

## Selfhood in Hellenistic Antiquity: Background ambiguities, paradoxes, and problems

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That both religion and philosophy in the Islamic world grew out of the Hellenistic culture of Late Antiquity and that this mediated its relation to Hellenism are indubitable. It is equally beyond doubt that the turn to the self reflected within Greek philosophy, at least as early as Stoicism, is communicated to that Islamic world and manifests itself within both its religious concerns and its philosophical dilemmas and orientations.<sup>1</sup> For example, Avicenna reflected on the notion of the self (*nafs*) as a ground of all experiences in his celebrated “flying man argument.” It is therefore worth reminding ourselves of a few of the many ambiguities, paradoxes, and problems of that turn, at least some of which are taken up within what emerges within Islamic and Jewish philosophy and mysticism.

Alain de Libera in *Archeologie du sujet: Naissance du sujet*<sup>2</sup> makes us recall that there is nothing corresponding to “self” which crosses the cultures and philosophies about which I am speaking here and that this is particularly problematic when our perspective is from modernity and beyond. Accepting the necessary anachronism and trying not to make it determinative, I propose to use Gerard O’Daly’s beginning in *Plotinus’ Philosophy of the Self*<sup>3</sup> and suppose that *seuton* of the oracular *Gnothi seuton* enables us to start. A turn to the self is manifest in three phenomena.

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<sup>1</sup> I have sketched some of these in “The Postmodern Retrieval of Neoplatonism in Jean-Luc Marion and John Milbank and the Origins of Western Subjectivity in Augustine and Eriugena,” *Hermathena*, 165 (Winter, 1998): 9–70, “Self-knowledge and God as Other in Augustine: Problems for a Postmodern Retrieval,” *Bochumer Philosophisches Jahrbuch für Antike und Mittelalter*, 4 (1999): 83–123, “Between and Beyond Augustine and Descartes: More than a Source of the Self,” *Augustinian Studies* 32:1 (2001): 65–88, “*Secundum rei vim vel secundum cognoscentium facultatem*: Knower and Known in the *Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius and the *Proslogion* of Anselm,” *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition in Islam, Judaism and Christianity*, ed. J. Inglis, (Richmond [England]: Curzon Press, 2002), 126–150, “‘Knowing As We are Known’ in *Confessions* 10 and Other Philosophical, Augustinian and Christian Obedience to the Delphic *Gnothi Seuton* from Socrates to Modernity,” *Augustinian Studies* 34:1 (2003): 23–48, “*Participatio divini luminis*, Aquinas’ doctrine of the Agent Intellect: Our Capacity for Contemplation,” *Dionysius* 22 (2004): 149–78, “Self and Cosmos in Becoming Deiform: Neoplatonic Paradigms for Reform by Self-Knowledge from Augustine to Aquinas,” *Reforming the Church Before Modernity: Patterns, Problems and Approaches*, ed. C.M. Bellitto and L.I. Hamilton (Aldershot, England/ Burlington, VT.: Ashgate Press, 2005), Chapter 3, 39–60, “Philosophical Religion and the Neoplatonic Turn to the Subject,” *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric and Truth*, ed. W. J. Hankey and D. Hedley (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Press, 2005), Chapter 2, 17–30, and “Re-evaluating E.R. Dodds’ Platonism,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 103 (2007): 499–541.

<sup>2</sup> Alain de Libera, *Archeologie du sujet: Naissance du sujet* (Paris: Vrin, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Gerard O’Daly, *Plotinus’ Philosophy of the Self* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

First there is the care for the individual, evident in the techniques and doctrines developed by Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics and Cynics, to enable its self-protection by *apatheia* and detachment. The techniques, if not the cosmologies, are taken up very widely so that they are evident, for example, in the first three books of the *Consolation of Philosophy*. It is rightly regarded as a concordist or common Platonism or Neoplatonism but takes these positions as fragments of the philosophical whole. They pass also to non philosophical Christians, especially monks, from whom their spread is diffuse—with the Islamic and Jewish worlds in mind one cannot fail to mention Sufis. There are many paradoxes here. I choose one associated with Skepticism because it stands at the entry to the philosophical construction of the human self or selves in Plotinus. Even more clearly it is the way to what presents itself as self-complete—either hellishly or anagogically—the circumcession of being, knowing and loving in Augustine.

Both depart from the Skeptical search for repose and its satisfaction by way of the suspension of judgment. The suspension brings the searcher back to his or her self but as laboriously undermined through the balance of affirmation and negation, though there is the presupposition of repose as identity. The poise which guards itself against being drawn to any *ekstasis* by judgment cannot give any substantiality to the self.

