinction between sempiternity and eternity.

12 For a detailed justification of the claim, see Stern-Gillet (2000).

13 See, e.g. Plato, Gorgias 503-04; Cicero, Tusculan Disputations, IV 31 and, more generally, the Stoics, as evidenced in Graeser (1972:62, S.V.F. 3,278).

14 See, for instance, tractate II 9 [33] 16 (Against the Gnostics) in which Plotinus criticises the Gnostics for failing to appreciate “right relation, proportion and order” in music, pictures and the world of sense. The qualifications that Plotinus later introduced to his anti-symmetry argument are discussed in Narbonne (2012: CCCVIII-CCCX) and Iozzia (2015: 60-64).
both the Forms and the “first beautiful” (prōton kalon)\(^\text{15}\); (2) The embodied soul judges of the aesthetic merit of external objects by fitting (synarmottousa, 3.3) them to the traces of the Forms within her, in the same way as “we use a ruler for judging straightness” (3.4-5); (3) In making Form the guiding principle of artistic production and aesthetic appreciation, Plotinus widened the concept of beauty so as to make it applicable also to non-corporeal objects such as states of the soul and ways of life.\(^\text{16}\). The extension comes at no loss of consistency since a virtuously disposed soul, as he would claim later in the tractate, is a soul so shaped by Intellect as to have herself become “form and formative power” for her own products (6.14)\(^\text{17}\); (4) There is, however, as Plotinus takes care to point out, a difference between the two classes of beauties: the beauties of sense may owe their shape or definition to the intervention of an outside agency, such as a craftsman, while the beauties beyond sense possess beauty intrinsically or from their own agency. As a result, their beauty is truer (cf. kallos alēthinōteron, 1.49-50); (5) Ugliness (to aischron), a contrario, stems from deficiency in coherence or shape. When it affects an embodied soul, ugliness stems from too close an engagement with the body and results in the soul being disfigured by “a form other than her own” (5.42); (6) By the mid-point in the tractate, the beauties of sense, having ceased to be the privileged objects of aesthetic judgments, have faded into the background and the distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical has become blurred. From there on, Plotinus’ focus is on the beauties recognised as true by the soul who has discarded “all the ugliness which came from the other nature” (5.57-58). Having the light of Intellect shining upon them, these beauties intensify the soul’s own beauty and bring it closer to the divine. It is unclear at that stage what Plotinus takes the divine to be: is it Intellect, as he suggests in lines 6.16-18, or is it the One, as he intimates three lines later, in 6.21-25? (7) The tractate ends with Plotinus seeking to motivate his audience, present and future, to find their way to the divine. “Wake to another way of seeing,” he apostrophises them, and “absolute beauty” (auto to kalon) will be within your reach. The way is arduous, he continues, and must be walked step by step: first detach yourself from external beauties, so as to come to appreciate the exemplary works of the virtuous souls of others, then measure your own inner achievements against theirs, and if, as seems not unlikely, you find yourself lacking by comparison:

Go back into yourself and look; and if you do not yet see yourself beautiful, then, just as someone making a statue which has to be beautiful cuts away here and polishes there and makes one part smooth and clears another till he has given his statue a beautiful face, so you too must cut away excess and straighten the crooked and clear the dark and make it

---

\(^{15}\) 6 [1] 2.2.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 2.4.

\(^{17}\) The point receives a fuller though still concise explanation in V 3 [49] 7. 29-31.
bright, and never stop “working on your statue” till the divine glory of virtue shines out on
you.18

This purple passage suffers from over-exposure and is often cited à tort et à travers. To give it the
attention it deserves, it must be set alongside two passages in the Phaedrus. In the first passage Plato
describes the effect that love has on different kinds of lovers: “each selects his love from the ranks of
the beautiful according to his own disposition, and fashions and adorns him like a statue (hoion agalma),
as if he were himself his god” (252d7-9). The contrast between the two philosophers could not be more
striking at that point: while Plato has the lover fashion and adorn his beloved as one would the statue
of a god, it is our own soul/statue that Plotinus urges us to work on, so as to enable the divine light to
shine from it. While the master describes a process in which a beloved other is beautified, the disciple,
more sternly, tells us to beautify ourselves. However, at the end of the dialogue, Plato - as Plato would
- casts doubt over the propriety of adorning another as a statue by having Socrates pray to the gods to
grant him inner beauty (259b9). Since Plotinus alludes to the Socratic prayer in an earlier chapter of
the tractate (5.5), it seems likely that the two passages got coalesced in his mind. By using Plato’s
analogy of the statue to develop Socrates’ request to the gods, Plotinus hit upon a highly memorable
conclusion to his argument that beauty rightly conceived has the potential to lead the soul to fulfil her
destiny in the higher world.

Although Plotinus’ general indebtedness to the Symposium and the Phaedrus is obvious at this
point, it should be noted that he departs from the Platonic line in two respects. First, he does not follow
Plato in presenting beauty as a single form (monoeidēs) or as the apex of the lover’s quest (211e3-4).
Second, although, like Plato, he claims for beauty a privileged role in stimulating recollection, he
ascribes it, not only to objects and properties external to the soul, but also and more importantly, to
realities borne within her, realities that include the prōton kalon. The identity of the prōton kalon
remains vague at this point, Plotinus confining himself to describing the response that it elicits from the
embodied soul:

The soul speaks to it [the prōton kalon] as if it understood it, recognises it and welcomes
it and as it were adapts itself to it. But when it encounters the ugly it shrinks back and
rejects it and turns away from it and is out of tune and alienated from it. Our explanation

18 I 6 [1] 9.7-14: Ἀναγε ἐπὶ σαυτὸν καὶ ἵ δε· κἀν μὴ ποιησαυτὸν ἰ δῆς καλὸν, οἶ α
ποιητής ἀγάλματος, ὡ δεῖ καλὸν γενέσθαι, τὸ μὲν ἀφαιρεῖ, τὸ δὲ ἀπέξεσε, τὸ δὲ
καθαρόν ἐπὶ ποιησεν, ἔσει ξεκεῖ ἐπὶ τῷ ἀγάλματι πρόσωπον, οὕτω καὶ οὐ ἀφαιρεῖ ὁς ΠΕΡΙΤΤΥ ΚΑΙ ἄναθεν ὅς ΣΚΟΛΗ ἄ
σκοτεινα καθαίρων ἐργάζεται εἰ να λαμπρα καί μη παύῃ τεκταίνων τὸ σὸν
ἄγαλμα, ἔσει οἰκλάμψει ἐ ὅι τῇ ἀρετῇς θεοεί δῆς ἀγλαία ἂ.

Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from the Enneads are in A.H. Armstrong’s rendering, with occasional modifications, flagged as
such.
of this is that the soul, since it is by nature what it is and is related to the higher kind of reality in the realm of being, when it sees something akin to it or a trace of its kindred reality, is delighted and thrilled and returns to itself and remembers herself and what is of herself.19

The passage, in which Plotinus presents beauty as the privileged intermediary between soul and the prōton kalon, repays careful reading. The occurrence of anamīnnēśkein suggests that he has in mind the role that recollection plays in the Phaedrus to account for the soul’s attraction to beauty. However, a shift of viewpoint has clearly taken place. The Plotinian soul “recognises” beauty in the world of sense, not so much as a reminder of a sight enjoyed in her pre-incarnation state, as Plato had held, but, more significantly, as a trace of something that is “suggenēs” (akin) to her. The use of suggeneia and suggenēs provides a further clue since, in Plotinus’ usage, both words regularly denote the relation between the human soul and Intellect, the higher reality from which she receives the imprints (typoi) or reasons (logoi) that enable her to think and to act discursively.20 Should we then take Plotinus here to mean that Intellect rather than the Good is the referent of to prōton kalon? Although the evidence points that way, it is to be set against chapter six of the same tractate, in which it is suggested that the One is the “first beautiful”. The issue remains inconclusive in this early tractate and will have to be considered further in section IV below. What is clear, however, is that recognition of the kinship charms the soul, draws her in and, when she is suitably disposed, causes her to return to herself and “what is of herself” (2.10-11). In a late tractate, V 3 [49] (On the Knowing Hypostases), Plotinus would go as far as claiming that, as a result of her suggeneia with Intellect, the embodied human soul may even achieve “self-knowledge,” albeit intermittently, when not prevented from doing so by her habitual orientation to what is outside her.21 As for “her possessions (tōn heautēs),” they are the typoi or traces of the Forms that the soul holds within herself, even when an excessive engagement with the world of sense, or a depraved way of life, prevents her from taking notice of them. The use of the reflexive pronoun (heautēs) to denote the object of recollection further highlights the gap between Plotinus and Plato: it is her true self that the Plotinian soul “remembers,” not a vision of realities described in an elsewhere that Plato located in “the region beyond the heavens.”

---

19 Ibid., 2.3-11: ἥ ψυχή ὡσερ συνεὶ σα λέγει καὶ ἐπὶ γνώσα ἀποδέχεται καὶ οἶ ὁν συναμμότεται. Πρός δὲ τὸ αἰ σχρόν προσβαλόσα άνί λλεται καὶ ἄνεί ταί καὶ ἀνανεύει απ’ αὐτοῦ οὐ συμφωνοῦσα καὶ ἄλλοτρι οὐμένην. Φαμέν δὴ, ὡς τὴν φύσιν οὖσα ὄπερ ἐστὶ καὶ πρὸς τῆς κρείττονος ἐν τοῖς οὐσίν οὐσίς ας, δὲ τι ἀν ἰ δη συγγενές ἢ ἰ χνός τοῦ συγγενοῦς, χαίρει τε καὶ διεπόθηται καὶ ἀναφέρει πρὸς ἑαυτήν καὶ ἀναμι μνῆσκεται ἐαυτής καὶ τῶν ἑαυτῆς.


21 V 3 [49] 6.26-28: “... it could happen to it, since it [the soul] is a rational principle and receives things akin to it, and fits them to the traces in itself, in this way to know itself.” On this point, see Ham (2000: 147-148).
If, as already seems certain at this stage, Plotinian *anamnēsis* serves the function of reminding the soul in us of her true self and high lineage, why does the notion not play as prominent a role in the *Enneads* as it does in the *Phaedrus*?

### III Plotinian *Anamnēsis*

A possible answer, given by Henry Blumenthal nearly fifty years ago and endorsed by most scholars who have considered the question, is that Plotinus, having postulated the existence of an undescended element in the human soul, saw no need of introducing *anamnēsis* to account for the soul’s cognition of the higher realities.\(^2^2\) Blumenthal’s answer, I shall now argue, rests on an unwarranted simplification of the evidence. Lexical data of occurrence show, not only that Plotinus is not reluctant to bring in *anamnēsis* whenever it serves the need of his argument, but also that his concept of *anamnēsis* significantly differs from Plato’s. To demonstrate how this is so, I shall proceed in three stages, first highlighting the bias in Plotinus’ account of Plato’s conception of *anamnēsis* in the *Phaedrus*, then showing him to be openly critical of Plato on the issue, before finally proceeding to a detailed analysis of the passages in which he evolves his own, fully rounded, conception of *anamnēsis*.

Take, to begin with, the opening chapter of tractate III 5 [50] (*On Love*), in which Plotinus purportedly outlines Plato’s views on the origin of love. Rather than faithfully reproducing the description given in the *Phaedrus* of love as a manifestation of the human attraction to beauty, which itself stems from the recollection of a pre-incarnation vision of the corresponding Form, Plotinus writes:

... if someone assumed that the origin of love was the longing for beauty itself which was there before in men’s souls, and their recognition of it and *kinship* with it and *unreasoned awareness that it is something of their own*, he would hit, I think, on the truth about its cause.\(^2^3\)

\(^2^2\) Blumenthal (1971: 96); forty-five years later, Fleet (2016: 279) makes the same point for the same reason as Blumenthal. More prudently, Hadot (1990: 36) accounts for what he takes to be Plotinus’ scant use of the notion of *anamnēsis* by his lack of interest in the Platonic version of it: “la théorie platonicienne de la réminiscence est peu développée chez Plotin.” Flamand (2009: 445, n.17) and Kalligas (2014:199) express the same view. In their recent commentary on *Ennead* IV 3-4.29 (2015: 287-88), Dillon and Blumenthal note that Plotinus “would seem to hold that *anamnēsis* really consists” in the accessing of the Forms or their *logoi* in the embodied soul. In private correspondence with A.H. Armstrong, Jesús Igal S.J. was more outspoken: “Blumenthal’s statement that *anamnēsis* is replaced by the doctrine of the undescended intelligence cannot, I think, be accepted without any reservation. Perhaps the doctrine of *anamnēsis* has not yet received sufficient attention by scholars.” Igal’s letters, together with letters by the editors of the *editio maior* and the *editio minor*, as well as documents from the Armstrong archives are currently being edited by Corrigan, K. and Stern-Gillet, S. under the title of *An Edition Worthy of Plotinus. The letters of A.H. Armstrong, P. Henry, J. Igal, H-R. Schwyzier and J. Trouillard, 1953-1980*, Leuven University Press, forthcoming.

