

Plotinus' Concept of 'We' and Its Relation to the Kantian Tradition

YADY OREN¹

Abstract

Hailed as an innovative concept in antiquity, Plotinus' concept of the 'we' occupies a nuanced and somewhat elusive systematic position. On the one hand, it locates itself in the realm of the soul rather than the intellect; at the same time, however, it manifests a self-conscious dimension typically ascribed to the intellect rather than the soul. This paper attempts to resolve this ambiguity by interpreting the 'we' as a potential of self-consciousness, which explains why the 'we' can become similar to, but not identical with, the actual self-consciousness of the intellect. The proposed definition not only brings clarity to the seemingly paradoxical formulations surrounding the 'we' in Plotinus' philosophy, but also sheds light on the allegories that Plotinus employs. Moreover, my analysis highlights the similarity between the Plotinian 'we' and the characterizations of the self within the Kantian tradition. Drawing on Cassirer's distinction between concepts of substance and concepts of function, and Kant's assertion that the 'I think' represents a potentiality rather than an actuality of self-consciousness, this study attempts to provide a conceptual bridge between the Plotinian and Kantian frameworks.

Keywords: Plotinus, History of Philosophy, Self-consciousness, Neoplatonism, Kantian Tradition.

El concepto de 'nosotros' de Plotino y su relación con la tradición kantiana

Resumen

Considerado un concepto innovador en la Antigüedad, el concepto de 'nosotros' de Plotino ocupa una posición sistemática, si bien esquiva y llena de matices. Por un lado, se sitúa en el ámbito del alma más que en el del intelecto; al mismo tiempo manifiesta una dimensión autoconsciente típicamente atribuida al intelecto más que al alma. Este artículo intenta resolver esta ambigüedad interpretando el 'nosotros' como un potencial de autoconciencia, lo que explica por qué el 'nosotros' puede llegar a ser similar, pero no idéntico, a la autoconciencia actual del intelecto. La definición propuesta no sólo aporta claridad a las formulaciones aparentemente

¹ University of Potsdam. Contact: yadyoren@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1974-9452>.

paradójicas que rodean al 'nosotros' en la filosofía de Plotino; también arroja luz sobre las alegorías que Plotino emplea. Además, mi análisis pone de relieve la similitud entre el 'nosotros' plotiniano y las caracterizaciones del yo dentro de la tradición kantiana. Basándome en la distinción de Cassirer entre conceptos de sustancia y conceptos de función, y en la afirmación de Kant de que el 'yo pienso' representa una potencialidad más que una actualidad de la autoconciencia, este estudio intenta proporcionar un puente conceptual entre el marco plotiniano y el kantiano.

Palabras clave: Plotino, Historia de la Filosofía, Autoconciencia, Neoplatonismo, Tradición Kantiana.

Plotinus' concept of the 'we' is unique both in the history of philosophy and in its systematic context. The 'we' is considered by some to be an innovation of Plotinus, who is said to be the first in antiquity to separate the self or 'we' from the soul (Dodds, 1960; Oosthout, 1991). Some even claim that Plotinus' conceptualization of the 'we' brings him closer to modern philosophy (Bréhier, 1928).² The following discussion attempts to address one aspect of this concept, namely that of self-relation or self-consciousness.³ I will refer primarily to Plotinus' treatise "The Knowing Hypostases and the Transcendent" (*Ennead* V.3 [49]) and examine how Plotinus understands self-consciousness in relation to the 'we'. I will argue that Plotinus ascribes to the 'we' a unique kind of self-relation, namely a potential or possibility for self-consciousness.⁴ In order to assess the significance and innovation of defining the 'we' as a potential for self-consciousness, I will compare Plotinus' concept with that developed in the Kantian tradition. In doing so, I will examine the extent to which Plotinus' 'we' approaches the modern concept of the self.

² See also Aubry (2020, p. 212), who also claims that "although, of course, he [Plotinus] is not a 'modern' [philosopher], he is no longer an 'ancient' either".

³ A broad account of this concept can be found by O'Daly (1973), Remes (2007), Mortley (2013), and Hutchinson (2018).

