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Actuality and Potentiality in Plotinus' View of the Intelligible Universe

SUMMARY: The scope of this paper is first to explain the meaning of potential existence, actual existence, power and actuality according to Plotinus; and then investigate how, in the *Enneads*, these notions apply to the One, Intellect and Soul. We will see that Plotinus makes a coherent and consistent use of these notions throughout the corpus.

Plotinus wrote a detailed study on the meaning of actuality and potentiality, entitled *On What Exists Potentially and What Actually* (II, 5 [25]). His goal is to define these notions and explain their relationship to the intelligible universe. We want here to describe Plotinus' conception of actuality and potentiality, and then give an overview of their meanings according to each level of intelligible reality. In II, 5 [25], for instance, the intelligible universe is considered as a whole, each level of reality does not receive any particular attention. It thus becomes important to examine how the entire *Enneads* handle the notions of actuality and potentiality regarding the One, the Intellect and the Soul¹. Does Plotinus follow a general and coherent doctrine on this topic throughout the whole corpus?

Our inquiry must start with the definition of each concept involved.

1. Potentiality

¹ This survey will neglect a few topics not relevant to our immediate concerns. Those include the definition of movement as the actuality of potentiality insofar as it is potentiality (VI, 1 [42], 1, 16 *sq.* ; VI, 3 [44], 22, 3 *sq.*) ; the precedence of actuality over potentiality (VI, 1 [42], 26, 6 ; VI, 7 [38], 17, 7) ; our knowing potentiality because we see something in actuality (VI, 3 [44], 23, 7-15) ; and finally the well-known theory of the two actualities (V, 4 [7], 2, 27-33). On the latter, see C. Rutten, "La doctrine des deux actes dans la philosophie de Plotin", *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*, 146, 1956, 100-106. Finally we will skip the description of the aristotelian doctrine at which Plotinus draws. The four key concepts studied here are evidently taken from the *Metaphysics*. For further details, see my introduction and commentary to the treatise II, 5 [25] in *Plotin, traités 22-26*, Paris, Flammarion, 2004.

Plotinus posits a general definition of potentiality, which allows two modes of application. We shall start with the common definition and then go through each particular type.

Something is in potentiality, says Plotinus, when it can become something other than what it already is. The bronze, for instance, is potentially a statue because the form of the statue may come over the bronze and give it the appropriate shape (II, 5 [25], 1, 11-15). In order to be in potentiality something must be able to transform itself in another thing (1, 17-18). This can happen in two different ways: while the transformation takes place the things can either remain intact like the bronze which becomes a statue or be corrupted like water which turns itself into bronze (2, 19-21). The bronze in the statue remains, whereas water disappears when bronze starts to exit. Plotinus therefore considers that being in potentiality implies that something exists in a given form and, by the oncoming of a new form, can become something which it is not yet, (VI, 3 [44], 22, 3-8). Thus water is potentially bronze because water has the capability of becoming bronze.

1.1 potential existence (tò dunámei)

According to Plotinus, potential existence is one of two ways to attain actual existence. It is always brought to actuality by means of something that already is in actuality: “For potential existence wants to be brought to actuality by something else that comes in it, in order that it may become something in actuality” (II, 5 [25], 3, 28-29); “... for potential existence has its actual existence from something else (...)” (2, 33, see also IV, 7 [2], 8³, 14-16); “For the potential existence is not able to attain actuality if the potential existence holds the rank of principle among beings, for it surely cannot bring itself into actuality, but it needs the actual existence to exist before it (...)” (VI, 1 [42], 26, 3-4)². It is what Aristotle calls a passive potentiality.

1.2 power (dúnamis)

² We based our translations on the text edited by P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzer, *Plotini Opera*, Scriptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca Oxoniensis, Oxford, Univ. Pr. (Editio minor), 1964-1982. We also consulted the translations by A.H. Armstrong, *Plotinus*, with an English translation, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Harvard University Press & London, Heinemann, 1966-1988.