\(^2^3\) III 5 [50] 1. 16-19: Ἀφάνὴν δὲ ἐὴ�� τις θεὶ το τῆν αὐτοῦ κάλλος πρότερον ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς δρέειν καὶ ἐπὶ γνωσιν καὶ αὐγγένειαν καὶ οἱ ΚΕΙ ὁτητος ἀλογον αὐνεσιν, τυγχάνοις ἄν, οί μας, τοῦ ἀληθοῦς τῆς αἱ τίς αἷς. See also 9. 42-44. For a study of Plotinus’ adaptations of the concept of love in the *Phaedrus*, see Lacrosse (1994: chapter 1, *passim*).
As the reading of I 6 [1] offered in section II above suggests, the unmistakably Plotinian flavour of these lines comes from the verbal and thematic reminiscences of tractate I 6 [II], 2.3-11 that they contain. By highlighting the kinship between human souls and the Intelligibles, here described as “something of their own,” Plotinus is subtly adapting to his own system the conception of anamnēsis that he found in the Phaedrus. His only nod in the direction of the Platonic account is the use of “before” to refer to the time gap between discarnate vision and incarnate memory. Furthermore, unlike Plato, who had distinguished two tiers of recollection, one of which all human souls are capable and another, which is the preserve of an elite amongst them, Plotinus merely draws a distinction between human souls who do not appreciate the true cause of their loving what they love and those who trace it to the Intelligibles to which their soul is akin. Rather than ascribing anamnēsis to the antenatal condition of the soul, therefore, as Plato had done, Plotinus presents it as the result of an arduous cognitive and moral exercise which the human soul should attempt, but which it may not succeed in completing. So much is suggested by his expression “those who come to the recollection of the archetype”26; erchesthai, a verb of movement, followed by the preposition eis and the accusative, is regularly used in the Enneads to denote the undertaking of difficult spiritual exercises. It is unsurprising therefore that Plotinus should not have endorsed the description given in the Phaedrus of the occurrence of anamnēsis as accompanied with loss of control and manic exultation (251sqq).

In the tractates of his middle period Plotinus does not shy away from explicitly criticizing the Platonic concept. He does so, for example, in tractate IV 3 [27] (Problems concerning the Soul I), where he deplores the failure on the part of “ancient thinkers” to distinguish recollection from memory. In contrast with memory, which “is of something acquired (epiktētou tinos), either learned or experienced,” he wrote, anamnēsis is of notions within the soul:

... the soul must not be said to remember ... the things which it possesses as part of its nature, but when it is here below it possesses them and does not act by them, particularly when it has just arrived here. But as for its activity, the ancients seem to apply the terms “memory” and “recollection” to the souls which bring into act what they possessed. So

24 See note 17 supra.
26 Ibid. 1.34-35: σις ἀνάμνησιν μὲν ἐκείνου ἀπὸ τοῦτο εἰλθόντων, trans. modified to bring it closer to the original. For a more faithful rendering, see Hadot (1990): « ceux qui parviennent à se ressouvenir du beau archétype. »
27 See Sleeman and Pollet (1979) on anamnēsis and erchesthai, sv f., and eis, sv e.
28 The Symp. 210e4 is at one with the Phaedrus in presenting the vision of the Form of beauty as coming suddenly (Ὀμορφίας τὸν ἐν τῇ ἐπανάληψιν) to those who have gone through all the preparatory steps of the scala amoris before beholding the final revelation. However, be it noticed that in stressing that anamnēsis is the outcome of a demanding cognitive and moral exercise, Plotinus comes closer to the two slightly different versions of the concept that Plato gives in the Meno and the Phaedo. While in the Meno recollection is presented as the outcome of a didactic step-by-step process, in the Phaedo it is said to stem from the recognition of dissimilarities between the sensible world and the intelligible realm.
this is another kind of memory; and therefore time is not involved in memory understood in this sense.”

29

Plato, the “ancient thinker” at whom Plotinus is here pointing an accusing finger, did indeed describe *anamnēsis* as a form of memory.30 In line with his own philosophy of the soul, Plotinus here points out that while memory enables the embodied soul to preserve from oblivion lived events and experiences external to herself, recollection retrieves notions and realities which lie deep inside her, but have been forgotten through over-engagement with the world of sense. From Plotinus’ point of view, the semantic confusion had the unfortunate consequence of obfuscating the ontological chasm that separates time, in which the objects of memory occur, from timelessness, which is the mode of being of the realities present in the soul. His insistence on the conceptual distinction, which will be the object of a later tractate, seems to have tolled the knell of Platonic *anamnēsis*. If it were to survive as a philosophical method, it had to be re-interpreted.

Re-interpreting *anamnēsis* was precisely what Plotinus does when he comes to deal with the notion in his own name. From the tractate *On Beauty* onwards, he consistently introduces the notion to account for the embodied human soul’s ability to lift herself up to the intelligible level. In tractate IV 7 [2] (*On the Immortality of the Soul*) he relies on *anamnēsis* to refute various Stoic arguments aimed at denying the immortality of the soul. In support of his own view, he begins by claiming that each and every soul is a reality that:

... lives of itself, and each of them apprehends the same things by the same means, thinking the things in heaven and the things beyond heaven and searching out everything which has substantial existence, and ascending to the first principle.31

The soul’s ability to think the higher realities through the practice of *anamnēsis*, in turn, shows her to be everlasting. As he wrote,

... the intellection of the authentic reality of each thing which the soul derives from herself comes to her from contemplations within her, that is, from recollection, and gives it an

---

29 IV 3 [27] 25.27-34: Οὐ τοῖς ψυχήν ἐνμημονεύειν τὸν αὐτόν τρόπον οἶνοι τὸν λέγομεν τὸ μνημονεύειν εἰ ναι ώ ἐξει συμφύτω, ἀλλ᾽ ἐπεὶ δὴ ἐνταῦθα ἐστίν, ἐξειν καὶ μὴ ἐνεργεῖν κατ᾽ αὐτά, καὶ μάλιστα ἐνταῦθα ἡκούση. Τὸ δὲ καὶ ἐνεργεῖν ἡδὲ—ταῖς ἐνεργούσαις ἄ ἐξειν μνήμην καὶ ἀνάμνησιν προστὶ θέναι ἐνὶ κασὶν οἰ παλαί οἴ. Τὸ θ᾽ ἐτερον εἰ δος μνήμης τούτοι· διὸ καὶ χρόνος οὐ πρόσεστι τῇ οὔτω λέγομέν ὡς μνήμη.

30 See page XXX supra.

31 IV 7 [2] 12. 4-8: ... ζητάρα ἐκατέρα, καὶ τῷ αὐτῷ τῷ ἐφάπτεται νουσά τα τε ἐν τῷ ώφραντά τε ώφρανον ἐπέκεινα καὶ πᾶν ὁ ἐστί κατ᾽ οὐσίαν ζητούσα καὶ μέχρι τῆς πρόκης ἀρχῆς ἀναβαί νουσά.
existence prior to body and makes it everlasting because it has everlasting knowledge.

(trans. modified)\textsuperscript{32} As presented in those lines, \textit{anamnēsis} is the endpoint of the process through which embodied souls, having overcome the lure of the world of sense and successfully turned their attention inwards, gain awareness of the higher realities lodged within themselves.

Admittedly, my reading of the passage can be challenged on the ground that the Greek is not unambiguous since the first \textit{kai} can be interpreted as either a run-of-the mill connective or an epexegetical particle.\textsuperscript{33} The syntactical difficulty is reflected in the variety of renderings offered by the most frequently quoted translations; some translators leave \textit{gignomenē} untranslated, others take \textit{anamnēsis} to be the trigger of \textit{katanoēsis} while others regard the two as altogether different stages in the upward journey of the soul. If \textit{kai} is taken to be a connective, the sentence means that the embodied soul has two ways of lifting herself up to Intellect, the one by relying on the intellection of visions held within her, the other by recollection. If, on the other hand, the first \textit{kai} is taken to be epexegetical, \textit{anamnēsis}, rather than an alternative route to inner contemplation, denotes the soul’s journey into her interior, a journey that leads her to apprehend the everlasting realities within her. While both construals are syntactically possible, the epexegetical construal is consonant with Plotinus’ re-interpretation of the concept of \textit{anamnēsis} that he found in the \textit{Phaedrus}. Since he states explicitly in the above-quoted lines that the object of the soul’s recollection is within her, there would appear to be no relevant difference between what would, on the alternative interpretation, be two different routes to what lies within the soul. Construed as epexegetical, therefore, \textit{kai} has the double advantage of avoiding an unnecessary repetition and of yielding an insight into Plotinus’ early view on the nature and capabilities of \textit{anamnēsis}.

