

Double Duty: How to Live in the Cosmos of Plotinus

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When I started studying Plotinus more than thirty years ago, one of the first things that struck me about the scholarly literature was that everyone agreed Plotinus was both a philosopher and a mystic. It was also pretty apparent that no one found fault with Plotinus for being a philosopher, but some disparaged his mystical tendencies.

I think that I can pass over what it means to be a philosopher. Everyone here has enough experience with philosophers to have some idea of what that means—and it has something to do with thinking.

But what does it mean to be a mystic? There seems to be general agreement, as far as I can tell, that a mystic is someone who claims it is possible for a human being to contact, or even to experience union with, the source of all reality. If this is what it means to be a mystic, then it goes beyond thinking—at least beyond thinking as we normally conceive of it. Union with the source may be compatible with thinking, but the idea of actually becoming one with something else certainly seems to be different from thinking.

There is more than enough evidence in Plotinus's writings to prove that Plotinus is both a philosopher and a mystic.

As far as philosophy goes, he himself insists that he is a follower of Plato. In fact, he goes so far as to say there is nothing that is not consonant with Plato's teachings in his thinking. That may be an overstatement, but his world view is without doubt built upon Platonic foundations, such as the image of the Divided Line in the *Republic* and the structure of reality discussed in the *Timaeus*.

Even a cursory reading of the *Enneads* quickly reveals, however, that Plotinus knows a great deal about all the ancient schools of philosophy, including the tenets of the greatest thinkers and the controversies among their followers. Plotinus is also quite knowledgeable about Aristotle and his differences with Plato. Where he is critical about Aristotle, he states his objections clearly. Where he agrees, he incorporates Aristotle's thought into his own.

This small account leaves little doubt about classifying Plotinus among the thinkers. He is certainly a philosopher—indeed, he is a great philosopher.

As for his status as a mystic, that is just as certain. We need only listen to one passage from the sixth *Ennead* to know this. Here is Plotinus describing the experience of union with the source:

And when the soul meets with this and it comes toward her, or rather, when it comes to light as something present, . . . and having seen it appear suddenly within her (for there is nothing between and they are no longer two, but both are one, . . . having sought this, she meets it as something present and looks at it instead of at herself; and she does not even take the time to see who it is that is looking (Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.7.34.8-22).¹

Nothing could be more mystical than this description of becoming one with the source. The soul becomes so much more than itself that its sense of self disappears. There is no more separateness between itself and the source; distinction disappears; the soul does not even seem to know who it is any longer.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, translations are the author's.

So, Plotinus is both a philosopher and a mystic. He has a very intricate, well thought-out understanding of the nature of reality that requires difficult thinking to understand. This is his philosophy.

But he also talks about transcendence of self through union with the source of being, and that would require the disappearance of the thinker, judging from the passage I just quoted. For how can a soul that no longer knows who it is be thinking? This is his mysticism.

Now about the same time that I began studying Plotinus, I also fell in with the writings of the great philosophical scholar Pierre Hadot, from whom I became convinced about a suspicion I had long held concerning the ancient schools of philosophy. Hadot's belief, which I share, is that all philosophical pursuits arise ultimately from a deep-seated desire to answer the question *How should I live my life?*

This belief runs a bit counter to the old saw that philosophy begins in wonder. But the two ideas are not that far apart. If we are stunned by our ignorance in the face of the infinitely large and the infinitely small, as Pascal has it, the desire arises to know as much as we can about these infinities in which seem to be embedded. Each success on the path to knowledge may seem to be merely speculative or theoretical, involving only step-by-step progress in thinking. But each step is at the same time ethical. For every truth one comes to see, there is a corollary question that goes something like this: *If this is the way things are, do I live in accordance with this truth?*

We avoid this question at our peril. To the extent that we live our lives in discord with the truth, we run the risk of having things turn out badly for us. And yet we all have our blind spots, our habitual actions that contradict what we know to be the truth. It seems that Aristotle was right about this: a habit once formed is difficult or impossible to change. Speculative knowledge does not seem to have the power to override ethical habits.

Nevertheless, anyone who tries to work out a speculative philosophy that gives an account of the nature of reality cannot help but confront ethics eventually—if he is being honest with himself. If he really believes what he says about the way things are, he would be a fool not to act in accordance with his beliefs, for things will not go well with him if he is actually right about the way things are. And in any case his own contradictory actions will continually provide evidence that things are not as he says they are.

So, my question about Plotinus some three decades ago was this: *What does Plotinus's view of the world indicate about how human beings ought to live?* And it was with the same question that I sat down a few years ago to begin the studies that led to this lecture.

