

Individuality in the work of Plotinus

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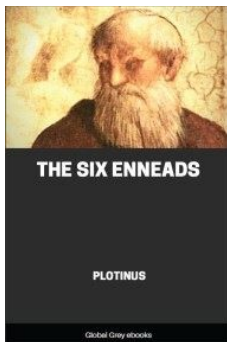
Abstract

Plotinus (c. 204/5- 270) was preoccupied with the question if what is called in philosophy 'individuals' exists; he connects the reality of these metaphysical 'entities' to that of the 'particulars'. He provides an account of sensible particulars which trace the individual nature of each distinct being (especially that of the individual human being) back to the causal power of the First Principle (*logos*).

As one can see, Plotinus regards the nature of each individual as dependent on incorporeal sources. And affirms that each individual being is capable to ascend to the Intellect.



Reconstructed bust believed to represent Plotinus; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plotinus>; Philosophy portal [Plotinus - Wikipedia](#);



Portrait of Plotinus from an edition of *The Six Enneads*; the source for the image is: [The Six Enneads, by Plotinus - Free ebook - Global Grey ebooks](#), 2018.

Production notes: This ebook of *The Six Enneads* was published by Global Grey in 2018.

But I recommend Plotinus, *Plotinus: The Enneads*, translated by Stephen MacKenna; revised by B. S. Page.

Foreword by E. R. Dodds; “Introduction” by Paul Henry, London: Faber, 1957; London: Faber and Faber, 1966; on-line version Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

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i) Introduction

Plotinus (c. 204/5- 270 AD), the philosopher who was born in the Roman Egypt,ⁱ discusses the issue of particulars (which, for him, are separate immaterial forms), and in that context he questions if ideas of individual people and individual objects exist; to this he answers in the positive. He does so even when speaking about artificial objects, despite the fact that no many Platonists do so. The Philosopher develops his thoughts on this topic especially in a treatise entitled “**Is there an ideal archetype of particular beings?**” (in the translation of Stephen MacKenna, revised by B. S. Page; the most known of translations (MacKenna 2009)ⁱⁱ) or “**On the Question Whether there are Ideas of Particulars**” (in Chiaradonna’s translation, 2014ⁱⁱⁱ) . This treatise is a part of the Fifth Ennead; it is treatise **V.7**^{iv}. Plotinus also elaborates on the topic of particulars and individuals in fragments within Ennead I and Ennead II. As we known, in Porphyry’s arrangement, the 48 treatises written by Plotinus were divided in groups of nine, hence the name *Enneads* (from the Greek, sing. ἐννέα/*ennéa* – set of nine; pl. Ἐννεάδες, in this case, six sets of nine treatises). As we also know, Porphyry of Tyre –d. 301 AD–, Plotinus’ student, was his famous editor.^v Porphyry’s edition does not follow the chronological order in which *Enneads* were written, but organizes them in such a way as to lead the student in Plotinus’s work from subjects close to human identity (soul, memory, perception, etc.) to those concerning the highest principles of the universe.

Today editors keep Porphyry's division; further work on it was done in the fifteenth century (in 1489) by Marsilius Ficinus, when he translated the *Enneads* from Greek into Latin; we shall refer more to this further.^{vi} Porphyry also ordered *The Enneads* into three volumes. After correcting and naming each treatise, Porphyry wrote a biography of his master, *Life of Plotinus*, intended to be an Introduction to the *Enneads*.

The *Enneads*, including the above-mentioned treatise 7 (of which content was written in c. 253–270 AD),^{vii} were compiled, edited, and published by Porphyry in c. 270–300 AD. With respect to the treatise “On the Question Whether there are Ideas of Particulars”, in the fifteenth century Ficinus divided it in three chapters (Ficinus 1489),^{viii} a distribution kept until today (MacKenna calls the partitions ‘sections’).

ii) Plotinus on Individuals

The concern for the particulars and the *logoi* in which they are grounded, as we know, was quite common in Antiquity; the Platonic Academy (opened in c. 387-386 BC) was very instrumental in keeping it within the attention of the philosophers of the fourth century BC. The manner in which these notions were discussed then is evidenced especially in Plato's dialogue *Parmenides* and in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. While the existence of the supreme Ideas (or Forms, or Essences) was not controversial, the **range** of these Ideas was. The Neoplatonist on whose work we focus here continued the discussion on this subject-matter some 500 years after his Master [Plato lived in 428/427 or 424/42 –348/347 BC].