In contradistinction to potential existence, power is what can produce by itself an actuality: "... for power, what it is able to achieve by itself, is an activity. For instance, a disposition and the activity called after it: courage and the courageous action." (II, 5 [25], 2, 34-36). When we possess the virtue of courage in actuality, it becomes the spring from which the courageous action arises. Courage is a power in the sense that it can provoke courageous deeds by itself. This is a way for Plotinus firmly to distinguish power from potential existence: power is the achievement of an actuality by the power itself, whilst the potential existence, in order that it may attain actuality, always needs the help of something else already in actuality. In other words, what Plotinus describes as a power Aristotle would call an active potentiality: what is able to make (II, 5 [25], 1, 24-25). Whenever he speaks about power, he insists that it should not be understood as mere passivity. We read in V, 3 [49], 15 that although the One is called "the power of all things" it is not so in the way that matter, which is potentially all things, receives passively the forms of all things. On the contrary, the One, as the first principle above all others, produces everything: "And the One is the power of all things. But in what sense is it power? For this is not in the way in which matter is said to be in potentiality, because it receives, for matter is passive: but this is the opposite of making." (15, 33-36). For this reason Plotinus does not consider matter as a power: matter cannot produce anything (III, 6 [26], 7, 9-10). Matter is only in potentiality (II, 5 [25], 5, 1-6) and never is a power.

2. Actuality

In strict correspondence with potentiality, actuality has a general definition, which also undergoes a bipartite division. In the general sense: "The actual existence, for *all* that is passing from potentiality to actuality, is what is always the same as long as the thing exists." (III, 9 [13], 8, 1-2). This definition clearly applies to all things which go from potentiality to actuality, to the things in potential existence as much as to the powers. Thus the actual existence for something is what the thing is as long as it exists. And when the thing disappears, it is no longer in actual existence, but either returns to potential existence or exists in the state of an inactive power. The actual existence is therefore closely related, for Plotinus, with reality and contrasted with what exists only potentially. Actual existence is applied to what exists, whilst potential existence is used for what does not exist but can possibly come into existence.

2.1 actual existence (*tò energeíai*)

In a stricter sense and following the previous distinctions concerning potentiality, Plotinus says that actual existence only corresponds to potential existence, since the actuality of a power and the actuality of a being formerly in potential existence are not the same: “For it would be more proper to speak of another actuality, the one which is related to the power that brings to actuality, for potential existence gets its actual existence from something else, whereas what power is capable of by itself is its actuality.” (II, 5 [25], 2, 32-34).

2.2 activity (*enérgeia*)

Plotinus continues by saying that since actual existence is related to potential existence activity will correspond to power (II, 5 [25], 1, 28-29). Whereas potential existence is related to a peculiar type of actuality, the one that is brought in by another thing already in actuality, a power has its own type of actuality, namely what it can achieve by itself.

3. *entelechy (entelécheia)*

We cannot conclude this first part of our study without a word about a closely related notion, that of entelechy. Two Plotinian treatises allude to this Aristotelian concept which is often understood as synonymous with “actuality”. As early as his second treatise Plotinus attacks this conception and never makes use of it again (IV, 7 [2], 8⁵). In his *On the Immortality of the Soul* (IV, 7 [2]) Plotinus devotes a long chapter to the Aristotelian definition of soul as “the prime entelechy of a natural body which possesses life potentially” (*On Soul* II 1, 412a27-b1). His main concern lies in the intimacy that such a conception involves between soul and body, when the soul is considered as the form of the body. Plotinus avers that the soul cannot be assimilated to the body in the same way as the form of the statue comes into the bronze (IV, 7 [2], 8⁵, 6-7). Several unwelcome consequences would indeed follow: 1) the soul would thus be divided whenever a part of the body is cut off (7-8); 2) the cognition would be impossible (15-18); 3) even sense-perception could not take place (19-22); 4) there would be no other desires than those of the body (22-23); 5) it is not even clear if the growth-principle can be so closely attached to the body (24-40). Keeping these objections

in mind Plotinus holds that the soul cannot be the form of something and does not derive its existence from any association with the body (40-42). Doubtless the soul exists before it belongs to any body (42-43)³. His final conclusion, this time in IV, 2 [4], is that “what has been said about entelechy is not true in the sense in which it is stated and does not make clear what soul is.” (2-3). Entelechy is then never to be mentioned again after the fourth treatise.