To get started with this question, we first need to grasp the contours of Plotinus's world view. It is, as he claims, largely Platonic, drawn mostly from the *Timaeus* and the *Republic*, combined with elements from the myths in the *Phaedrus* and the *Meno*. Plato's Forms play a large role in Plotinus's world view, as does the immaterial being that Plato calls Soul. According to Plotinus, the roots of the phenomenal world are found in the realm of the Forms and in the regions of Soul, as we shall soon see.

Now any sketch of Plotinus's world view must begin with the One, which he sometimes refers to simply as "there," the furthest pole from where we find ourselves within the structure of reality—which is to say, in the phenomenal world, that is, "here."

So, what is the One? It is as Plato portrays it in his dialogue *Parmenides*. It is something that is utterly and unutterably unified—*utterly* in that it is completely simple, without parts or internal differentiation of any kind; *unutterably* because nothing that is said of it can possibly do it justice. This is not merely because it is beyond our capacity to comprehend but because its simplicity is

incompatible with language itself, which is a thing with parts, as, for example, subject and predicate. That which must have parts cannot accurately reflect that which has no parts.

Indeed, the problem goes even deeper than language. Language is a representation of *dianoia*, thinking something through. The successivity of this kind of thought is obviously at odds with the radical simplicity of the One, simply on the ground that *dianoia* is divided up into parts that come before and after.

There is another kind of thinking, however, that may seem to be clear of this difficulty. *Nous*, the direct apprehension of a knowable object—like a tree or the idea of equality—seems to skip over the discursive element inherent in *dianoia* to get directly at the knowable object.

But even this kind of thought is subject to an ineradicable dualism—the distinction between the knower and the thing known. So, it is not just language that is incapable of grasping the One, but even *nous* seems to be too diverse to get a handle on the ultimate, and ultimately simple, source of everything.

If we are to get any further, then, we have to ignore this difficulty, as Plotinus himself does. We have to keep thinking about the One even though it is impossible to grasp it in thought. We have to keep asking questions despite the fact that even correct answers will not be able to get at the One itself.

So, here is an opening question: *How is it that there is anything else besides the One if the One itself is entirely simple, pure unity, excluding all difference and multiplicity?*

Plotinus's answer to this question is that the One has a pure, undifferentiated internal activity that is beyond our comprehension because of our innate multiplicity. The intensity of that pure internal activity gives off an external activity that is not the proper activity of the One, but rather a likeness of it.

How are we to understand this? Let me propose an image. The internal activity of a human being, the inner life, is accessible only to the individual. But the inner life throws off an external image that can be seen by others. One person's movements and speech give off an impression of grace, another's an impression of seriousness, another's an impression of foolishness. This external image is certainly not the individual's inner activity, but a secondary being emanating from that inner activity, a being real enough to be observed by others, real enough to become the source of motion in others who are attracted or repulsed by that image. It is a remarkable feature of this process that it requires no effort or outflow of energy on the part of the primary being beyond its innate inner activity. Of such cases Plotinus says that the original "remains" or "stays unaffected" by the external being that it throws off.

In a similar way, the internal activity of the One gives off an external image of its internal activity. Plotinus calls this external image of the One *Nous*, that is Intellect or Understanding.

In trying to describe Intellect, I'm going to use an image that builds on the previous one but is even more fantastical. Think again of the external likeness thrown off by a human being. Now imagine that it takes on a more solid existence than we normally experience, like a shell surrounding the person whose inner activity throws it off. Now imagine the inner surface of that shell as a single giant retina focused on and seeing the person who is its source. Finally, imagine that this seeing shell is aware of itself looking at the source.

Weird as this image is, it captures some significant aspects of Plotinus's Intellect. This external image of the One is a Being, standing out from the source that it perceives. Its activity has the shape of thinking, namely, the shape of a perceiving, self-aware subject assimilating a perceived object to the best of its ability. That is why this secondary being is called Intellect.

Now in assimilating the One from its distant perspective, Intellect knows itself to be different from the source it sees; but it also knows that it is the same, since, in its own oneness, it takes the One into itself through its seeing. And it recognizes some sort of Motion when it contemplates first itself and then its source; and this motion is mixed together with some sort of Rest when it does not think but merely looks upon its source. So, in the first rank of things that it thinks are the forms of Being, Sameness, Otherness, Motion, and Rest—the so-called “five greatest forms” mentioned in Plato’s *Sophist*. The interplay of its thinking on these greatest forms gives rise to all the forms that can possibly exist. In this regard, Plotinus’s Intellect is like Aristotle’s Prime Mover: it is thought thinking itself.