⁴ The definition proposed here overlaps to some extent with Aubry's account of the 'we' (2020), as will be addressed in the course of the paper. My reading differs from Aubry's, however, particularly with regard to the relationship between the 'we' and the intellect and the distinction between self-consciousness and self-knowledge, as will be explained below.

I will first explain in what sense I use the term self-consciousness. I will then present how the concept of self-consciousness is integrated in the Plotinian structure of hypostases, as discussed in *Ennead* V.3. I will present Plotinus' ambiguity in claiming that the 'we' belongs to the soul and not to the intellect, but is nevertheless characterized by a self-consciousness that is typical of the intellect and not of the soul. I will then review the dispute in the literature regarding whether self-consciousness should be attributed to the soul. To resolve the ambiguity in Plotinus' formulations, I will then propose to define the 'we' as the soul's potential for self-consciousness. Through this definition, I hope to clarify Plotinus' formulations and allegories regarding the concept of the 'we'. Finally, I will conclude that, in attributing to the 'we' a potential for self-consciousness, Plotinus in some sense anticipates the conceptualization of the subject in the Kantian tradition. But first it will be useful to explain in what sense I use the term self-consciousness in this context.

In the history of philosophy, the term self-consciousness has had many different aspects. While in pre-modern philosophy it mainly carried a theoretical meaning, modern philosophy has added a practical meaning expressed by autonomy and political freedom. Although at the end of this paper I will discuss the similarities between Plotinus and modern philosophy, the use of the term self-consciousness here is almost exclusively concerned with a theoretical aspect, namely self-relation and the unity/complexity tension within self-relation. Plotinus begins his discussion in *Ennead* V.3 by asking whether "that which is conscious of itself" ["*νοοῦν ἑαυτὸ*"] (V.3.1.1) must be complex.⁵ This question motivates Plotinus' discussion in the following sections, wherein he explores which hypostasis should be accorded self-consciousness. Plotinus concludes that the intellect is the hypostasis that has self-consciousness in the sense of self-relation, since it is directed toward itself and thus involves the unity within complexity that characterizes self-relation.⁶ I will restrict my treatment of self-consciousness to this sense.

⁵ Similarly, Plotinus addresses the problem of unity/complexity in relation to "know yourself" (VI.7.41.21–25).

⁶ As Plotinus claims in several places, the intellect is *ἐν πολλά*. See, for example, VI.7.14.11–12; IV.2.2.40.

1. The Ambiguity in Plotinus' Concept of the 'We'

Self-consciousness is a focal issue in Plotinus' philosophy. All three hypostases, the soul, the intellect, and the One, can be characterized in terms of directionality: the soul is directed to the external world, the intellect is directed inwardly, to itself, and the One is a simple unity that denies any distinction between inside and outside and thus denies the very possibility of being directed. Since the intellect is that which is directed to itself, it is clear why Plotinus considers the intellect to have self-consciousness rather than the soul or the One. In *Ennead* V.3, however, Plotinus discusses extensively the possibility that the soul also has self-consciousness in some sense. His discussion in this text reviews different aspects of the soul, in order to decide whether they have the quality of self-consciousness. Plotinus begins by denying self-consciousness to the perceptive part of the soul, claiming it is "perceptive only of what is external" (2, 3–4). Plotinus turns then to the reasoning part of the soul. The reasoning part is in charge of processing and judging the impressions perceived by the lower part. It deals indeed with the external, but in order to process and judge the impressions, it might also turn to itself and thus possess self-consciousness. However, Plotinus claims that, if the reasoning part turns to itself, then it is identical with the pure intellect. Such an identification annihilates the difference between the soul and the intellect and risks undermining the whole structure of the three hypostases. Although Plotinus is careful to avoid conflating the soul and the intellect, he does not deny that the intellect is an internal part of the soul. Rather, he makes two distinctions: first, between being in the soul and belonging to the soul, and second, between the soul and the 'we', as he states:

What then prevents pure Intellect from being in soul? Nothing, we shall reply. But should we go on to say that it belongs to soul? But we shall not say that it belongs to soul, but we shall say that it is *our* [ἡμέτερον] intellect, being different from the reasoning part and having gone up on high, but all the same *ours* [ἀλλ' εἶτι δεῖ λέγειν ψυχῆς τοῦτο; Ἀλλ' οὐ ψυχῆς μὲν φήσομεν, ἡμέτερον δὲ νοῦν φήσομεν] (V.3.3.22–26).⁷