By ‘Ideas’, or more often in his terminology, by *logoi*, Plotinus understands “sensible particulars which trace the individual nature”^{ix} of every element of reality to an incorporeal metaphysical principle, the *logos* (sometimes called by him ‘the Intellect’); hence for him the

logoi are the individual essences of everything that exists. In addition to his preoccupations for astronomy, physics, and nature in general, in some of his texts – those mentioned in the beginning of this paper – Plotinus also focuses specifically on human individuals. While affirming that each of them has a ‘particular’, i.e. a corresponding idea in the realm of the Intellect, he does not offer an argument for his conviction. In fact, with respect to this issue he elaborates on Plato’s views. As we know, Plato considers that every element of the sublunary world is the manifestation of a Form, Essence, or Idea; those Forms exist in their own realm. He also speaks about ‘the One’, the fundamental principle of the universe. Plotinus partially builds on this scheme. Additionally, he affirms that each person has a counterpart in the intelligible world; that is his/her un-descended soul. This element of the soul makes possible also for individual human being to exist in the intelligible world; they are apt to ascend to the Intellect (the Supreme principle) ‘in virtue of the highest and un-descended part of his/her soul’^x (Chiaradonna 2014: 48). The metaphysical status of the un-descended soul is identical to that of the generative immaterial forms mentioned at the outset of this piece.

In the first treatise of the first Ennead, ‘The Animate and the Man’ (especially in I.1.2) Plotinus speaks about a distinction between the Soul and the Essential Soul [i.e. between ‘an individual Soul and the Soul-Kind in itself’ in MacKenna’s terminology]. Then he further analyses the implication of such a distinction as well as that of the equivalence between the two ‘modes’ of the soul. The Philosopher considers that, if this distinction is real, the human soul is a composite of various elements, as well as the place where ‘the affections’ and experiences are to be found. He also takes into account the opposite situation (that in which the human soul and the Essential Soul are different). In the latter case, the Soul would not be the seat of any emotions, but an impassive ideal form that activates itself; as such it can be immortal and imperishable. Plotinus prefers to believe that the first scenario is true.

As one can see, the Philosopher equals the status of this ‘un-descended’ soul with that of Plato’s Ideas, Forms, or Essences. But he disagrees with Plato’s theory that all human beings are material ‘reflections’ (instantiations) of a unique idea of human being (V. 7.1.1-21). As indicated above, for Plotinus there are rather *logoi*, which means bodily expressions of a *logos*, i.e. a formative principle which the un-descending soul accesses. Such a view leads Plotinus to believe in reincarnation; he thinks or, at least thought for a while, that each soul from the intelligible realm can be shared by a few human beings, but not at the same time. (As an example, he refers to Socrates’s soul, which can pass in any man, woman, or animal – Plotinus mentions a horse; V.1.4). That is possible because each intelligible soul possesses within the formative principle (one of the *logoi*).

Plotinus elaborates on the *logos*, this formative principle, by opining that:

There cannot be the same formative principle for different individuals, and one human being will not serve as a model for several human beings differing from each other only by reason of their matter but with a vast number of special differences of form (V.7.1.18-21)

Therefore, the content of the concept ‘*logoi*’ is not to be confounded with the content of the notion of ‘individual’.^{xii} James Wilberding explains that Plotinus’s view about the relationship between the *logoi* and the (human) individuals, and connects it with the Philosopher’s belief in the reincarnation of human souls:

We might say that these *logoi* [i.e. the *logoi* of wholes, each one of which maps onto exactly one sensible individual in the world] represent the maximally specific formal descriptions of the bodies that an individual soul can take up on earth during one of these world-periods^{xiii} (Wilberding 2011: 66).

However, Plotinus considers that the status of sensible human individuals is different from that of other biological species.