I need to mention just two other aspects of Intellect for further reference. First, because it contains many Forms, Intellect is obviously multiple and variegated. Indeed, Plotinus calls it a “one-many” for this very reason. Second, this multiplicity is a defect or a falling away of the Intellect in comparison with its source, the hyper-unified One. An image is always lacking something that its source possesses, and it relies on the source to satisfy that need. In this case, Intellect needs the image of oneness that it borrows from the One to hold together its multiplicity.

So much for Intellect, the second level of reality in Plotinus’s conception of the way things are.

Now we move on to the third and final level of reality in Plotinus’s system.

The internal activity of Intellect, its self-contained thinking, throws off another external activity. Here I’m going to abandon the image of the self-aware retina. It would become much too unwieldy. Instead, I’m going to show you a visual image that tries to capture the relations among the levels of reality. Perhaps this drawing will provide some orientation while I describe the characteristics of this new being that is a likeness of Intellect, the being which Plotinus calls Soul.

The first thing to notice about this drawing is that a portion of the area allotted to Soul falls within the area allotted to Intellect. This is a consequence of Intellect’s relative lack of unity in relation to its source. Intellect is not sufficiently unified to throw off its external activity entirely. Some of its image remains within, while most of it stands outside. That is to say, some aspect of Soul both *images* Intellect and at the same time *is* Intellect. This is a crucial element of Plotinus’s system, as we will see in a moment.

Insofar as it is an image, Soul mirrors its source in many respects. I will mention only three of them. First, it images the thinking of its source. Second, it images the self-awareness of its source. Third, and most important here, it images the oneness of its source—which is to say that Soul’s oneness is even more deficient than the oneness of Intellect. Or, looking at it the other way round, it is even more multiple and variegated than its source. Its unity is so deficient, in fact, that its inner activity cannot throw off an external image of itself at all. Whatever imaging continues to occur in the system does so *within* Soul. There is no other level of reality.

This decrease in oneness that is at the same time an increase in multiplicity affects Soul’s self-awareness and its thinking. Soul is distracted by its own variety and has difficulty focusing its thinking on its source. This same distractedness interferes with Soul’s ability to focus on its awareness of itself, on its attention to what it is doing.

So, what is Soul? In short, it is a bit of Intellect together with everything else that exists besides the One and Intellect. The drawing situates the entire phenomenal world within the level of Soul. For Plotinus, everything in the phenomenal world is Soul, Soul expressing itself with the utmost variety in every possible way. It does this by bringing the forms it sees in its upper reaches—the area of overlap between Soul and Intellect in the drawing—into its lower reaches, where form is less at home because of the increased multiplicity of Soul. This is why the overlapping area on the

drawing is crucial to Plotinus's system: Soul could not transfer forms to its lower reaches if it were not in touch with them in its higher reaches.

It is too complicated a topic to explain all the ways in which the phenomenal world—the “here” we humans inhabit—is a manifestation of Soul. But here is just the briefest outline.

The highest reaches of Soul, as we've seen, consort with Intellect and the forms. At Soul's very lowest end, on the other hand, it transmits the last possible vestige of form—the form of pure potentiality. This is the form of something that has no properties except a need for form, a continual striving to receive form. This is what Plotinus calls *matter*.