In responding Plotinus gives us three selves and they cannot be unified in a single self-consciousness: the historical or empirical self, moving between what is below it and above it,

the *noetic* self, always in contemplation within the life of *Nous*, a contemplation on which our psychic knowing is dependent but of which it is only intermittently aware. Finally, there is what Plotinus calls “erotic *Nous*”, the *Chaldean Oracles*’ “flower of the intellect.” This is mind as it turns toward the One which it cannot hold as an object of thought within its self-reflexive knowing. Problematically for self-conscious identity in Plotinus, both the One and also the substantial being of intellectual self-relation are models and causes of the human self.

For Augustine not “making a judgment, but rather doubting everything, and fluctuating between all”, is the inescapable way to the knowledge of God and of the soul as incorporeal substances, as he tells the story of his philosophical journey in the *Confessions*. But his refutations of the Academics keep reoccurring, and are even to be found in the higher reaches of the *De Trinitate*. This reminds us that in distinction from Plotinus, Augustine has unified the One and *Nous* theologically and thus humanly. The mirrored self-reversion of both makes Augustine’s self the leading ancient candidate for historical substantiality. I shall look at it again at the end of this paper.

The *Consolation* gives us a second phenomenon belonging to this turn by teaching the immortality of the soul. As against the older forms of Greek and Hebrew

religions, concern about immortality arises in the mysteries and in philosophy. Whether the interest is: in freedom from it and its consequences, or in demonstration of both, or in practices by which a better reincarnation or a blissful resurrection may be hoped for, it is another form of occupation with the self. Here two features need noting. First, the individual may be protected from anxiety by a cosmology which makes individual immortality impossible. Second, schemes of reincarnation operate by disassociating the soul and the conscious self. When, as probably in Aristotle, and certainly in the Peripatetic tradition, both pagan and Arabic, the immortality belongs to separate intellect and humans possess it only by participation, the heart of the problem appears clearly. We must consider this later as well.

Having begun with the *Gnothi seauton*, Socrates' peculiar obedience to that command requires another word. As he is represented in the *Apology* both immortality and extinction are options. However, a turn toward the self is seen both in his demand for the examined life which now has a divinely mandated instrument, philosophy, and in his *daimonion*. Religion is not only a matter of the state or family, but also about the permanent good of the individual. The care of God for the one fulfilling the divine command to self-knowledge manifests itself in the gift of an interior divine presence; in principle, self-knowledge and interior dialogue with God belong together. However, Socrates' religion remains conservative in one crucial way. His inquiries convince him that only the god is wise. In contrast, Plato and Aristotle turn against the poetic theology, and its warning that the gods are jealous and wish to keep their knowledge to themselves. No, says Aristotle, following Plato, such jealousy would belong to an impossible imperfection, indeed knowledge is most what they want to share. However, this definitive shift towards the human self and its sharing in the divine knowing retains a conservative side: god is still what truly knows, the locus of life as knowing in the highest and proper sense, humans have *nous* only by participation.

The third phenomenon I associate with the turn to the self is different. It does not concern the individual but it is a move from the objective to the subjective pole, and the *Consolation* teaches it: knowledge is according to the mode and power of the knower. What becomes a commonly accepted law is well founded in one of Porphyry's *Sentences*, is essential to Neoplatonism and to the Christian and Arabic concordist Peripatetic / Neoplatonic systems.

If we leave aside Stoic and Epicurean dissolutions of the self as modes of care for it, and Skeptical staying with self by the labour of frustrated quest, two primary modes remain: the Peripatetic and the Neoplatonic. Both exhibit the problematic out of which paradoxes emerge. For both the substance, or the foundation, are outside the human self; union with the substance or foundation dissolves, at least, the self-consciousness of the human historical individual—if there is such a thing. I begin with the Neoplatonic where a 20<sup>th</sup>-century controversy was illumining.