So far we have ascertained the meanings of the four notions that we need for our present purpose. Generally speaking, potential existence describes the capacity that something has to become something other than what it is; whereas actual existence is what a thing is as long as it exists. At a more specific level, potential existence points to something which needs something else to achieve actuality, whilst power is what can attain actuality by itself; and actual existence is the counterpart of potential existence understood in a specific sense, whereas activity corresponds to power, also in its strict sense.

We can now examine what becomes of these notions when applied to the One and the intelligible realm (Intellect and Soul).

The One

It is a well known fact that Plotinus takes the One to be beyond all things (V, 1 [10], 6, 13; V, 3 [49], 13, 2; V, 4 [7], 2, 39). More precisely the One is beyond being⁴, substance⁵, Intellect⁶, intelligibility⁷, thought⁸, cognition⁹, reckoning¹⁰, and choice¹¹. All this springs from a single affirmation in Plato’s *Republic* (VI, 509b9), when the Good is said to be beyond being. Plotinus took hold of this notion and pushed it to the extreme. So much so that the One is also considered to be beyond activity: “And because it is beyond substance, it is beyond activity, intellection and thought” (I, 7 [54], 1, 19); “So if there is something which is prior to

³ For a more elaborate discussion on this topic, see G. Bruni, “Note di polemica neoplatonica contro l’uso e il significato del termine *entelécheia*”, *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, 39, 1960, 205-236; about Plotinus, p. 214-218. See also G. Verbeke, “Les critiques de Plotin contre l’entéléchisme d’Aristote. Essai d’interprétation de l’*Enn.* VI, 7, 8⁵”, in *Philomathes, Studies and essays in the humanities in memory of Philip Merlan*, ed. by R.B. Palmer & R. Hamerton-Kelly, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1971, 194-222.

⁴ I, 3 [20], 5, 7; I, 7 [54], 1, 8; II, 4 [12], 16, 25; IV, 4 [28], 16, 27; V, 1 [10], 10, 2; V, 5 [32], 6, 11; VI, 2 [43], 17, 22; VI, 6 [34], 5, 37; VI, 8 [39], 9, 27.

⁵ I, 7 [54], 1, 19; V, 1 [10], 8, 7; V, 3 [49], 17, 13; V, 4 [7], 1, 10; 2, 38; 40; 42; V, 6 [24], 6, 30; VI, 7 [38], 40, 26; VI, 8 [39], 16, 34; 19, 13; VI, 9 [9], 11, 42.

⁶ I, 7 [54], 1, 20; III, 8 [30], 9, 9; III, 9 [13], 9, 1; V, 1 [10], 8, 7; V, 3 [49], 11, 28; 12, 47; V, 4 [7], 2, 2; V, 8 [31], 1, 3; V, 9 [5], 2, 24.

⁷ V, 5 [32], 6, 20.

⁸ III, 9 [13], 9, 12.

⁹ V, 3 [49], 12, 48.

¹⁰ VI, 8 [39], 17, 7.

¹¹ VI, 8 [39], 18, 8.

activity, it is beyond activity, so that it is also beyond life. If then life is in Intellect, the giver gave life, but it is better and worth more than life.” (VI, 7 [38], 17, 10-13, see also V, 6 [24], 6, 2-4).