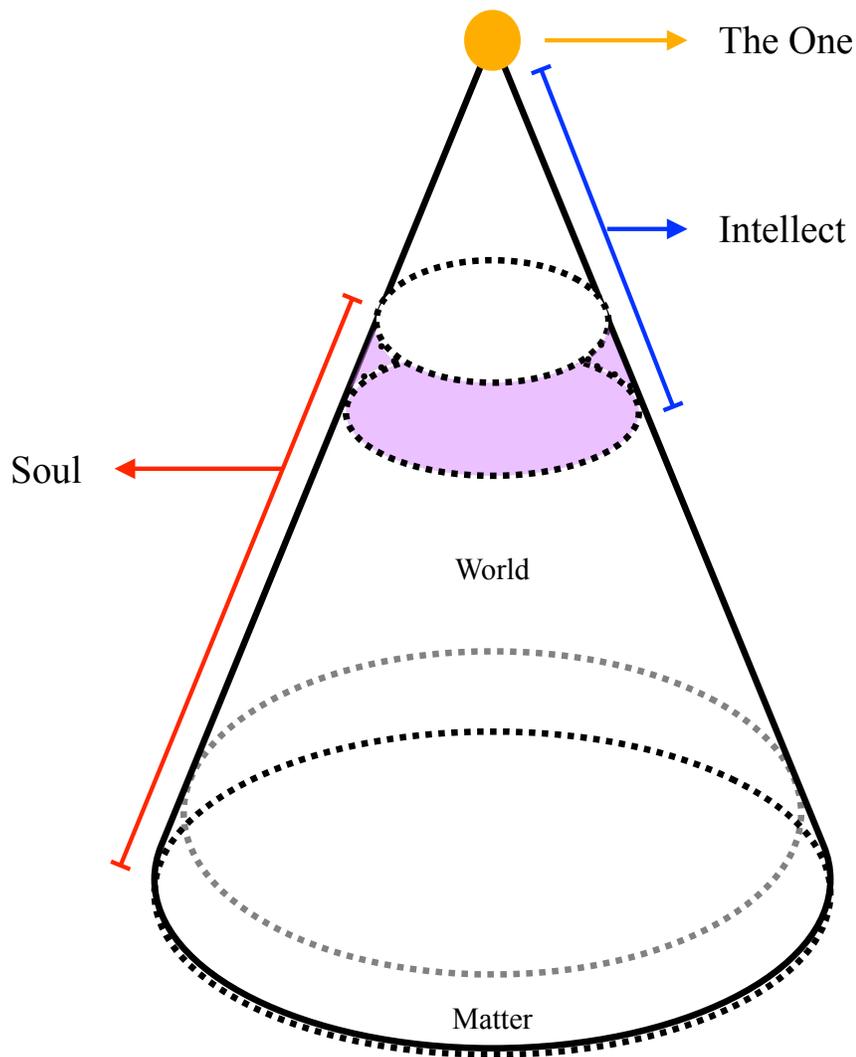


Fig. 1: The structure of reality according to Plotinus

The entire phenomenal world, then, is the work of Soul endowing pure potentiality with form in order to satisfy matter's ultimate neediness. This is true both for animate and inanimate objects. Whatever form a phenomenal object has—whether it be the complex living form of a human being or the simple shape of a rock—comes to it from Soul uniting forms with ultimately needy matter.

Now to complete our overview of Plotinus's system, let's look a bit more closely at the activity of Soul along its whole extent.

We've already seen that Soul, as an image of Intellect, is more diversified than its source. Even in its upper reaches, where presumably it can borrow some unifying force from Intellect, it gets distracted from its thinking and its self-awareness by the variety within it.

This distraction causes a reversal in the order of reality. Soul, the image of Intellect, loses its focus on its source and turns away from Intellect in the only other direction it can look, namely, toward itself. Attending now to its own multiplicities and capacities, it loses focus on its self-awareness and pays more attention to the many things within it. And this interest in the multiplicities is the phenomenal world—it is Soul looking toward its own variety and informing matter in every possible way.

But the activity of informing matter is itself a further decrease in unity and a further increase in multiplicity. A phenomenal object of any kind is not pure form; it is form serving the neediness of matter. Unlike pure forms, these forms-with-matter are not entirely compatible. Nor are they completely subservient to the Soul that informs them because matter binds Soul through its intense, clutching need for form. The result in the phenomenal world is all sorts of random collisions and interdependencies among both inanimate and animate objects, accompanied by all sorts of misjudgments among animate objects as they try to navigate the confusing world around them.

And this brings us to one final aspect of Plotinus's reality that we need to consider, namely, our place in it, the situation of human beings.

Obviously, we belong among the animate objects. So, as we have just mentioned, the Soul that informs us is bound by matter's neediness and is further enmeshed in the network of collisions, interdependencies, and misjudgments that abound in the phenomenal world. Our attention to our own bodies and to external objects obstructs our thinking and self-awareness—so much so that it seems nearly impossible to free ourselves from the incessant demands the world makes on us. This is the situation of human beings as Plotinus sees it: we are Soul bound to matter in such a way that it hardly remembers itself, sunk into the phenomenal world with barely the dream of a memory of its actual lineage.

For a brief summary of Plotinus's system of reality, this has been rather long. But it presents just as much information as we need to address the question I started with and to give it a provisional answer.

Let us take up again the initial question, namely, *What does Plotinus's view of the world indicate about how human beings ought to live?*

The provisional answer is the one that first comes to the fore when we begin to study Plotinus, especially when one focuses on the passages we read here at St. John's. Judging from those readings, we ought to live in such a way as to extricate ourselves from the bonds of the phenomenal world. We need to loosen the chains that shackle us to the dispersive and all-consuming distractions of the world around us. We need first to remember the Soul that we are, then turn back toward Intellect and to its original, the One. And then, having made the turn, we need to reach journey's

end in the ultimate meeting between our Soul and the source of all being, a meeting in which, as we heard before, “there is nothing between and they are no longer two, but both are one.”