Plotinus is distinguishing between two different questions: what is the place of the intellect and to whom does it belong. The structural place of the

⁷ All English translations are from Plotinus (1966–1988).

intellect may indeed be *in* the reasoning part of the soul, but this does not entail that the intellect *belongs* to the reasoning part. Instead, Plotinus argues that it belongs to us. Specifically, Plotinus does not claim the self-conscious intellect is *in* us but rather that it is *ours*, it *belongs* to us. Such a statement has two implications: first, the 'we' is different from the soul, and second, the self-consciousness of the intellect belongs to the 'we'.

In the course of the discussion, however, Plotinus qualifies the statement that self-consciousness is ours, and speaks in paradoxical terms, stating (V.3.3.26–27): “self-thinking [τὸ νοεῖν ἑαυτὸ] [...] is ours [ἡμέτερον] and not ours; for this reason we use it [προσχρώμεθα] and do not use it”. He explains that the reason why we both have self-thinking and do not have it, is because our self-consciousness comes to us, or to the 'we', *through* the intellect [παρὰ τοῦ νοῦ ἔχει] (18). The 'we' does not have self-awareness of its own, but becomes aware of itself through the intellect. Accordingly, Plotinus argues that the 'we' has self-consciousness “in accordance with the intellect, because it *becomes* that intellect” (V.3.3.11). Since the intellect is what has self-consciousness in the strict sense, Plotinus argues that the 'we' must become identical with the intellect, in order to have self-consciousness. Such identification cannot be applied to the reasoning part of the soul, which is directed to the outside and thus cannot become identical with the intellect. The identification with the intellect is restricted to the 'we' alone. But the identification of the 'we' and the intellect is itself also qualified. Although we become identical with the intellect, Plotinus stresses that “we are not intellect” [“οὐ γὰρ νοῦς ἡμεῖς”] (V.3.3.30). The 'we' is thus different from both the soul and the intellect. The intellect belongs to the 'we' rather than to the soul and the 'we' becomes identical with the intellect although the 'we' is not the intellect.

To explain the complex set of relationships between the 'we', the soul and the intellect, Plotinus turns to allegories. For example, he uses the metaphor of *flying* to refer to the process in which we become identical with the intellect. In Plotinus' words,

he who knows himself in accordance with Intellect because he has become that Intellect [τὸν γινώσκοντα ἑαυτὸν κατὰ τὸν νοῦν ἐκεῖνον γινόμενον]; and by that Intellect he thinks himself again, not any longer as man, but having become altogether other and snatching himself [συναρπάσαντα ἑαυτὸν] up into the higher

world, drawing up only the better part of soul, precisely the part that can get wings to thought (V.3.3.11–14).

When the 'we' 'flies' to the intellect, that is, when it becomes aware of itself through the intellect, it takes the better part of the soul with it. Apart from the allegory of 'flying', Plotinus states that the 'we' is an *image* of the intellect. The intellect's self-consciousness is the source and the 'we' is an image or a representation of it. The image does not stand on its own, but only in relation to the source. This metaphor means that the 'we', as an image, is dependent upon the intellect just as a representation is dependent upon what it represents. Plotinus also uses the allegory of *seeking*: the 'we' seeks or looks for self-consciousness, whereas the intellect already possesses it. The difference between the intellect and the 'we' is also expressed in a temporal sense: Plotinus claims that the intellect *always* thinks of itself, whereas we do not always think of ourselves.

Plotinus' discussion about the 'we' and the use of metaphors point to the complexity of the relationship between the soul, the 'we' and the intellect. The 'we' is not the intellect but the intellect belongs to it; we are not the intellect but become identical with it; the intellect is ours and not ours, we use it and do not use it. On the one hand, the 'we' is part of the soul and not of the intellect. On the other, the 'we', as a first-person concept, also has to do with self-consciousness that characterizes the intellect. The 'we' is thus a part of soul which has the character of the intellect, namely, the character of self-consciousness.