Plotinus not only states that the formative principles are applicable to more than one particular individual (especially to individual persons), but he also explains **how that is possible**. He does so via his view about the qualities of the matter, which, for him, are of two types: ‘completions’ features (those which are peculiar to it – for example, having a size,

being rational, or being a biped, and ‘accidental’ characteristics, which ‘contain what comes after it’, an ‘extra’; among the examples of those that Plotinus provides are: being tall, beautiful or ugly, virtuous or immoral (II.6.2.24-26). This is what Plotinus affirms with regard to this topic:

We ought to call what are said to be essential completions of substance qualities, seeing that those of them which come from the formative principles and substantive powers are activities; we should call qualities only what are outside all substance and do not appear in one place as qualities but in other things as not qualities; they contain that which is extra and comes after substance, for instance, virtues and vices, and ugliness and beauties, and states of health, and being of this and that shape (II. 6.2.20-26)

These qualities are grouped in bundles which, as shown, Plotinus calls ‘wholes’ (II.6.1.50-58); later I will bring more details about his view concerning the concept “quality” in the *Enneads*.

In Ennead V, especially in the treatise ‘On the Question Whether there are Ideas of Particulars’ (V.7.3) Plotinus says **that the generative principles are equal in number to individuals** (human as well as objects). To illustrate his position, the Philosopher uses the example of a craftsman who, while making things of the same kind, is aware of their similarity through a process of rational differentiation (my translation of the term from the Greek). But, on the ‘background’ of likeness, the artisan produces each particular object with a small difference, and this difference ‘enters’ the generative principle – or one can say that it is ‘incorporated’ within the archetype of that kind of objects. In the same manner, we can say that the individuality of sensible particulars is due to their specific forms, which constitute the ‘outcome’ of the activity of the *logoi*. Therefore, since forms for each individual exist, these and the individuals in themselves are equal in number (V. 7. 3).

Plotinus on Qualia

In ‘On Substance and Quality’/‘Quality and Form-Idea’ (II) Plotinus affirms, as I mentioned above, that he understands sensible particulars to be non-essential in their general structure and also as lacking pure being (II.6.5-58); they are not substances but a grouping of characteristics, which constitute qualitative imitations of ‘objects’ that originate in the *logoi*. I will explain just a little further why he thinks so. In any case, as we have seen, in the Second Ennead (II.6.1), he divides the sensible particulars into two categories: one referring to ‘completing’ qualities, and one to accidental ones. In II. 4.8 he exemplifies the content of this taxonomy by indicating properties as size (‘magnitude’) and rationality to be ‘completing’ qualities, and colour, hot, cold, short and tall as ‘accidental’ qualities) - in VI. 1.

Usually, ‘completing’ qualities refer to substance; hence Plotinus is not consistent on this important point. For the Philosopher, particular beings are opposed to the realm of intelligible essences, which should not be conceived as a part of the material realm. Also, because they are non-essential, the sensible particulars are totally different from the intelligible essences, the *logoi*, but are determined by those. This is what Plotinus states, for instance, in V. 8. In this particular framework he situate all these qualities on the same level. But if it is possible for them to be so, why he divides them in two categories earlier, in II. 6. 1? I suggest that this contradiction, as the others in his work, occurs because the Philosopher changed some of his ideas from time to time.

In another context, in VI. 1. 1, Plotinus states that specific differences are characterised as ‘qualities’ only in the name or ‘by analogy’. They do not share the nature of qualities in the proper sense, ‘since they determine essence and are activities or rational

formative principles.^{xiii} As stated above, when mentioning the qualities of sensible particulars, Plotinus classifies them in ‘essential completions of substance’^{xiv} and ‘mere’ qualities (II.6). Surprisingly, as one can see, he uses language from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (V. 14. 110020b13-17) to elaborate on these notions, and not from Plato’s dialogues – especially *Timaeus* would have served him well in discussing the qualities of the substance along the lines of his Master’s thought. (We all remember that is Aristotle, not Plato, who mentions specific differences as ‘essentially’ constituting the substance – both a specific form and the particular ‘derived’ from it). Furthermore, regarding qualities, Plotinus thinks that the determinative causal action of the *logos* is ‘accountable’ for the distinction between properties essentially pertaining to individuals (which, in his opinion, are activities) and those which are ‘simple’ features, accidental in nature (only the latter are ‘real’ qualities’). Plotinus thinks that the first are activities because they derive from the *logoi*; for him, what is ‘an essential’, i.e. a constituent of something, is not a quality, but an activity.