In short, we should live as mystics. We should spend our time turning inward, away from the phenomenal world, seeking the One within. We might well imagine that such a life consists largely of meditation and retirement from the world. It would be a life of interiority and withdrawal, a life of apparent self-absorption.

Now Plotinus provides a lot of advice about how to carry out the meditative practice that may bring us back to our home in the One. There is, for example, this famous admonition in Plotinus’s first written work, *On Beauty*, where he is focusing on Beauty as a prominent characteristic of the One and everything that proceeds from the One, including the seeker, who can use his own beauty as point of contact with the Soul, the Intellect, and the One within.

Go back into yourself and look. If you do not yet see yourself as beautiful, then be like a sculptor who, making a statue that is supposed to be beautiful, removes a part here and polishes a part there so that he makes the latter smooth and the former just right until he has given the statue a beautiful face. In the same way, you should remove superfluities and straighten things that are crooked, work on the things that are dark, making them bright, and not stop “working on your statue” [Plato, *Phaedrus* 252D7] until the divine splendor of virtue shines in you, until you see “Self-control enthroned on the holy seat” [*Phaedrus* 254B7]. . . .

For the one who sees has a kinship with that which is seen, and he must make himself the same as it if he is to attain the sight. For no eye has ever seen the sun without becoming sun-like [Plato, *Republic* 508B3 and 509A1], nor could a soul ever see Beauty without becoming beautiful. You must first actually become wholly god-like and wholly beautiful if you intend to see god and Beauty (*Enneads* 1.6.9.8-34²).

Then, in the treatise called *On the Good or the One*, Plotinus goes on to say that this shaping of the beautiful inner statue is only the first step in the “seeing” that the seeker intends.

The intimate contact within is not with a statue or an image, but with the One itself. The statue and the image are actually secondary visions, whereas the One itself is indeed not a vision, but another manner of seeing. It is self-transcendence, simplification, and surrender, an urging towards touch, a resting, concentration on alignment, if one is to have a vision of what is in the sanctum. If indeed someone looks in a different way then nothing is present to him (*Enneads* 6.9.11.20-25; Gerson, 897).

I will not go on quoting Plotinus on this point but, as I say, there are many such indications in Plotinus’s writings that the inward, mystical turn is the path human beings should follow, the path that leads out of the darkened and darkening phenomenal world, the path that leads toward the light. It seems that the ethical inference from Plotinus’s beliefs about reality is that we should all become mystics, spending our time seeking unification with the inner source of our being.

Why then did I call this a *provisional* answer?

Because there is something wrong here, something that goes back to my initial remarks on the thinker who does not act according to his beliefs about the structure of reality. The simple fact is that there seems to be a contradiction between Plotinus’s view of reality and his life. His view of reality indicates that a meditative, inward-focused life is the best life for human beings. But we know that Plotinus did not expend all his energies in that pursuit.

Of course, we could say that this is just not possible. We could point out, as Aristotle does, that our situation in the phenomenal world makes it necessary to attend to matters that preclude the

² Lloyd Gerson, ed., *Plotinus: The Enneads* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 102.

inward turn, like eating, sleeping, exercising, communicating, and so forth. Nevertheless, as Aristotle also suggests, it seems that our happiness depends on conceding as little as we must to our physical existence while spending as much time as possible in contemplation, just as Plotinus's view of reality indicates.

Now here's the problem: *Plotinus did not act that way.*

Of course, he meditated quite a bit, and this shows that he recognized the duty of turning inward that his view of reality implies. No doubt he also minimized concessions to the demands of physical existence. But we also know that he spent a great deal of time actively engaging with life in the here-and-now rather than meditating.

Our evidence about this comes from the short biography of Plotinus written by his student Porphyry, who spent six years in constant contact with his teacher. Porphyry tells us, among other things, that Plotinus ran a school, or at least was a well-known teacher who was very much involved in dialogue with students and friends. We also know that Plotinus wrote the fifty-four treatises of the *Enneads*, and Porphyry tells us that Plotinus was not a thoughtless writer. He wrote with care and edited repeatedly with the aid of assistants, reconsidering his arguments with an eye to the individuals who were likely to read the texts. And, to add just one more example, Porphyry tells us that Plotinus looked after quite a few children who were placed in his care, providing for both their physical and their educational needs.

Now we all know how much time and effort it takes to teach, to be a friend, to write carefully, and to raise children. Undertaking these tasks is a very different thing from making concessions to physical necessities. Plotinus did these things voluntarily. By choosing these outward-facing activities instead of the mystic path, Plotinus seemingly acted in opposition his own view of reality. The fact that these actions are altruistic or even compassionate may make them attractive to us, but it does not remove the contradiction. Plotinus willingly acted in violation of the duty to turn inward that his view of reality indicates is best for human beings.