Picking up from the concerns of his mentor, Gilbert Murray, Eric Dodds was preoccupied, if not obsessed, throughout his life with the irrational, and, in relation to this (or perhaps the other way round), the roots of human action. They saw in Antiquity a “Failure of Nerve”. Dodds diagnosed, in the Europe of the First World War and after, an analogous problem. Two books come out of this: *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951) and its continuation, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (1965). Ultimately, Dodds judged that Europeans had either lost confidence in their control of themselves and their world or lost that control. Perhaps he supposes these to be the same. In any case, he assumes such control of self and the practical world to be humanly normative, and not only finds his time deficient for lacking it but supposes, anachronistically, that the ancients ought to have had it. Thus, he concludes the *Greeks and the Irrational* with reflections on the parallels between what was happening in his time to “Western civilization” and what happened to ancient Hellenic civilization. Here the failure of nerve reappears. Dodds quotes André Malraux to the effect that “Western civilization has begun to doubt its own credentials” and asks:

What is the meaning of this recoil, this doubt? Is it the hesitation before the jump?...Was it the horse that refused, or the rider? That is really the crucial question. Personally, I believe that it was the horse—in other words, those irrational elements in human nature which govern without our knowledge so much of our behaviour and so much of what we think is our thinking.<sup>4</sup>

André-Jean Festugière was both a fellow student of Antiquity and a friend of Dodds. In his little masterpiece *Personal Religion among the Greeks*, like Dodds, Festugière connects the religious turn in later Neoplatonism with the political and social decadence and the misery of late antiquity.<sup>5</sup> In *Pagan and Christian*, Dodds quotes him: “As Festugière has rightly said ‘misery and mysticism are related facts’.”<sup>6</sup> The response to Festugière comes from Pierre Hadot:

It seems to me that his vision of the Hellenistic and Roman world (as moreover that of his friend, the great E.R. Dodds) has been a great deal too much dominated by simplistic clichés on the social and political decadence of the political life of the ancient world, on the trouble of the collective

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<sup>4</sup> E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Sather Classical Lectures 25 (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953), 254.

<sup>5</sup> A.J.M. Festugière, *Personal Religion among the Greeks*, Sather Classical Lectures 26 (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954).

<sup>6</sup> E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety. Some aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine*, The Wiles Lectures Given at the Queen’s University 1963 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 100.

ancient conscience. A formula like that of A.-J. Festugière: “Misery and mysticism are connected facts” is a pseudo-evidence ...<sup>7</sup>

Magisterially, Hadot breaks through the whole problematic in which these questions are set by connecting the so-called anxiety and irrationality of late antiquity and its solutions to the growth of individuality. He admits “une certaine tonalité affective commune” characterising Christians and pagans. However, there has been a problem in how historians account for this:

In order to define this psychological phenomenon, certain historians have spoken, with a degree of exaggeration, of “nervous depression,” others, of a crisis of “anxiety”; nearly all have deplored the “decline of rationalism” which manifested itself in this period. It is not perhaps exact to consider this vast transformation as a morbid phenomenon. It is true that there was a psychological crisis, but it was provoked by a phenomenon eminently positive: our taking consciousness of the “ego,” the discovery of the value of individual destiny. The philosophical schools, at first the Epicureans and the Stoics, then the Neoplatonists, give an increasing importance to the responsibility of the moral conscience and the effort for spiritual perfection. All the great metaphysical problems, the enigma of the cosmos, the origin and the end of the human, the existence of evil, and the fact of liberty, are posed in relation to the question of the destiny of the individual.<sup>8</sup>

Here we have the best description of what I am calling the turn to the self, and it is a convincing statement of the phenomena. Nonetheless, Hadot is too close a reader of Plotinus to suppose that this ego or individual is well established and with his analysis of union in Plotinus we get the other side.

Hadot recognises that Plotinus is not really the friend of the human. He wrote of the good man that he will choose “the life of the gods: for it is to them, not to the good men, that we are to be made like.”<sup>9</sup> The one who knows himself is double, one reasoning, having knowledge according to soul: “and one up above this man, who knows himself according to Intellect because he has become that intellect; and by that Intellect he thinks himself again, not any longer as a man ...”<sup>10</sup> In *Ennead* 5.3, Union with the First is a breaking in or a bringing to birth, where there is a “sudden reception of a light” compelling the soul “to believe” that “it is from Him, it is Him.” With this arrival of the “true end of the soul,” it “contemplates the light by which it sees,” but it is no longer operating by a power over which it has

<sup>7</sup> P. Hadot, *Mémorial* [André-Jean Festugière], *Annuaire: Résumé des conférences et travaux*, École pratique des hautes études, Section des sciences religieuses, 92:31–35 (Paris: 1983–84), 34.

<sup>8</sup> P. Hadot, “La Fin du paganisme,” *Encyclopédie de la Pléiade. Histoire des religions*, Tome 2 (Paris, 1972), 346–347.

<sup>9</sup> *Ennead* 1.2.7, lines 23–28 (Armstrong, Loeb, p. 146).