2. The Dispute in the Literature

The ambiguity in Plotinus' discussion has led to different and opposing interpretations. The very independence of the concept of the 'we' is controversial. Some scholars do not treat the 'we' as an independent term. Beierwaltes and Kalligas claim the 'we' does not extend beyond the boundaries of the soul. Beierwaltes considers the 'soul' and the 'we' as synonymous and claims both represent the subject equally (Beierwaltes, 1991; Kalligas, 2014). Their interpretation, however, disregards Plotinus'

distinction between what belongs to the soul and what is ours.⁸ As explained above, Plotinus explicitly states that even if the intellect is inside the soul, it does not belong to the soul but to us. The soul and the 'we' are thus clearly distinguished.

In contrast to Beierwaltes and Kalligas, most interpreters consider the 'we' to be an independent term, distinct from the soul. Warren, for example, states that "to identify the self as soul will equally end in confusion" (1964, p. 97). He continues: "Plotinus always understood implicitly that the factor which determines one's experience is the peculiar power that enables the self to turn towards its object and cognize it" (Warren, 1964, p. 97). Yet, even though most scholars view the 'we' as independent, they find it difficult to determine its place between the soul and the intellect due to the paradoxical nature of Plotinus' formulations. Such ambiguity is expressed in Dodds' oft-quoted description of the 'we' as "a fluctuating spotlight of consciousness" (1960, p. 5; see also Hutchinson, 2018). Following Dodds, Blumenthal defines the 'we' as a "focus of consciousness" (1960, p. 5), while O'Daly claims that "it has a good degree of what we can call selfhood" (1973, p. 49).⁹ In a similar vein, Bréhier says that the 'we' is neither a "thing" nor a hypostasis, but "a subjective activity" (1928, p. 68).

Addressing the fluctuating character of the 'we', Sorabji attributes to the 'we' free choice, claiming that the 'we' "is something that you yourself can shape rather than something that has just been given you by nature" (2006, p. 119; see also Tornau, 2009). Aubry also grasps the 'we' "as a power of choice and self-determination", and, similarly to the definition suggested in this paper, also defines the 'we' as potentiality (2020, p. 218). His account differs from the present one, however, in terms of the relationship between the 'we' and the intellect, as I will elaborate below.

⁸ Cf. V.3.24–26: "But we shall not say that the intellect belongs to soul, but we shall say that it is *our* intellect, being different from the reasoning part and having gone up on high, but all the same ours, even if we should not count it among the parts of soul".

⁹ "The self is not a static *datum*, even if it exists potentially in its entirety: it is essentially a faculty of conscious determination, a mid-point which can be directed towards the higher or towards the lower" (1973, p. 49).

3. The 'We' as Potentiality

In what follows, I will attempt to substantiate an understanding of the 'we' as a potentiality for self-consciousness, in the hope that such a definition will serve to resolve the problems I have outlined so far. That is, such a definition should first clarify Plotinus' paradoxical formulations in which he claims that we have self-consciousness and do not have it, that we use it and do not use it. Second, in a broader sense, it should explain the structural place of the 'we' between the soul and the intellect, and the extent to which the 'we' belongs to each of the hypostases. Third, the definition should shed new light on the dispute in the literature about the independence of the 'we' from the soul.

I believe the key to understanding the self-consciousness of the 'we' lies in its relationship with the intellect. The intellect is defined as directed to itself and thus its self-consciousness is characterized by the Aristotelian concept of *actuality* [*energeia*]. Plotinus elaborates on this actuality, arguing that it constitutes the unity of knower and known. The 'we', as I have shown above, is not the intellect but rather a part of the soul. Nevertheless, it is "the part that *can* get wings to thought" and become identical with the intellect (V.3.3.13). The 'we' has the ability to shift from being directed to the outside, to being directed, as part of the soul, toward itself, and in this sense become similar to the intellect. Thus, the 'we', as part of soul, can be defined as *possibility* or *potential* for self-consciousness. The 'we' has the potential to become aware of itself. More precisely, the 'we' is *the soul's* ability and potential to turn to itself and thus become aware of itself. The systematic definitions are indeed unequivocal: the soul is directed to the outside and the intellect to itself. This definition of the soul, however, is not a complete denial of the self-consciousness of the soul. The soul can be defined as being directed to the external world and nevertheless have the potential for self-consciousness. This is due to the special character of the concept of potentiality. Potentiality or possibility indicates being there and not there; what exists, but only as potential of existence. The soul can be defined as being directed to the outside, to the world, but nevertheless can contain self-consciousness, as long as it is merely a possibility. Plotinus assigns this possibility or potentiality of the soul to the concept of the 'we', and thus refrains from undermining the soul's definition as being directed to the outside. When Plotinus argues that self-consciousness "is ours [*ἡμέτερον*] and not ours" and that "we use it [*προσχρόμεθα*] and do not use it" (V.3.3.26–2),