At this point, I'm going to take a break from the course of the argument to insert a humiliating bit of personal biography. Think of it as an interlude. Or as comic relief. Anyway, here it is.

This seeming contradiction actually bothered me for quite a while. In one of the many ways these things can happen, the bulk of my attention was captured by many other difficult and interesting Plotinian conundrums while this unresolved problem percolated under the surface. One day I was thinking about a quite unrelated issue and just ran out of steam. My mind went blank. And in the blankness, the little inner voice that enjoys bombarding us with critical remarks, piped up. "Well," it said snidely, "what do you think is more likely—that Plotinus doesn't know what he's doing or that you missed something?" The question answered itself, but I was ashamed that it took me so long to get the point, especially since I have a lifetime of experience to teach me that I get things wrong far more often than I get things right.

Once that had been settled, it was clear what I was missing. Plotinus was no fool. He was not the kind of thinker who could ignore the ethical implications of his own beliefs. So, there must be an aspect of Plotinus's system that suggests a second duty in addition to the duty of the inward turn. I must have missed the element that motivated Plotinus's engagement with the here-and-now.

From that point on, the question I was dealing with was no longer just *What does Plotinus's view of the world indicate about how human beings ought to live?* It became a more specific question, namely, *How does the reality of Plotinus suggest a double duty of turning inward toward our source and of turning outward toward our world?*

Having refocused the question, I soon realized that I had all along been noticing the traces of an answer without actually noticing them. As I looked at my notes in the margins of my copy of the *Enneads*, I found question marks near passages having to do with the outward turn. And after a while, I saw that Plotinus very often quoted (for instance, in *Enneads* 2.9.18.40, 3.4.2.1, 4.3.1.34, and 4.3.7.14) this line from Plato's *Phaedrus*: "All Soul cares for what is without soul" (446B6).

Of course, as we have already seen, Plotinus does not believe that there is anything in the phenomenal world that is, strictly speaking, without Soul. So, he puts his own spin on this passage when he says that "[Soul] comes here voluntarily and for the sake of its capacity *and for the ordering of what is after it*" (*Enneads* 4.8.5.26; italics mine).

The first part of this passage reconfirms the way Soul reverses the order of source and image. As we said, Soul turns toward itself and away from its source, the Intellect, for the sake of exercising its own capacities. This turning away is, as Plotinus puts it, the "beginning of evils" for Soul (*Enneads* 5.1.1.4-5). The turn away brings Soul into the phenomenal world, where matter binds it. And this, as we have seen, is the reason why humans are duty-bound to make the mystic ascent.

But the second part of the passage introduces a new element. Soul turns toward its own multiplicities and capacities not only for its own sake, but also "for the ordering of what is after it."

And *that*, I realized, was the missing piece. Soul, by informing matter's neediness, transmits an image of oneness to "what is after it"—which is the whole phenomenal world. It is through Soul that the One's ultimate unity reaches everything that exists in world "here." To be sure, the oneness of rocks and microscopic dust particles may be extremely attenuated, but it is there by virtue of Soul's donation of form to matter's neediness.

This additional element gives a double meaning to the Soul's turning away from Intellect. Its turn toward itself, toward its own multiplicities and capacities, does indeed carry the mark of Lucifer's sin, the sin of pride. Plotinus in fact calls Soul's turn toward itself *tolma*, that is, audacity (*Enneads* 5.1.1.4-5). And as a consequence of its audacity, Soul conjoined with body suffers all the evils of being bound to matter—confusion, distorted judgment, forgetfulness of its source. But that same prideful turn also has a positive aspect. It is true that Soul cares more for itself than for its source. But this is still a *caring*. By giving form, and therefore order, to "what is after it," Soul tends for the phenomenal world, taking care of its well-being to the extent that it is possible for matter-with-form to be well.

Here ends the biographical interlude. Now that we know there are two duties in Plotinus's reality, we need to get a bit clearer on what each duty entails. And finally, we need to consider the relationship between them in order to understand the practical aspects of fulfilling them in everyday life.

So, what does the centripetal duty, the mystical imperative, the inward turn demand of us? It requires that humans assimilate themselves to the One by moving toward the inner center of our being. This requires turning within, away from our life "here," in order to break free of the confusing welter of the phenomenal world. Only in that way can we come to understand our true self and its true situation in the structure of reality.