The basic doctrine at work here, which is pretty common in the *Enneads*, is that the giver always transcends the gift (VI, 7 [38], 17, 9-10). So everything that Intellect has is a gift from the One, which transcends all that it gives. In this way, insofar as the One is beyond being, substance, intellection, intelligibility, life, activity and thought, Intellect will be being, substance, intellection, intelligibility, life, activity and thought (see for instance V, 3 [49], 5, 36-40)¹². Since the One is beyond all those things, Intellect becomes the first and prime instance of all these: it is the first activity, the first and real being, the first life and so on. Plotinus therefore concludes that the One is not an activity, but that Intellect is the first activity (I, 7 [54], 1, 19; V, 3 [49], 5, 36-38).

Plotinus also assumes that the One’s being beyond everything implies that it depends on nothing, while everything depends on it (another common doctrine, see for instance I, 7 [54], 1, 21-23). This has two interesting outcomes: since everything has its existence as a gift ultimately derived from the One, (1) everything has an activity directed towards the One: “The activity of all things tends towards the Good” (V, 6 [24], 5, 17-18); (2) the One is the power of all things: “And there is One here also, but the One is the power of all things.” (V, 1 [10], 7, 9-10; see also V, 4 [7], 2, 38). We note that while neither the activity, the actual existence or the potential existence is allotted to the One, the latter is said to be a power, namely what can produce something by its own means. Plotinus explains with great care what kind of potentiality the One possesses and he stresses the point that the One is not potentially all things in the same way as matter is potentially all things. He writes: “ And the One is the power of all things. But in what sense is it a power? This is not indeed in the way in which matter is said to be in potentiality, because it receives, for matter is passive: but this is at the opposite of making.” (V, 3 [49], 15, 33-36). The One is therefore an active potentiality, i.e. a power, and is not in potentiality as if it needed something else already in actuality so that it can produce all things. The One is by itself the spring from which everything flows and is

¹² This is at the core of the Plotinian doctrine that the One gives what it does not itself possess. It forms part of the general description of the procession from all realities, starting from the One and ending with sensible matter. Each offspring is indeed inferior to its generator and cannot be a perfect imitation of its source (V, 1 [10], 7, 37-40 ; V, 2 [11], 2, 1-3). For example, Intellect, when it turns toward the One, cannot receive the overwhelming simplicity of the One and fragments it in a multiplicity of Forms. In the same way Soul, when it contemplates Intellect, receives the Forms in a degraded state, that of the *lógoi*. (on this topic, see L. Brisson, « *Lógos et Lógoi* chez Plotin : leur nature et leur rôle », dans *Plotin, des principes*, Les Cahiers Philosophiques de Strasbourg, Strasbourg, 1999, 87-108).

generated: “What is it [the One] then? The power of all things. If this power did not exist, neither would all things. (...) For think of a spring which has no other origin but gives its whole self to the rivers, without being used up by the rivers but remaining itself at rest (...)” (III, 8 [30] 10, 1-7). And since it is the power of all things, the One first produces Intellect, which becomes all things: “Thus the life of Intellect is the whole power, and the vision of what is over it is that of the power of all things, and Intellect which comes to be shows itself as the very totality of things” (VI, 7 [38], 17, 32-33)¹³.

Before we examine Intellect and Soul each in its turn, let us consider what Plotinus has to say about the intelligible universe in general.

The intelligible universe

Plotinus deems that the intelligible universe is both in actuality and an activity (II, 5 [25], 3, 39). The treatise II, 5 [25] devotes one argument to each topic: 1) there is no potential existence in the intelligible; 2) all intelligible realities are activities.

1) No potential existence can be found in the intelligible universe, for in that case the potential existence would always remain in potentiality (II, 5 [25], 1, 7-8). The intelligible realities being eternal and not subject to temporality, the potential existence would never become in actuality (8-9). Thus potential existence does not exist in the intelligible universe¹⁴.