<sup>10</sup> *Ennead* 5.3.4 lines 8–12 (Armstrong, Loeb, p. 82).

control. Hadot describes what happens as an irruption into consciousness of a reality of which the soul was unconscious.<sup>11</sup> The consciousness explodes; it appears to have been taken over by another.<sup>12</sup>

Augustine shared with Plotinus the experience that when united with the First, the soul moves beyond thinking about itself and discovered that the attempt to grasp its goal results in fall.<sup>13</sup> Thus, as with Plotinus, the soul passes here beyond self-control and movement into the realm of grace. Despite systematic differences, Proclus has an analogous view of that to which the providence of the gods leads and how it comes. Individuality is founded in the ineffable Henads and real freedom for humans requires their help because they possess the virtue we desire. Slavery to them is our greatest freedom, “by serving those who have power over all, we become similar to them, so that we govern the whole world”<sup>14</sup>. Knowledge beyond intellect, divine madness, involves arousing “what is called the ‘one of the soul’...and to connect it with the One itself.” Then the soul loves to be quiet and becomes speechless in internal silence. The acme of liberation is “the life of the gods and that of the souls who dance above fate and follow providence”<sup>15</sup>.

The conclusion of the human journey manifests a dependence of the self on the beyond which was present from the beginning. Proclus, following Iamblichus, does not regard self-knowledge as immediately attainable. “[T]he soul is not immediately conscious of its own essential *logoi*, and possesses them as if breathing, or like a heartbeat. In order to make this hidden content of its own *ousia* explicit to itself, the soul must draw them forth through what Proclus calls projection.”<sup>16</sup>

J.J. O’Cleary writes of how for Proclus the soul has knowledge of itself and the One:

Proclus cites Socrates in the (First) Alcibiades as saying that the soul, by entering into herself, will behold all things including the deity itself ... At first the soul beholds only herself but when she penetrates more profoundly into the knowledge of herself she finds in herself both intellect and the orders of beings. However, when she proceeds ... into the “sanctuary” .. of

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<sup>11</sup> Plotin, *Traité* 9: VI, 9, Introduction, traduction commentaire et notes par Pierre Hadot, Les Écrits de Plotin publiés dans l’ordre chronologique (Paris: Cerf, 1994), 43.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 48. See also his Plotin, *Traité* 38: VI, 7, Introduction, traduction commentaire et notes par Pierre Hadot, Les Écrits de Plotin publiés dans l’ordre chronologique (Paris: Cerf, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> Plotinus *Enneads*, 5.3.17, 6.9.7; 6.9.11; Augustine *Confessions*, 7.16.22 & 9.10.24-25; *De Trinitate*, 15.25.

<sup>14</sup> Proclus, *On Providence*, trans. Carlos Steel, Ancient Commentators on Aristotle (London: Duckworth, 2007), §24, p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., §§31-34.

<sup>16</sup> D.G. MacIsaac, “Projection and Time in Proclus,” *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition in Islam, Judaism and Christianity*, ed. John Inglis, pp. 83–105 at 96.

the soul, she perceives with her eyes closed the genus of the gods and the unities of beings.”<sup>17</sup>

To appreciate the subversion of any self-enclosed rational subjectivity in Proclus, it must be remembered that the gods and “the unities of beings” to which he refers are above knowledge in themselves; the soul knows them only as they are in soul. The soul properly knows according to *dianoia*:

[A]s long as our thinking remains *dianoia* without passing over into *Nous* it will seek wholeness without achieving it. ... [*D*]ianoia is always still on the way. The intelligible is present to it only through its own dividing circuit of *Nous* ... This circuit is never finished for *dianoia* because *dianoia* is a circumference which never touches the centre which it explicates. ... [It] is erotic ... drawn towards its object.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, by her knowledge, the rational soul is pointed towards and opened to what transcends her. When she does turn to her own unity and thus to the unity of *Nous* and the One, she has also passed over into a kind of union with what is above her. As with Plotinus, Proclus is clear that we can only wait for what exceeds knowledge. I quote O’Cleary again:

Like the initiate of the mystery cults, one must wait in the outer darkness for the gods to illuminate the soul, so as to bring it into direct contact with the One. This is why prayer and theurgy are necessary supplements to the scientific way, according to Proclus.<sup>19</sup>

The Christian author of the Dionysian *corpus* is so little attached to his historical identity that, like Iamblichus, who wrote as “*the Preceptor Abammon*,” an Egyptian priest, he identified himself with the Dionysius converted by Paul’s sermon on the Athenian Areopagus and with the content and method of the Apostle’s preaching

