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## **Plotinus on the Role of the Other in the Search for Self-Knowledge**

One of Plotinus' departures from Plato is his abandonment of the dialogical method in favour of a turn inwards and a dialectic in which another person's role is very limited. His interpretation of the Platonic quest for self-knowledge dispenses with the role of the other emphasised in both the *Charmides* and the *Alcibiades I*, and fundamental to the philosophical way of life - shared discourse - disclosed in the dramatisation of the dialogues. Ancient philosophy is often accused of sacrificing the individual to the universal. Does Plotinus' move eliminate the last niche of true significance placed on another person?

For a Platonist, philosophy is a quest for self-knowledge. This quest can take two different forms.

**I** The way of life we see the participants of many of Plato's dialogues engage in is a *shared study* of their beliefs about fundamental things. As the dramatisations show, even though the object of knowledge was our own self and the beliefs we hold, in order to make progress, we must make our beliefs public and available for shared scrutiny. It is not just that Socrates is needed to make people understand their intellectual commitments; people bring their whole personality and belief set to the discussion, offering arguments and approaches that arise from different kinds of life experiences. The presence of another person widens the scope the discussion can take by providing an alternative set of beliefs to start the inquiry from and by proposing new and perhaps even surprising ways of thinking.

**II** The exhortation to know oneself can also be understood as directing us to *solitary contemplation*. Knowing oneself is different from knowing anyone or anything else. It is natural (although not self-evident) to think of one's own thoughts, experiences and feelings as available for oneself in a more direct or immediate way than those of any other person. However, in both the *Charmides* and the *Alcibiades* the attempt to acquire knowledge of oneself by simply looking into one's own soul seems to fail, and any hope of self-knowledge turns out to lie in complicated discussions with Socrates.

Despite these notable failures, Plotinus, famously, takes the idea of looking within seriously. His proposed method is to look more closely inwards, to turn one's gaze from the sensible realm to what lies inside our souls. Where in the *Alcibiades I* the metaphor for attainment of self-knowledge is an eye gazing at the eye of someone else, Plotinus directs us to inward turn (*eis to eis*) and the higher kind of vision that leaves the sensible behind (*Alc. I 132c-133c; Enn. I.6.9.Ý*)

This *epistrophé* is accompanied by an almost total abandonment of dialogical character of philosophy. The treatise on dialectic (*Ennead I.3*) describes the chosen method as "leading", "teaching" as well as "giving studies" rather than, for instance, conversing. Dialectic seems, in the end, a solitary encounter between the philosopher, his objects of knowledge, and his true self.

How deeply and for what reasons has Plotinus changed the basis of the philosophical way of life? Even if there remained a place for virtue and benevolence towards other people in Plotinus' thought, has Platonic philosophy with this development lost its last interest in another person as irremediably and utterly other?