Taking stock at this point, it may be seen that three features of Plotinus’ conception of \textit{anamnēsis} have so far become apparent. First, unlike Plato, who regarded it as directed outwards, to transcendent realities existing outside the human soul,\textsuperscript{34} Plotinus took it to be an inward-directed process that enables suitably disposed souls to be re-acquainted with eternal realities present in themselves. Second, from

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Ibid.} 12. 8-11: \textit{H tē δὴ παρ᾽ αὐτῆς ἐκ τῶν ἐν αὐτῇ θεαμάτων κατανόσθεις αὐτοekenáston kai ἔξ ἄναμνήσεως γι γνωμένη πρὸ σώματός τε αὐτῆς δῆ δῶσαι τὸ εἶ ναι καὶ ἄ οις ἐ πι στήματις κέχρημένην ἀδ ἄ ον καὶ αὐτὴν εἶ ναι .

\textsuperscript{33} Harder (1937), Armstrong (1984) and Fleet (2016) translate \textit{kai} as a simple connective while Brisson/Pradeau (2002) take it to be epexegetical. Igal, it seems to me, interprets \textit{kai} as appositional (Denniston 1950: 291): “Furthermore, the intuition of each thing in itself that comes to her from herself, from the objects of contemplation that are in her, and that originates by virtue of reminiscence, gives her an existence prior to the body and makes her be eternal herself, since she makes use of eternal sciences.” I am grateful to José Baracat Jr. for clarifying Igal’s rendering of the passage into Spanish.

\textsuperscript{34} As earlier noted by Wallis (1972: 80), Sinnige (1975:148) and Armstrong \textit{ad loc}.
the contribution that the above-quoted lines make to his argument for the immortality of the soul, it may
be inferred that, unlike Plato, Plotinus held anamnēsis to be a capability present in all human souls,
although not to the same extent or at the same depth. The point had already been made in tractate I 6
[I], where it had been explained that, in order to rise to the higher realities, “we must wake to another
way of seeing, which everyone has but few use.”35 In this tractate, second in the chronological order of
writing, however, Plotinus follows Plato; his description of the soul as aidios (immortal) and
indestructible (aphthartos) suggests that he takes it to be sempiternal rather than eternal.36

He would later change his mind on this particular point, as testified by tractate III 7 [45] (On
Time and Eternity), in which he stresses the distinction between sempiternity (aidiotēs) and eternity (ho
aiōn), defining the former as “unending time” and the latter as “partless and unextended completion.”
As appropriate to the soul’s mediating function between the world of the Forms and the physical
cosmos, she can in one sense be said “to be in time” and, in another sense, “not to be in time.” Her
higher element, which does not descend, leads the life of Intellect, to which time is foreign and
anamnēsis redundant. So much had indeed been pointed out by Blumenthal. The human soul’s lower
element, whose precise identity is not made clear in the tractate, is a “restlessly active nature which
wanted to control herself and be on her own,”37 and who, for that reason, projected herself outwards “to
transfer (metapherein) what it saw There (ekel) to something else:”

Soul, making the world of sense in imitation of that other world, moving with a motion
that is not that which exists There, but like it, and intending to be an image of it, first of all
put herself into time, which it made instead of eternity, and then handed over that which
came into being as a slave to time, by making the whole of it exist in time and encompassing all its ways with time.38

These lines raise a host of issues. What can Plotinus mean by claiming that the descending soul “put
herself in time”? Does he not repeatedly state elsewhere that, as part of the Intelligible world, the soul
is eternal, impassible and indivisible? In any case, how can temporalisation “occur” in the framework
of eternity? Is the identification of time with “the life of the soul in a movement of passage from one
way of life to another” to be understood as referring to the amphibious nature of the soul? Which in
any case is the manifestation of hypostasic Soul that has “put herself in time”? Is it the world-soul, the

36 For aidios, see IV 7 [2] 10.15-16 and 34; for aphthartos, see ibid., 12. 19-20.
37 III 7 [45] 11.15-16: Φόσεως δὲ πολυπράγμονος καὶ ἅρχειν ἀυτῆς βουλομένης καὶ εἶ ναι ἀυτῆς
38 Ibid., 11.27-32: ... σοῦ ὥσπερ δὴ καὶ ἀυτῆ κόσμον ποι ὄσα ἀι σητὼν μι μήσει ἐκεί νου
κινομένον κι ὅσα ἐκεί ἐστιν ὄσι κι ὅσι ἐκεί, ὅμως καὶ τῇ θέλειν οἱ κινομένον κι ἐμοῦ δὲ εἴ δὲ
καὶ τῷ ἐνομένῳ διω λῦειν ἡρανδώνσε σε δε ὅποι οὐσιν τοῦ ἔσα σα ἐπι τὰ δὲ καὶ τῷ ἀνομένῳ ἐν ἱμνώτατον τοῦ ἐν ἱμνώτατον
πάντα τοὺ ποί ἀνασα εἰ ναι.
human soul or a distinct power in either the one or the other? Plotinus’ handling of these questions is not altogether satisfactory, even if it is borne in mind that the introduction of the prosoopoeia of time accounts for his uncharacteristic switch from a metaphysical to a mythical mode of discourse, with the complications that inevitably ensue.³⁹ Fortunately, there is no need in the present context to go into these questions which, in any case, did not appear to have much troubled Plotinus at this particular point since he went on to advise the embodied soul that anammēsis could help her to overcome the limitations inherent in her time-bound condition and thus share in the timeless life of Intellect:

... if someone, before contemplating eternity, should form a mental picture in his mind of what kind of thing time is, it would be possible for him, too, to go from this world to the other by recollection and to contemplate that which time is a likeness.⁴⁰

The advice given in those lines would appear to stretch to the utmost the capabilities of the human soul. How can she be able, not only to evolve a conceptualised version of what makes her thinking what it is, namely sequential and discursive, but also to contrast it with the “all at once” thinking of her higher manifestation? How can the soul “in time” become wise to the manner in which she would think if she were to think differently from the manner in which she does think? How can a representation of discursive thinking yield the insight necessary to conceive the totum simul of eternity?