he expresses precisely the two sides of potentiality. Potential is what we both have and do not have, in the sense that we *can* have it, but we do not necessarily actually have it.

The relationship between potentiality and actuality gives substance to Plotinus' statement that the 'we' has self-consciousness *through* the intellect. By actualizing itself, potentiality becomes identical with actuality, just as the 'we' becomes identical with the intellect. It is thus clear why Plotinus can stress that "we are not intellect" (V.3.3.30), but all the same claim that the 'we' can become identical with the intellect. At this point I take issue with Aubry (2020), who distinguishes between self-consciousness, which belongs to the 'we', and self-knowledge, which belongs to the intellect. In my view, if the 'we' is understood as potentiality, once it becomes actual, there can be no distinction between the 'we' and the intellect.¹⁰ On my reading, the statement "we are not intellect" (V.3.3.30) is parallel to claiming that potential is not actual. But such a statement does not preclude that the potential *can become* actual.

In this sense, Plotinus distinguishes between the question of whether the intellect is *in* the soul and that of whether the intellect *belongs* to the soul. The question regarding the place of the intellect refers to the general structure of the three hypostases, that is, whether one hypostasis could be viewed as being within the other. The question of *to whom the intellect belongs*, on the contrary, refers to the use of the intellect. The intellect belongs to us to the extent that we use it, to the extent we fulfill our potential, and to the extent that we turn to ourselves and thus become identical with the intellect. The 'we' is not a hypostasis like the soul. The intellect cannot be 'inside' us. The 'we' is rather a possibility or a function of the soul. We take possession of the intellect to the degree that we use this function, fulfill our potential and become identical with the intellect.

I believe such reading can shed light on Plotinus' metaphors as well. The metaphor of "get[ting] wings" (V.3.3.13) to the intellect does not necessarily refer to a mystical experience (see Beierwaltes, 1991). It can simply refer to the act in which we fulfill the potentiality, turn to ourselves and become identical with the intellect. The metaphor of 'seeking' and 'possessing' resembles the relationship between potentiality and actuality. It

¹⁰ Cf. Plotinus (V.3.9–11): "he who knows himself in accordance with Intellect because he has become that Intellect" ["τὸν γινώσκοντα ἑαυτὸν κατὰ τὸν νοῦν ἐκεῖνον γινόμενον"].

is, as if, the 'we' seeks out intellect's self-consciousness, in the same manner that potentiality, in a way, looks for actualization. The allegory of image and source thus becomes clear. The potentiality appears as an image of actuality, because it is similar to it, but not actual. In the same manner that the image is dependent on the source, but not *vice versa*, so the potentiality of the 'we' is dependent upon the actuality of the intellect. The intellect, for its part, is a pure actuality which is independent of potentiality.

Characterizing the 'we' as potential for self-consciousness explains why Plotinus attributes to the 'we' *freedom*, or free choice. Unlike the intellect, which by its nature necessarily thinks of itself, the 'we' does so by its own free will. Plotinus argues that by choosing between focusing on the external world and focusing on ourselves, we can become either messengers or kings, respectively. If we choose to focus on the external world, and thus remain part of the soul, we are "messengers" [ἄγγελος], whereas if we turn to ourselves, and thus become identical to the intellect, we are "kings" [βασιλευς] (V.3.3.45). The allegory means that when we focus on the external world we are second to it, the world is the object and we are merely passively observing it. However, when we turn to ourselves, we become the observed object. Potentiality is a necessary condition for this free choice between being messengers and kings. We are free to be conscious only because we have the potential to be conscious.