iv) Conclusion

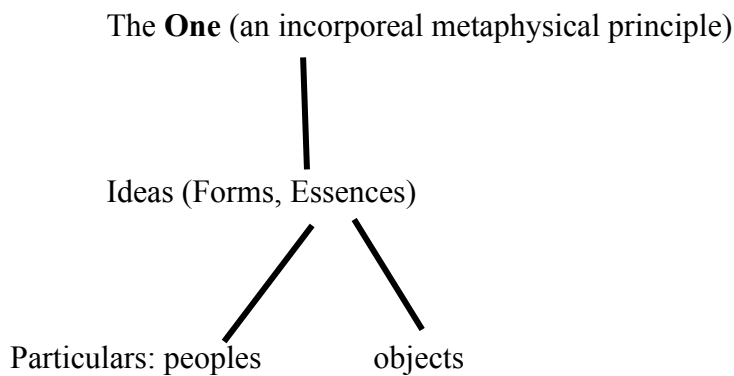
1. To conclude, I underline that Plotinus thinks that an idea, i.e. a formative principle, exists for each particular. For him, that is true even for non-human realities; he seems to imply that the particulars belonging to those have also a formative principle that ‘validates’ their existence.
2. The human soul has two parts (in MacKenna’s translation these are two ‘phases’): the undescended one and that which employs the human body.
3. The Roman-Egyptian Philosopher considers that the generative forms are applicable to more than one particular **individual, but that cannot happen simultaneously**. The fact that both this idea and its opposite – the affirmation that there is an individual as such – are present in the work of Plotinus could be explained through the fact that he changed his views

at some point of his life; only later he gave up the idea of reincarnation and strongly underlined that particulars and individuals exist.

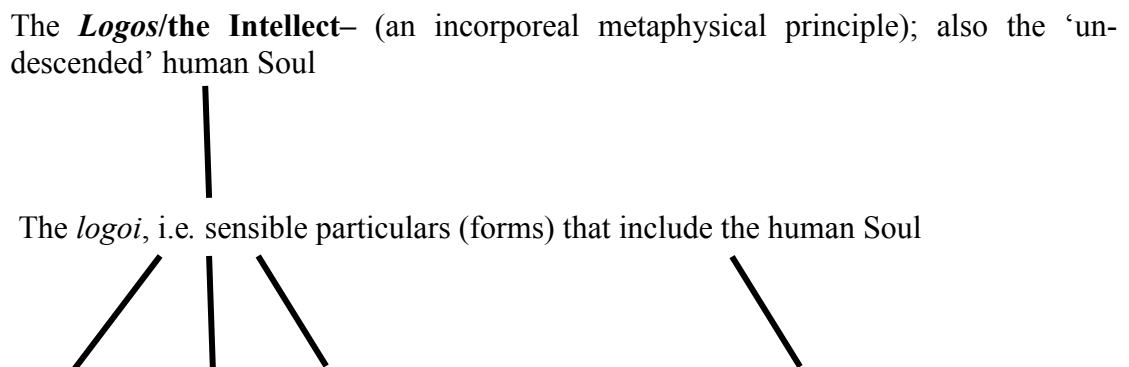
4. I think we can see that in Plotinus’s philosophy the Aristotelian hylomorphism is present because he maintains that every physical entity (object) is the result of **the combination between matter and an immaterial form**. The generic form is immanently real within the individual.

5. In spite of his deployment of Aristotelian terms I think that a Platonic scheme of reality is transparent through his philosophy in the manner in which Plotinus organizes his system of thought. I illustrate my statement by comparing graphically the arrangement of Plotinus’s ideas with the similar arrangement in Plato’s works, thus:

A. Plato:



B. Plotinus:



Individuals: peoples, objects

individual souls

5. What Plotinus contributes most to Plato's scheme is to put the 'un-descended' part of the human soul on a corresponding level with that on which Platonic Ideas/Forms are. An intimation about this state of affairs existed in Plato's philosophy, but Plotinus makes it explicit.