To deal with such questions, Plotinus brought in a concept of anammēsis more developed than the one he had relied upon so far. He presented it as a by-product of the faculty of imagination (phantasia, to phantastikon), whose function is to serve as an intermediary between the lower and the higher soul in us. Imagination, he explained, can exercise its function in different ways, depending on the data it operates on.⁴¹ At a lower level, phantasia processes the raw data received by the sense organs so as to make them accessible to the soul in us, whose impassibility prevents her from receiving them directly.⁴² At a higher level, phantasia assists the embodied soul by unfolding, separating and conceptualising what is partless (amerēs) in the intuitive thinking of Intellect and her undescended element.⁴³ When the two levels come into play together, the resulting harmony between them favours

---

³⁹ For a more accessible answer to the questions, see IV 4 [28] 15, in which Plotinus asks why the descending soul generates time since she is not herself in time. He replies: “It is because the things which it generates are not eternal, but encompassed by time; since even the [individual] souls are not in time, but such affections as they have are, and the things they make. For the souls are eternal, and time is posterior to them, and that which is in time is less than time; for time must encompass what is in time.” For a clear and thorough discussion of the issues involved, see Karfik (2012).


⁴¹ For a convincing argument purporting to show that Plotinian phantasia consists, not in two faculties as is commonly assumed, but in “being the meeting point of two representations,” see Perdikouri (2016).


⁴³ IV 3 [27] 30.5-11 and 31.
the practice of anamnēsis. Through its lower side, phantasia enables the soul to evolve a conceptualised version of lived time as sequential and discursive while its higher side brings within the soul’s compass the thinking of her undescended element, which eternally contemplates the Forms. At that point, recollection can take place and the soul can elevate herself:

... when one soul is in tune with the other, and their image-making powers are not separate, and that of the better soul is dominant, the image becomes one, as if a shadow followed the other one and as a little light slipped in under the greater one; but when there is war and disharmony 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.\textsuperscript{44}

Normative considerations are here brought to bear on anamnēsis since the kind of harmony that Plotinus describes cannot but take the form of dominance of the higher soul over the lower one. Whether or not we recollect, therefore, is subject to ethical norms not dissimilar to those that govern the achievement of well-being or happiness (eudaimonia), namely the kind of independence of the soul from the body that is achieved through self-purification and the practice of the virtues.\textsuperscript{45} In Plotinus’ understanding of the word, therefore, anamnēsis is a good merited by souls who orient themselves to the higher realities.

The norms that Plotinus built into his version of anamnēsis reflect his conviction that the higher soul in us can never be completely and irreversibly alienated from the lower one; however deep in the world of sense the soul may have sunk, it never loses the “trancendent something” (hyperechon ti) that ties her to the higher realities. Whatever her lapses of attention to her prior, philosophical enlightenment and self-purification will always enable her to re-orient herself and to recollect what is within her. The clearest expression of Plotinus’ optimism in that respect is to be found in tractate IV 8 [6] (On the Descent of Souls into Bodies), where a summary of Plato’s account of the fall of the soul is followed by the claim that it is possible for the soul:

... to be freed from its fetters and to begin to ascend, through recollection, to the contemplation of reality: for, in spite of everything, she always possesses something transcendent in some way. Souls, then, become, one might say, amphibious, compelled to live by turns the life There, and the life here.\textsuperscript{46} (trans. modified)

These lines are exegetically helpful in two ways. Firstly, they suggest that the discrepancy noted earlier between chapters one and eleven of tractate III 7 [45] is less problematic than might at first appear.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 31.9-16.

\textsuperscript{45} See I 2 [19] chapter 2 passim.

\textsuperscript{46} IV 8 [6] 4.28-33: ἐπὶ στραφεῖ σα δὲ πρὸς νόησιν λύεσθαι τε ἐκ τῶν δεσμῶν καὶ ἀναβαίνειν, ὅταν ἄρχῃ λάβῃ ἐξ ἀνάμνησις ὑπερέχον τι. Γεγονότα οὖν οἴ ν άμφι βίοι ἐξ ἀνάγκης τόν τε ἐκεῖ βίον τόν τε ἐνταῦθα παρὰ μέρος βιοῦσαν.
Although the prosopopoeia of time may leave the reader with the impression that in temporalising herself the soul loses the transcendent properties that had tied her to the Intelligible Principle, the above lines show that such is unlikely to have been Plotinus’ meaning. Secondly and more relevantly to the present essay, the lines highlight Plotinus’ life-long conviction that it is possible for an embodied soul “to go from this world to the other by recollection.”

Tractate III 7 [45], it may be concluded, makes a twofold contribution to Plotinus’ concept of anamnēsis. It presents anamnēsis as a deliberately undertaken and disciplined effort on the part of the embodied human soul to reach out to the superior element in her. The effort requires of her, not only that she makes herself aware of the discursive nature of her own thinking (dianoia), but also that she recognises the superiority of a different mode of thinking, namely noēsis, which apprehends its objects “all at once and together.” To fulfill her anagogic function, anamnēsis, as conceived by Plotinus, is normatively charged since it presupposes harmony between the lower and the higher elements in the soul.

Anamnēsis makes a final appearance in V 3 [49] (On the Knowing Hypostases), a didactic and largely analytic tractate dealing with self-knowledge and self-thinking. While it would be absurd (atōpos), Plotinus there writes, to deny self-knowledge (noēsis heautou) to Intellect, a hypostasis that knows everything else, it would not be unreasonable to deny self-knowledge (gnōsis heautēs) to the soul, a hypostasis whose main function is to “observe what is outside her and busying herself with it” (V 3 [49] 3.16-17). To engage his audience in the issue, Plotinus takes the example of an embodied soul who has to handle external and internal data. Upon seeing something moving along the street, for instance, the embodied soul uses her perceptive and imaginative powers to identify the object as a man and to wonder who the man is. If it so happens that she has met the man before and knows him, her faculty of memory tells her that the man in question is Socrates. The process of recognition is more complex than appears at first sight; discursive reason (dianoia) collects data from sense-perception, unfolds (exelittein) them before separating them into their constitutive elements (meridzein) and, finally, grouping these elements together (synairein) so as to form a concept - this is a man - and, once the man’s form (morphē) has been recognised, to make a judgment - this is Socrates. Up to that point, the embodied soul deals solely with mental images, both perceived and recollected, of external data.

47 For the full quotation, see note 37 supra. A similar lesson may arguably be drawn from the famous gedankenexperiment described in V 8 [31] 9.7-22, in which Plotinus directs us in the use of phantasia to de-spatialise our mental representation of the physical cosmos and thus to apprehend the spacelessness of Intellect and the Forms in a single act of intuitive thought. To assist in the process, he suggests that the soul pray to Intellect, the god in question, of which she holds an image in herself, to ask for help in overcoming the hold that space has upon her. Although there is no mention of anamnēsis in the passage, the thought experiment itself as well as the prayer that is to precede it both presuppose that it is thanks to the presence of Intellect in herself that the human soul is able to rise above the discursivity that characterises her ordinary mode of thinking and thus free herself from the limitations that she had brought upon herself in “putting herself in time.”
The issue becomes more complex when the reasoning soul asks herself whether Socrates, the man in question, is good. Norms are now involved, and questions about norms cannot be settled solely by appeal to external data. Like all norms properly so called, “the norm of the good” (kanōn tou agathou) comes from Intellect as an imprint (typos) in the soul. Judgements of value such as the one we form when we judge that “Socrates is good,” therefore, are made by applying norms held in the pure or higher part of the soul, which in that tractate he occasionally refers to as “the intellect of the soul,” to objects and beings existing outside her.\(^{48}\)