Furthermore, the ability or freedom of the 'we' to turn from the soul to the intellect has a methodological advantage in Plotinus' theory, for it clarifies our status as philosophers. When Plotinus inquires into the self-consciousness of the intellect, he faces a methodological problem, which he implicitly addresses in *Ennead* V.3.4, right before turning from the soul to the intellect. Since we, as philosophers, "are not intellect" (V.3.3.30), how can we investigate it at all? If the intellect has self-consciousness, and we lack this quality altogether, how can we understand such a phenomenon which is completely beyond us? The pivotal place of the 'we' between the soul and the intellect solves this problem. Our ability to actualize the potential and thus become identical with the intellect's self-consciousness means that when we inquire into the intellect, we actually inquire into *ourselves*. This gives us, as philosophers, the methodological justification to explore the intellect, even though we are not intellect.

The definition suggested here can shed new light on the dispute in the literature regarding the status of the 'we'. Since potential for self-consciousness is something that "we have and do not have", as Plotinus states, it is clear why some scholars do not even consider the 'we' to be a distinguishable concept. Indeed, Beierwaltes' reading, according to which the 'we' is synonymous with the soul is correct to the extent that as long as 'we' do not fulfill our potential, the 'we' is indistinguishable from the soul. Moreover, when the 'we' fulfills this potential, it immediately becomes identical with the intellect. At any given point the 'we' is identical with one of the two. The independent place of the 'we' does not stem from it being separate from the other hypostases; the sole way to consider the 'we' is as a part of each. Instead, the independence of the 'we' stems from our ability to freely choose to be part of the soul or of the intellect. Such understanding of the independence of the 'we' corresponds with Dodds' description of the 'we' as a "fluctuating spotlight of self-consciousness" (1960, p. 5). This definition addresses the ability of the 'we' to fluctuate in this way, due to the constant oscillation of the 'we' back and forth between potentiality and actuality, from being directed to the world to being directed to the self.

However, in light of the discussion so far, a question arises: if this definition of the 'we' is indeed correct, why did Plotinus himself not define the 'we' as a potential for self-consciousness? Considering Plotinus' frequent use of the Aristotelian distinction between *δύναμις* and *ἐνέργεια*, why did he refrain from this definition? First, it should be remembered that the concept of the 'we' receives only a marginal place in Plotinus. Though he is the first in antiquity to separate the self from the soul, given his short discussion on the 'we', Plotinus did not pursue this separation to its fullest extent. It is very likely that Plotinus was not concerned with the precise definition of this term. An indication of this is the sparse discussion Plotinus devotes to the 'we' in an *Ennead* dealing with self-consciousness (V.3). Although the 'we', as a first-person pronoun, appears to be a first candidate to be examined in terms of its self-consciousness, Plotinus comes to discuss it only incidentally, as a transition between the soul and the intellect. The marginal place of the 'we' may be an indication that Plotinus did not fully consider its precise definition.

Another possible answer concerns Plotinus' argument against what he calls the "potential intellect" (II.9.1). Both in V.3.5 and in II.9.1 ("Against the Gnostics"), Plotinus criticizes the approach that divides the intellect into

potential and actual. Plotinus' claim is that the intellect is pure actuality without any potentiality (see Emilsson, 2007). It is thus possible that Plotinus refrains from the term potential in relation to the 'we' in order to avoid the confusion with the concept of the potential intellect. In the next section, in order to emphasize the contribution of the proposed definition, I will turn to a discussion of the extent to which such a definition of the 'we' anticipates the concept of the self as it is understood in the Kantian tradition.