Plotinus has received appreciation in modern times. For instance, Ludwig Noiré, in his famous Introduction to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, wrote: 'For the first time in Western philosophy we find idealism proper in Plotinus' (Noiré 1881).^{xv} Also, in *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) refers to Plotinus. He considers that the Neoplatonist was influenced by Indian philosophy via the culture of Egypt (Schopenhauer 2014: § 7)^{xvi} And we are still discussing Plotinus's work.

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- ⁱ Plotinus was born in the Roman Egypt (Lycopolis) and died in Campania, Italy.
- ⁱⁱ Plotinus, *Plotinus: The Enneads*, translated by Stephen MacKenna; revised by B. S. Page. Foreword by E. R. Dodds; ‘Introduction’ by Paul Henry, London: Faber, 1957; London: Faber and Faber, 1966; on-line version Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Riccardo Chiaradonna, 2014, ‘Plotinus on Sensible Particulars and Individual Essences’, in Alex Torrance and Johannes Zachhuber (eds.), *Individuality in Late Antiquity*, Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 47-61.
- ^{iv} Throughout the paper I shall use the Roman numbers to indicate which Ennead I mention in a particular context, then Arabic numbers for chapter, respective paragraph.
- ^v Porphyry was born in Tyre, within Roman Phoenicia (today Lebanon) and died in Rome.
- ^{vi} Marsilius Ficinus in *Three Books on Life (De vita libri tres)*, 1489; this was the first full translation from Greek to Latin of Plotinus’ *Enneads*. It was conceived as three separate books, thus: ‘On Healthy Life’ (*De vita sana*), completed around 1480, corresponded to Book One in the eventual printed edition. The second book, ‘On Long Life’ (*De vita longa*), completed in 1489. The third book, ‘On Obtaining Life from the Heavens’ (*De vita coelitus comparanda*), composed sometime between 1480 and 1489 grew out of Ficino’s commentary on Plotinus (specifically on *Enneads* 4.3.11). Ficinus was born on 19 October 1433 in Figline Valdarno, Italy and died on 1 October 1499 in Villa Medici at Careggi, Florence, Italy.
- ^{vii} Plotinus, *The Enneads*, edited and translated by Stephen MacKenna, revised by B. S. Page, London: Faber and Faber, 1966; on line edition 2018.
- ^{viii} Ficinus 1489, *Three Books...*
- ^{ix} Riccardo Chiaradonna 2014, “Plotinus on Sensible Particulars and Individual Essences”, in Alex Torrance and Johannes Zachhuber (eds.), *Individuality in Late Antiquity*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014, p. 47 [pp. 47-61].
- ^x Chiaradonna, “Plotinus on Sensible Particulars and Individual Essences”, p. 48.
- ^{xi} For Plotinus ‘wholes’ constitute a bundle of qualities peculiar to the ‘sensible particulars’, who, for him, are non-essential in their structure because they lack essence and ‘pure’ being’; Plotinus, *Enneads*, II.6.1.50-58]. About the relationship between the concept of ‘logoi’ and that of ‘individual’ see James Wilberding 2011 “Intelligible Kinds and Natural Kinds in Plotinus”, in *Études platoniciennes* 8 [*Les formes platonicienne dans l’Antiquité tardive*]: 53-73.
- ^{xii} Wilberding 2011, ‘Intelligible Kinds and Natural Kinds in Plotinus’, in *Études platoniciennes* 8, p. 66. For Plotinus ‘wholes’ constitute a bundle of qualities peculiar to the ‘sensible particulars’, who, for him, are non-essential in their structure because they lack essence and ‘pure’ being’; II.6.1.50-58
- ^{xiii} Chiaradonna 2014 ‘Plotinus on Sensible Particulars and Individual Essences’, p. 55.
- ^{xiv} Idem, p. 53.
- ^{xv} Ludwig Noiré, ‘Introduction’ to Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, vol. 1, translated by Friedrich Max Müller, London: Macmillan, 1881.
- ^{xvi} Arthur Schopenhauer, ‘Fragments for the History of Philosophy’ § 7, in *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*, within *The Cambridge edition of the Works of Schopenhauer*, general editor Christopher Janaway, volume I. translated and edited by Sabine Roehr and Christopher Janaway, Introduction by C. Janaway Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014 (first published in 1851).