... the perceptive power ... perceives the experiences in the body by its own agency, but the reasoning power in the soul makes its judgment, derived from the mental images present to her which come from sense-perception, but combining and dividing them; and, as for the things which come to it from Intellect, it observes what one might call their imprints, and has the same power also in dealing with these; and it continues to acquire understanding as if by recognizing the new and recently arrived impressions and fitting them to those which have long been within it: *this process is what we should call the recollections of the soul.*\(^{49}\)

Plotinus is here translating the example into his own epistemic vocabulary, leaving in the background the complex process through which the combined intervention of imagination and memory makes perceptions and bodily affections accessible to the soul in us. All that he says here about that part of the process, of which a detailed account is given in the example itself, is that it presupposes reliance on what Plato had called the method of collection and division. He then proceeds to consider in greater detail the way in which discursive reason (*dianoia*) interprets and assesses the data received from the perceptive power. At that point, Plotinus introduces *anamnēsis*, describing its function as that of bringing to the soul’s attention what he calls, somewhat gingerly, the “so to speak imprints (*hoion typoι*)” of Intellect that have long been within her, but of which she may so far have remained unaware.

In such cases, *anamnēsis* brings two benefits to the embodied soul: (a) it enables her to make *typoi* from the sense organs interact with “the so-called *typoi*” inscribed by Intellect in the higher part in her; (b) it

\(^{48}\) As spelled out by Ham (2000: 113), to whose insightful commentary I am here indebted: “Sans doute s’agit-il encore seulement d’un jugement qui utilise les données de la sensation mais il s’agit d’appliquer à ces données extérieures une règle intérieure: le jugement ne vient pas d’elles, il est prononcé ‘sur elles.’” A parallel process of applying norms to sensory objects is described in similar terms in the tractate *On Beauty* I 6[1] 3, where the norms are aesthetic. See also Kuhn (2009: 74).

\(^{49}\) V 3 [49] 2.2-14: Τὸ μὲν οὖν αἱ ἀσθητικὰ ἠμαρτίας τῶν γάρ ἐν τῷ σώματι παρθημάτων ὑφ᾽ ἐαυτοῦ αἱ σθανατεύτες. Τὸ δ᾽ ἐν αὐτῇ λογιζόμενον παρὰ τῷ ἐκ τῆς αἱ ἀσθήτους φαντασμάτων παρακείμενῳ τῷ ἐπὶ κρίσιν ποιοῦμενον καὶ συνάγον καὶ διὰ αἰροῦν ἢ καὶ ἐπὶ τῷ ἐκ τοῦ νοῦ ὀντων ἐφοροθιδον τοὺς τύπους, καὶ ἐξει καὶ περὶ τούτως τὴν αὐτὴν δύναμιν. Καὶ σύνεται ἐτι προσλαμβάνει ὧπερ ἐπὶ γινώσκον καὶ ἐφαρμόζει τοῖς ὑπὸ αὐτῆς ἠποκοιταντοί τοῦτος νέοις καὶ ἡ ἰκονικῇ τῇ δή καὶ ἀναμνησίᾳ ἡ φαιμεν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ εἴ ναι.
gives her an increased understanding (\textit{synesis}) of herself as discursive reason capable of functioning “in accord with Intellect” (ch. 4 \textit{passim}). Does this mean that the soul in us is capable of (a degree of) self-knowledge?

Plotinus’ answer to the question, first raised in the opening chapter of the tractate, is cautiously affirmative, the need for caution arising, as he points out, from the fact that \textit{anamnēsis} can occur at different levels.\textsuperscript{50} The embodied soul who “applies” the “laws” (or norms) that Intellect has inscribed in her to guide her everyday existence in the world of sense is relying on discursive reason. In taking the further step of attending to the norms in question, discursive reason may become aware that they do not originate in herself. She might thereby realise that her lack of epistemic self-sufficiency shows her dependence upon a reality higher than herself. Illumination of a kind may thus come from the data of sense-perception when, taking on the role of messenger (\textit{aggelos}), they point the recollecting soul in the direction of the source of the imprints and thereby provide her with a measure of self-knowledge. So informed, the attentive soul knows herself to be both discursive reason and reflection of Intellect. However, this is no self-knowledge in the full sense of the word since the part of the soul that knows is other than the part of the soul that is known.\textsuperscript{51}

If Plotinus thus held that full self-knowledge eludes most human souls, he did not rule out that there might be rare souls who “live” the presence of Intellect in themselves and, as a result, become “as if filled with it and ... able to see it and be aware of it as present” (4.3-4). Since full self-knowledge requires identity of knower and known, the full self-knowledge enjoyed by such rare souls presupposes that each of them, as a knowing subject, has become identical with the object known, which is herself. Is that possible? Does not the very fact that Plotinus entertains that possibility run counter to his earlier claim that the embodied soul has “the task of observing what is outside it and busy ing herself with it”? Aware of the risk of inconsistency, Plotinus introduces a caveat at this point: it is not in so far as they are souls that they come to know themselves, but in so far as they have succeeded in returning to their prior and live its life. As introduced in this late tractate, therefore, \textit{anamnēsis} empowers the soul in various ways and to various degrees; it can bring home to her that she is epistemically dependent upon Intellect or, in exceptional cases, it can enable her to transcend herself.

IV Ways of inwardness: \textit{anamnēsis} and \textit{to prōton kalon}

Tractate V 3 [49] thus brings an extra element to the concept of \textit{anamnēsis} developed in tractates IV 7 [2] and III 7 [45]. To the benefits of \textit{anamnēsis} spelled out in those earlier tractates, it adds cognitive

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{50} In 4.1-4 in a disjunct Plotinus spells out the two manners in which \textit{anamnēsis} can lead the soul upwards: κατ᾽ ἐκεῖνον δὲ δὴ χῶκε, ἡ τοί γε ὁ οἶν γράμμασιν ὡσπερ νόμοις ἐν ἡμῖν γραφεῖ σοι, ἡ οἰνοπληρωθέντες αὐτοῦ ἤ καὶ δυνηθέντες ἰ δεῖ ν καὶ αἱ σθάνεσθαι παρόντος.

empowerment. The Plotinian version of anamnēsis, it can now be concluded, crucially differs from its Platonic counterpart in the following respects: (1) it is a self-initiated inward movement on the part of the human soul who turns to her ontological priors; (2) it has an ethical dimension in so far as it corrects the human soul’s propensity to self-forgetfulness, which Plotinus consistently deplored;52 (3) it apprises the human soul of her dependence on Intellect and may even, albeit rarely, lead her back to it.

Different though their views on anamnēsis were, Plotinus and Plato were at one in holding beauty to be the trigger most likely to set off the embodied soul on the way to recollection. The agreement between them, however, was limited in so far as Plotinus was more suspicious of earthly beauty than Plato had been. In tractate I 6 [1] (On Beauty), as will be recalled, he had consistently urged the embodied soul to distance herself from physical beauty so as to attend to the beauties of “ways of life and kinds of knowledge.”53 Perceiving in them imprints of the Forms, the soul can then reach out to what he there called, somewhat elusively, the prōton kalon, “the first beautiful” or fount of all beauty.