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<sup>17</sup> J.J. O’Cleary, “The Role of Mathematics in Proclus’ Theology,” *Proclus et la Théologie Platonicienne. Actes du Colloque International de Louvain (13-16 mai 1998) en l’honneur de H.D. Saffrey et L.G. Westerink*, éd. A.Ph. Segonds et C. Steel, Ancient and Medieval Philosophy De Wulf-Mansion Centre Series I, XXVI (Leuven and Paris: Leuven University Press and Les Belles Lettres, 2000), pp. 65–90 at 75–76. For what the Pseudo-Dionysius did with this, see Istvan Perczel, “Pseudo-Dionysius and the *Platonic Theology*. A Preliminary Study,” *Proclus et la Théologie Platonicienne*, pp. 491–532 at 520. Henry Chadwick, “Philosophical Tradition and the Self,” *Late Antiquity. A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. G.W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, Oleg Grabar (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 72–73 gives an outline of the *In Alcibiades*.

<sup>18</sup> MacIsaac, “Projection and Time in Proclus,” 99–101. For this image in Plotinus, see *Enneads* 1.7.1; 5.1.11; 6.5.4; 6.9.8.

<sup>19</sup> O’Cleary, “The Role,” p. 88. J. Bussanich, “Mystical Theology and Spiritual Experience in Proclus’ *Platonic Theology*,” *Proclus et la Théologie Platonicienne*, pp. 291–10 at 306 refuses to isolate “ecstatic states and visionary experiences” from “the entire way of life pursued by the Neoplatonic mystic.”

(Acts 17:22-34). His writing, and his hidden life manifest only in that writing, also declare “the unknown God”. They do so by using the religious and philosophical culture of the Athenians he and the Apostle addressed. Paul had been converted in a blinding encounter with a heavenly light “beyond the brightness of the sun” (Acts 26.13). When describing the one “caught up into the third heaven” (I Cor. 12.2), he spoke in the third person, because, as he writes in another context, “I live, but not I, Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2.20). Dionysius explicated this ascent and vision, and Paul’s passage beyond the opposition of identity and difference, by uniting the Pauline writings with what descended to him from Philo Judaeus, on Moses’ entrance into the divine darkness, and Plotinus, on union with the One, and from the new Athenian mystical theologians, Proclus and Damascius. Concluding beyond negation and affirmation a journey begun with a sensuous affirmative symbolic theology, he exhibits the continuation of a Neoplatonism which surpasses matter / spirit, body / soul, sense / reason, evil / good dualisms by way of the ineffable First.

This is all too sketchy and scattered but a brief reference to Aristotle will bring the problematic before us openly. He teaches not only that there are higher forms of knowing than the human, but also that ours depends on theirs. This comes out especially in *Metaphysics* 12, *De Anima* 3, and *Nicomachean Ethics* 10. The last gives the consequence with all the clarity of Aristotelian *aporiae*, which Plotinus echoes: The best life is “too high for man; for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him;...We must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things.” The highest is both beyond us and our true selves. De Libera shows how Averroes follows the Peripatetic reading of Aristotle on this with the consequence that our knowing and immortality depend on what is separate from us.<sup>20</sup>

Attention to the Augustinian doctrine of illumination produces a like result in respect to knowing. In Book X of the *Confessions*, Augustine is on his way to the last three books where the human historical journey and his account of his conversion as providential are grounded in the divine revelation of the cosmic genesis. Another substantiality as essential to the self and its knowledge has long been present. When, in Book X, Augustine obeys the Delphic “Gnothi seauton” in confession as self-examination before the divine judge, the idea that he knows and judges through contact with the immutable light above and within enables him to ask: “Truth, when did you ever fail to walk with me, teaching me what to avoid and what to seek after..?” (*Conf.* 10.40.65). Is it then any wonder that de Libera is able to make much of the fact that for Augustine, acts like knowledge and love come to light in the soul, but cannot be attributed to it as their subject.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> de Libera, *Archeologie du sujet: Naissance du sujet*, 202–208.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 209–295.

When all is said and done the paradoxes of the self to which the ancients attend are those displayed in the dialogue on self-knowledge with which the Neoplatonists started their students, the *Alcibiades*; self-knowledge takes us beyond ourselves to a unity, a subsistence, a knowledge, a love and a good which is beyond us and in which we only participate and we come to know ourselves only as reflected in an higher other.