On the other hand, the centrifugal duty, the imperative for creating order, the outward turn is an imitation of Soul's activity. It requires caring for this world and the beings within it by working to bring order to the confusion that runs rampant in phenomenal reality.

The first issue to settle in the relationship between the two duties is the matter of priority. Are the inward and the outward turn coordinate or is there a subordination of one to the other?

The answer to that question is pretty clear, at least on first approach. As embodied Souls, we are caught in the snares of matter and mistaken about the true structure of reality. Disordered

ourselves, we are in no condition to bring order to the disorder around us. It would seem, in fact, that attempting to do so would only make things worse by injecting poor choices into the already discombobulated muddle, choices based on mistaken beliefs about the way things are.

The inescapable conclusion seems to be that the centripetal duty is prior to the centrifugal one. We need to make the mystic turn first in order to clear up our mistaken thinking about the way things are. Only after finishing the journey to “there,” only after reuniting with the One, will we see clearly enough to care properly for the world in our lives “here.” This seems to be quite well expressed by Christ’s command, “first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:5).

The best way to see how this works is to examine the life of the sage—the person who has ascended to the One and therefore has complete clarity about “there” and “here” and the relationship between them.

Progress in the ascent toward the One takes place through dedicated and intense work on the self. This is the sculpting of the inner statue mentioned earlier, and it has the look of self-absorption. It begins with training in the so-called “civic virtues,” the four cardinal virtues mentioned by Socrates in the *Republic*, namely, courage, temperance, justice, and prudence. By mastering these virtues, the sage-in-training brings order to the external side of his existence. He eventually reaches the point when no external danger or temptation or injustice or foolishness can impede his choices.

But this is hardly enough. The civic virtues can be inculcated without imparting an understanding of why they are good beyond their utility for living “here.” They make us steadier, less at the whims of our emotions and mindless reflexes. They create inner resourcefulness and flexibility. They increase the sense that we are competent to meet all contingencies that humans can possibly manage or withstand. But they do not turn us within sufficiently to start the journey upward toward the One.

The sage-in-training must use the stability of life gained by exercising the civic virtues to turn attention toward the life of the mind, for it is there that Soul touches us directly. Here the injunction to philosophy comes forward. By turning inward to one’s thinking, by gaining skill in dialectical reasoning, the aspirant increases the ability to focus on immaterial being and becomes comfortable with the motions of Soul in its higher reaches, where it mingles with the forms that are at home in the Intellect.

But this too is not enough. Dianoetic activity, the thinking through of the multiple forms that present themselves for inspection in Soul’s higher reaches, is pleasant work for those who have ascended that far. But the pleasantness is a stumbling block to further progress. *Dianoia* leaves us dispersed. Reasoning at this level is still discursive, still tainted by the successivity that we see in language—not only the distinction between grammatical subject and object, but also the directional separation between premise and conclusion or ground and inference.

So, the sage-in-training has to push thought to the end of dianoetic activity at the upper surface of the overlapping area in the figure where Soul and Intellect commingle—and then leap up into pure Intellect, where the thinker takes up the thing thought as an immediacy. This is pure *nous*, which knows the Forms intimately and without dissection, in a way that is something like our wordless, face-to-face immersion in a burgeoning landscape or a complex artwork.

Having arrived at this point, the aspirant finds only one more hurdle to jump. Intellect retains the final separation that must be overcome, the manifest gap between the subject, the thinker, and the object, the thing thought. Intellect sees the One but is aware that it is not itself the One, that it lacks the fulness of its source. How does the sage leap over that last chasm?

This is the mystical core of the mystical turn. It is the “self-transcendence, simplification, and surrender” that Plotinus speaks about in the passage I quoted earlier. Is this final leap something done by the sage or something suffered by him at the hands of the One? I’m afraid that nothing can be said about this because the ultimate unification extinguishes the distinction between agent and patient. And this is probably why this “experience”—though that is surely not even close to an adequate name for it—cannot be communicated by sages to other human beings. They can only point. It is up to others to travel in the direction of their outstretched fingers.

Returning from the ascent to the One, the sage finds himself living in the phenomenal world “here.” But the sage is not like other human beings. The echo of self-disappearance in uniting with the One lives on in the sage, just as the echo of any life-altering experience may live on in regular humans. Those, for instance, who are shattered by experiences that shame them to their center and shock them out of their complacency may become different, more considerate people after their experience than they were before, even though the event may fade from their thoughts with time. For the sage, however, the event has effected a *complete* transformation—he has changed from a confused and dispersed dweller in the phenomenal world to a clear-sighted and fully integrated dweller in two worlds. The sage is a citizen of “there” and “here” who sees phenomenal reality in the light of eternal oneness. Such people, and only such people, are perfectly empowered to do the work of Soul in the midst of the phenomenal world. When *they* bring order, when *they* care for the world and all its beings, they bring the best order and care possible because they do not inject into the necessary disorder even more friction caused by erroneous beliefs about the nature of reality.