What is the prōton kalon? Is it Intellect, as Plotinus unequivocally states in some contexts, or is it the One, as he states, just as unequivocally, in other contexts? The issue will now, by way of a conclusion, be addressed.

To clear the ground for the investigation, let us first dispose of the long-lived assumption that Plotinus takes the Intelligible Principle to include an individual Form of Beauty corresponding to what Plato had called the “final vision of the mysteries” (Symp., 210a1) and described as “the most manifest [Form] to sense and most lovely of them all.” (Phaedr., 249d1-2) The longevity of the assumption is surprising in view of the fact that Plotinus himself had done his best to kill it in advance: “... the soul will come in its ascent to intellect and there will know the Forms, all beautiful, and will affirm that these, the Ideas, are beauty.”54 (I 6 [1] 9.34-36). He reiterated the point many times, most explicitly at the end of his writing life, when he wrote in tractate III 5 [50] (On Love) that: “the eternal is ... akin to the beautiful, and the eternal nature is that which is primarily beautiful, and the things which spring from it are all beautiful too.”55 Is Intellect the prōton kalon then?

---

52 See V I [10] 1.1-3: “What is it, then, which has made the souls forget their father, God, and be ignorant of themselves, even though they are parts which come from the higher world and altogether belong to it?”
54 Ibid. 9.34-36: ἔστι τὸν κάκες πάντα ἐὰν φήμη τὸ νοούμενον καὶ τὸ καλός τὸ ἐν ἐννοεῖ, τὰς ἰδέας τὰς ἑαυτῆς. καὶ τὸν καὶ τὸ ἄλλον καὶ τὸ ἃπτετε ἀναμνησθεὶς τοῖς ὅλοις τὸ πάντα.
55 III 5 1.44-46: Καὶ γὰρ καὶ τὸν ἀληθὲς τὸν συγγενέως τὸν καλῷ καὶ ἀληθὲς τὸ ὅλος πρὸς τὸν ὅλον καὶ τὸ ἄλλον καὶ τὸ ἀπ’ αὐτῆς τοῖς ἀναμνησθείς τὸ πάντα.
In tractate V 8 [31] (On the Intelligible Beauty) Plotinus encourages us to think that it is:

Who, then, will not call beautiful that which is beautiful primarily, and as a whole, and everywhere as a whole when no parts fail by falling short in beauty? ... Or if that [Intellect] is not beautiful, what else is? For that which is before it does not even want to be beautiful; for it is this which first presents itself to contemplation by being form and the contemplation of Intellect which is also a wonder to see. (trans. modified)56

And a chapter later:

... where would the beauty of intellect be if it was deprived of its being? And where would its reality be if it was stripped of its being beautiful? For in deficiency in beauty it would be defective also in reality. For this reason being is longed for because it is the same as beauty, and beauty is lovable because it is being.57

In the first of these two passages, Plotinus ascribes superlative beauty to Intellect; in the second he identifies the being of Intellect with beauty, which he then presents as the object of desire and love. This, however, did not prevent him from defending the opposite view in a later tractate, VI 7 [38] (On the Forms and the Good), in which he describes the One as the fount of beauty: “The primarily beautiful, then, and the first is without form, and beauty is that, the nature of the Good.”58

Can the discrepancy be accounted for or even ironed out? It can, I suggest, through attention to the respective contexts of the conflicting pronouncements. In V 8 [31], as seen above, the focus is on the beauty of Intellect itself while in VI 7 [38], as will now be seen, it is on origin of beauty and the motivation that leads the human soul to discard the beauties of sense for reaching out to the remoter beauty of Intellect and beyond.

Plotinus deals with the issue of the origin of beauty in tractate VI 7 [38] (How the Multitude of Forms Came into Being, and on the Good) by demonstration supplemented by what he calls “persuasion” (peithō), aimed at easing the task of reason. He argues that Intellect, qua such, is powerless to draw the embodied soul and that the Forms, for all their beauty, must be graced by an outflow (aporroō) of the Good before they can exert a force of attraction on the embodied soul. To

---

56 V 8 [31] 8.1-7: Καλὸν οὖν πρῶς, καὶ δὸν δὲ καὶ πανταξοῦ δὸν, ἵνα μηδὲ μέρη ἀπολεῖ πηταις τῷ καλῷ ἐλλεῖ πειν ... Ἡ ἔι μὴ ἐκεῖνο καλὸν, τί ἄν ἄλλο; τὸ γὰρ πρὸ αὐτοῦ οὐδὲ καλὸν ἔθέλει εἶ ναι· τὸ γὰρ πρῶς εἰς θέαν παρελθὸν τῷ ἐκεῖ δος εἰ ναὶ καὶ θέσαι νοῦ τοῦτο καὶ ἀγαθὸν ὀφθήναι. 57 Ibid., 9.37-41: Ποῦ γὰρ ἄν εἰ η τὸ καλὸν ἀπο στερηθὲν τοῦ εἶ ναι; Ποῦ δὲ ἅν ἢ οὐσία τοῦ καλὸν εἰ ναί ἐστερημένη; Ἐν τῷ γὰρ ἀπολεῖ φθῄνει, τοῦ καλοῦ ἐλλεῖ πειν καὶ τῇ οὐσίᾳ. Διὸ καὶ τὸ εἶ ναί ποθείνον ἐστιν, ὅτι ταὐτὸν τῷ καλῷ καὶ τὸ καλὸν ἔρασμιν, διέ τὸ εἶ ναί. 58 VI 7 [38] 33.21-22: Ανείδεον ἄρα τὸ πρῶτος καὶ πρῶτον καὶ ἡ καλλονὴ ἐκεῖνο ἡ τοῦ ἁγαθοῦ φύσις.
make the argument “persuasive,” he borrowed metaphors from the Phaedrus⁵⁹ and introduced an analogy.

Starting with “persuasion,” he notes that the outflow of the Good prompts the soul to “dance wildly” and to become “all stung with longing (οἰστρών πιμπλαται),” before adding that the soul who has been so stung “rises to something greater which appears to be ‘in her memory.’”⁶⁰ Lastly, so as to boost the argument, he brought in an analogy with an experience likely to be familiar to his hearers:

... if it [the soul] remains in Intellect it sees fair and noble things, but has not quite grasped what it is seeking. It is as if it was in the presence of a face which is certainly beautiful, but cannot catch the eye because it has no grace playing upon its beauty. So here below also beauty is what illuminates good proportions rather than the good proportions themselves, and this is what is lovable. For why is there more light of beauty on a living face, but only a trace of it on a dead one, even if its flesh and its proportions are not yet wasted away? ... the living is more desirable; and this is because it has more the form of the good; and this means that it is somehow coloured by the light of the Good, and being so coloured wakes and rises up and lifts up that which belongs to it, and as far as it can makes it good and wakes it.⁶¹ (22. 21-36)

The claim made in these lines is theory driven. Since it is a keystone of the Enneads that the One is the productive power of all things (dynamis pantōn), consistency requires that it be presented, as it is here, as both giver of beauty and ultimate object of desire/love. But Plotinus was too good a philosopher not to spell out the theory behind the claim. The argument in tractate VI 7 [38] relies on a central point of his philosophy, namely that the One, in its overflowing superabundance, generates a product that reflects its radiance and. The product, in turn, passes a less intense degree of radiance to its own product, Soul. Human souls, although handicapped by their embodiment, have the redeeming capacity, through their attraction to beauty and their capacity for recollection, to reach out to the ultimate source of beauty.