4. The Plotinian 'We' and the Kantian Tradition

In the final part, I would like to suggest that my reading, as presented so far, can contribute not only to the comprehension of Plotinus' text alone, but hopefully also to the understanding of Plotinus' place in the history of philosophy in general. I will do this by pointing out a similarity between the Plotinian 'we' and the way the self is understood in the Kantian tradition. In pointing out such resemblance, it is not my intention to argue that Plotinus attributes to the self the same degree of centrality as has been attributed to the self in modern philosophy since Descartes. Whereas in modern philosophy the self is often both starting point and center, in Plotinus it plays merely a marginal role as a bridge between the soul and the intellect. My intention, instead, is to point to two main elements of the Plotinian 'we' that can also be found in Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy. The first pertains to the self's status as a *dynamic* rather than a static factor in the system. The 'we' is not understood as a substance [*ousia*] but rather as a concept that continually pivots from the soul to the intellect, from being a messenger to being a king. The self is not defined in itself but only *in relation* to the soul and the intellect. Here it would be helpful to introduce Cassirer's (1923) distinction between *Concepts of Substance* and *Concepts of Function*. In rather simplistic terms, Cassirer distinguishes between a concept of substance, which refers to concepts that exist in themselves, independently of other concepts, and a concept of function, which is only to be understood by virtue of the relation it has to other concepts and the role it plays in a system. Cassirer's distinction can be applied, *inter alia*, to the way concepts such as the self, the soul or God have been understood since Kant. Namely, they are viewed regarding the function and the role they fulfill rather than as independent entities. I believe Cassirer's distinction might explain the status of the 'we' in our discussion. In contrast to the hypostases of the soul and the intellect, which

can be seen as concepts of substance, the self or the 'we' is understood merely by the function it fulfills and the set of relationships it has. The difference between substance and function may further explain Plotinus' distinction between the question of whether the intellect is *in us* and the question of whether it *belongs* to us. The intellect may be in the soul, since the soul can be viewed as a concept of substance, for as a substance, it may be understood as something that contains in itself something else, namely the intellect. The 'we', however, cannot contain the intellect because the 'we' is merely a function. Rather, the intellect belongs to the 'we' to the extent that the 'we' uses it and becomes self-conscious. Therefore, in denying substantiality to the 'we' and concentrating on its function, Plotinus' 'we' is similar to the concept of the I or the subject in the Kantian tradition, wherein the self is understood as a function rather than a substance.

The second similarity between the Plotinian 'we' and Kantian philosophy concerns the definition of the 'we' as potential for self-consciousness, as presented here. This definition is reminiscent of Kant's famous formulation, according to which, the "*I think* must be *able* to accompany all my representations" (Kant, 1956, p. 131). Kant's formulation puts self-consciousness in a position of ability and potentiality. Kant does not claim that we are constantly aware of ourselves when we perceive the representations. Rather, he claims that we have the *ability* to attribute all the representations to ourselves. The ability of the I to attribute the representations to itself resembles the 'we' that has the potential to turn from the soul to the intellect, from the external to itself. In this sense, both Kant and Plotinus understand the self as ability and potentiality for self-consciousness. The similarity between Plotinus and Kantian philosophy does not indicate that Plotinus anticipates the modern discovery of subjectivity. It rather shows that to some extent his concept of the 'we' is a precursor of the characterization of the self in modern philosophy.

The similarities pointed out here between Plotinus and the Kantian tradition are part of a broader, growing tendency to compare Neoplatonism with the Kantian tradition and German Idealism. As part of this tendency, one can refer to studies that emphasize the similarity between the traditions and seek to explain Kant and his followers in the light of Neoplatonism (Halfwassen, 2002; Leinkauf, 2019; Rohstock, 2023); studies that examine the extent to which Neoplatonic philosophers can be seen as precursors of

Kantian insights (Halfwassen, 2004; Oren, 2020); and studies that emphasize the distance and difference between the two (Asmuth, 1995; Oren, 2022). The two similarities I point out here can contribute to this tendency by revealing the ways in which Plotinus anticipates some ideas that were later developed in the Kantian tradition.

In conclusion, I suggest viewing Plotinus' concept of the 'we' as potential for self-consciousness. I believe that potentiality, as distinct from the actual self-consciousness of the intellect, is the key to understanding the various characteristics of the 'we'. It explains its pivotal place between the soul and the intellect, the freedom Plotinus attributes to the 'we', and our methodological possibility as philosophers to explore the intellect. I further suggest understanding the Plotinian 'we', in the light of Kantian philosophy, as a concept of function rather than as a concept of substance. I hope that these suggestions may help to clarify the self-relation of the Plotinian concept of the 'we'.

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