Do such people actually exist? Perhaps Plotinus was one, or Christ, or Buddha. Or maybe they only exist in literature, like Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium* or Father Zosima in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Be that as it may, where does it leave the rest of humanity? Does the priority of the inward turn mean that everyone should be sculpting the inner statue unceasingly to the exclusion of all other activities except those that are absolutely necessary to sustain existence? Does everyone have to wait until they can achieve union with the One before taking the outward turn? Is it impossible to do Soul’s work of caring for the world without first becoming a full-fledged sage?

I said just a moment ago that only sages are *perfectly* empowered to do the work of Soul. The structure of Plotinus’s reality makes that conclusion inescapable. But this does not mean that normal human beings cannot do the work of Soul as well. They just have to resign themselves to doing it *imperfectly*. They must understand that their efforts to care for the world and bring order to it will carry impurities owing to their ignorance. They must keep in mind that their very best efforts, and even their successes, will likely add some dissonance to the already dissonant phenomenal world—unless their efforts happen by chance to align with the true nature of reality. And such an alignment could only be by chance because regular humans don’t understand the true nature of reality. It would be like a Larissa-bound traveler journeying under a permanent eclipse of the sun who stumbles on the right road in the darkness and manages, despite the existence of many wrong turns, to stay on the main road all the way to town. In other words, it would be a rare, but not impossible, occurrence that would be all but unrepeatable because of the profound ignorance enveloping every move the traveler makes.

An awareness of the dissonance attending the efforts of normal humans to care for the world is all the more important because the question I asked about waiting to become a sage before taking the outward turn is utterly contrafactual. The truth is that humans do not have the option of waiting for sagehood before they engage with the here-and-now. They are already and continually doing Soul’s work, whether they know it or not.

As I said at the outset, we all act in accordance with our beliefs about how the world is. Every choice we make, every step we take in life is a co-creation of the matter-with-form around us and our beliefs about the nature of reality. In choosing to act one way or another, we invest phenomenal reality with the forms of our beliefs. Every human action brings form and order into phenomenal reality. Even abstaining from action is a choice based on one's notion of reality. There is no waiting for sagehood before acting in the here-and-now. Waiting too is an act in the here-and-now.

Given that humans do Soul's work constantly, bringing order into the world in accordance with their understanding of reality, it makes all the difference whether they are aware of it. If they remain unaware, they will do the work badly, sowing disorder along with the flawed order they create. If, however, they become aware of what they are doing, they can begin to correct their views of reality, which in turn will result in less discord accompanying their engagements with the world.

But this is to have already embarked on the inner journey. The first correction in one's view of reality is the first chip at the inner statue. From this point on, the inward journey proceeds in a ratcheting motion. The improving person acts in the world and brings some order to it in accordance with his new view of reality. Then he turns inward to chip and polish his statue. Then he turns outward again to act, and it goes a bit better because his views are more aligned with reality. Then he turns within again for the next round of sculpting. And so on.

So long as he never becomes complacent and never stops turning inward to work on his statue, his work in the world will be less disorderly and more in line with the care that Soul intends to take of phenomenal reality. Even if he never becomes a sage and can never do Soul's work perfectly, such a self-sculptor would have improved the world by his inner exertions, although less aware humans may charge him with self-absorption.

In fact, as Plotinus points out, the appearance of self-absorption is a misapprehension on the part of confused people.

[T]he whole world would not bear a grudge against the part that achieved greater worth by being better ordered. For it also makes the whole more beautiful when it has become embellished with a greater worth. For a thing acquires this character when it is made to be the same as the whole and is, in a way, permitted to be like and be aligned with it, that something in it might also shine forth in the region where a human being is, too, like the stars in divine heaven (*Enneads* 3.2.14.22-25; Gerson, 266).

So, after this long excursion, we are finally in a position to give a comprehensive answer the original question, *What does Plotinus's view of the world indicate about how human beings ought to live?*

The answer is that reality imposes two duties on human beings. The first duty is to make the inward turn, to take the mystic path back toward the One, the source of all Being. This is the prior injunction, although many never heed it. The second duty is to care of the world and bring order to it as perfectly as possible. This is the posterior injunction, although its activity begins in us unawares long before we make the inner turn.

While the life of the sage may not be attainable for most human beings, in Plotinus's cosmos, everyone lives his or her best life by doing double duty.