---

⁵⁹ These Platonic allusions are carefully noted and referenced by Armstrong in ad loc. comments.

⁶⁰ VI 7 [38] 22.17: πρὸς ἄλλο οἶν τῇ μνήμῃ μεῖζον κοιφῆς ζεταῖ. The use of μνήμη here strongly suggests that Plotinus has in mind Plato’s description of recollection in the Phaedrus rather than his own conception.

⁶¹ Ibid., 22.21-36: ἔν δὲ μὲν ἐν νῷ καλὰ μὲν καὶ σεμνὰ θεόται, οὕτω μὴν ὁ ζητεῖ πάντη ἔχει. Οἴ οὖν γὰρ προσώπωπελάξει καλῶμεν, οὕτω δὲ ὄμω κινεῖν δυναμένω ὧμη ἐμπρέπει στάρις ἐπί θέουσα τῇ κάλλεῖ. Διὰ ὁ καὶ ἐνταῦθα φατέον μᾶλλον τὸ κάλλος τὸ ἐπὶ τῇ συμμετρίᾳ ἐπὶ λαμπόμενον ἢ τῆς συμμετρίας ἢ τούτῳ ἢ τούτῳ ἢ τῷ ἔρασιν τί νῦν χωτὸς προσώπου μᾶλλον τὸ φέγγος τοῦ καλοῦ, ἱχνος δὲ ἐπὶ τεθηκότας καὶ μῆτῃ τοῦ προσώπου ταῖς σαφεῖς καὶ ταῖς συμμετρίαις μεμαρασμένους; ... Ὁ δὲ ὁτι τοῦ ἐφετὸν μᾶλλον·τοῦτο δ’ ὅτι φυσικὸν ἔχει·τοῦτο δ’ ὅτι ἀγαθοὶ δεσπέρον·τοῦτο δ’ ὅτι ἀγαθοὶ ἀμηνέτης φωτέν κέχρωσιν καὶ χρυσθεῖς ἐγήνεσθαι καὶ ἀνακούσφιαται καὶ ἀνακουφίζει·δ’ ἔχει, καὶ ὡς οἶντο τε αὐτῷ ἀγαθοποιεῖν αὐτὸ καὶ ἔγειρε.
which is the One. This is the reason why in the above-quoted lines, Plotinus identifies the prōton kalon with the One by describing it as the power that “generates beauty and makes it more beautiful by the excess of beauty which comes from it, so that it is the principle (archē) of beauty and the term (peras) of beauty.”

The claim, which has the ring of a definitive pronouncement, is consonant with the description in tractate V 5 [32] (That the Intelligibles are not Outside the Intellect. and on the Good) of the ontological dependence of Intellect upon the One. It is a necessity of our nature, Plotinus there argues, that we should have an innate (symphyton) longing for the One, upon which our very existence ultimately depends. The longing is present whether we are conscious of it or not, whether we are awake or asleep. By contrast, the love that beauty arouses in our soul is supervenient upon a prior conscious encounter with it: “... the passionate love of beauty, when it comes, causes pain, because one must have seen it to desire it.”

Further to emphasize the superiority of the One over Intellect in truth and power, Plotinus points out that while human beings often satisfy themselves with the appearance of beauty, they do not want to have the Good in seeming only. Lastly, so as to settle the point, he explains that the One cannot be an object of anamnēsis since it is not “a this something” in the sense of having a definable essence. Being a form-less and boundless nature (apelton physin), the One is “beyond being” (epekeina ontos) and cannot, as such, be “encompassed” (perilambanein) or “named” (onomadzein) in the strict sense of the word, by embodied human souls, although it is ever present to them. Only of Intellect and the Forms can there be anamnēsis.

We infer, a contrario, that the Plotinian soul engaged in anamnēsis grasps a specific “this something,” which in an ideal case is Intellect or a Form in relation to other Forms. Such grasp, although cognitive in nature, is not propositional, but gives the soul direct acquaintance - or re-acquaintance - with her higher self, which is in eternal contemplation of Intellect. Anamnēsis, therefore, rather than an occurrence likely to be sudden or to take the soul unaware, is better understood as a self-induced and effortful process on the part of the soul who, upon realising the illusory nature of physical beauty, purposefully seeks to purify herself and to come within reach of her originating principle. Although anamnēsis may well stop short of its goal, the fact that it is sustained by the soul’s concentrated attention

---

62 Ibid., 32. 31-34.  
63 V 5 [32] 12.16-17. The importance of this point has been noted by commentators in their ad loc. comments. Thus Dufour (2006:179): “l’amant de la beauté n’éprouve du désir qu’après avoir perçu le beau et avoir désiré de le poursuivre. C’est un désir acquis, par opposition au désir inné ou connaturel du bien.” Thus Gerson (2013:182): “… we can only be conscious of that which we cognize. This requires a differentiation of subject and object. The fact that we can be conscious of beauty shows that beauty is not the primary Good or object of desire.”  
64 Ibid., V 5 [32] 12.38.  
65 Ibid., 6.5-6: ἁνεῖ δὲ οὖν δὲν οὐκ οὐσί:  
on her prior makes it unlikely to fail altogether. What the recollecting soul cannot do, however, is to grasp the principle from which Intellect is originated. If she is to be privileged with a vision of the Good, the occurrence will be as unexpected as it is sudden (exaiphnēs, 7.34). All the soul can do, Plotinus explains, is to “wait quietly till the One appears.”

Even at its lowest and most physical level, it can now be concluded, beauty is the stimulus most likely to set off the recollecting process as Plotinus describes it. Once the embodied human soul recognises that the physical beauties in the world outside, ephemeral though they be, are reflections of enduring realities of which she holds traces within herself, she embarks on a process that can lead her to the Forms in Intellect. Such is the power of anamnēsis that it could even prepare her to receive the vision of the fount of all beauty, the prōton kalon, which, after a certain amount of tergiversation, Plotinus identified with the One. As he wrote tersely in tractate VI 7 [38]: “The primarily beautiful, then, and the first is without form, and beauty is that, the nature of the Good.”

University of Bolton and University of Manchester

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Texts


---

68 33, 21-22: Ἀνειδέον ἀρα ὁ πρῶτος καὶ πρῶτον καὶ ἡ καλλονή ἐκάινο ἢ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ φύσει. For further discussion of Plotinus’ conception of the prōton kalon, see Stern-Gillet (2000) and Smith (2016: 103-04 and 120-21).


**Secondary literature**