Here Plotinus’ objection is simply that potential existence has no meaning if it cannot reach actual existence. Potential existence rightly implies the ability for some one thing to become something different from what it actually is. But this is not possible in the intelligible universe because the Intelligibles are always the same and never change (II, 5 [25], 2, 9; 3, 30-31). In what is eternal “nothing is becoming what it is not already, there is nothing which, transforming itself in something else, gives birth to something different (...)” (3, 5-7). So “there is nothing there in which the potential existence can be” (3, 7-8). This argument, adds Plotinus, concerns the intelligible matter as well. Someone can indeed be troubled by the transformations and changes that matter undergoes in the sensible world. Thus we can wonder

¹³ Plotinus often says that Intellect contains everything, see for instance: V, 9 [5], 8, 4 ; 21-22 ; 14, 5-6 ; VI, 2 [43], 22, 24; VI, 6 [34], 7, 1-5 ; 8, 1-5 ; VI, 7 [38], 17, 34 ; VI, 9 [9], 2, 45-47). For a more detailed study on the One as the potentiality of all things, see G. Aubry, « Puissance et principe : la *dynamis pánōn* ou puissance de tout », dans *Plotin, Ekeî, entaûtha*, textes rassemblés par D. Montet, Toulouse, Presses Universitaires du Mirail, *Kairos* (15), 1999, 9-32; and also E.D. Perl, « The power of all things : the One as pure giving in Plotinus », *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* (71, 3), 1997, 301-313.

¹⁴ This doctrine is frequently reasserted in the *Enneads*; see for instance: II, 9 [33], 1, 23-24 ; 30; III, 9 [13], 8, 5; IV, 7 [2], 8³, 21-22; V, 9 [5], 5, 8-9; 10, 14 .

“if potential existence should not exist in the intelligible correlatively with the matter there” (II, 5 [25], 3, 10-11). Not at all, replies Plotinus: the intelligible matter is a form and is never separated from its form (3, 13-16). The treatise *On the Two Kinds of Matter* avers that intelligible matter “always remains the same and always keeps the same form.” (II, 4 [12], 3, 10-11). This matter possesses every possible form at the same time and “this is why there is nothing into which it can transform itself (...)” (3, 13-14, see also 5, 1-2). Since it is as eternal and immutable as the whole intelligible universe (5, 24-28), the intelligible matter surely cannot be held to introduce potential existence. The intelligible universe is thus in actual existence only: the things there do not pass from potentiality to actuality, but each of them keeps its self-identity forever and possesses its own nature by itself (II, 5 [25], 3, 30-32).

2) Plotinus also argues that the intelligible realities are activities, since the intelligible realm is full of life: “Of course if this nature is rightly said to be sleepless, to be life and the best life, the more beautiful activities should be in the intelligible.” (II, 5 [25], 3, 38-39).

This last argument takes for granted that life is an instance of activity, a doctrine that Plotinus will clearly state in later treatises (III, 2 [47], 16, 17-18; IV, 5 [29], 6, 28). It also considers the intelligible universe to be a living entity, another point that will be argued for in later treatises: Plotinus says that the One transcends life (VI, 7 [38], 17, 10-11; VI, 8 [39], 16, 34), and that Intellect is the first and perfect life (III, 6 [26], 6, 15-17; III, 8 [30], 9, 33-35; 10, 2-3), whilst Soul and the lower souls are the second and third lives, which represent a coarse image of the first life (III, 8 [30], 8, 16-20). Even in their lowest forms all these lives are an activity (IV, 5 [29], 6, 28). So everything in the intelligible world is an activity, Intellect being the first and perfect activity, whereas Soul is a degraded kind of activity.

We can now proceed to the examination of Intellect and Soul in order to see if Plotinus maintains the same doctrine when he describes more particularly these lower levels of reality.

Intellect

Since the One is beyond activity, Intellect becomes the first activity: “If then Intellect is an activity and the first activity and the more beautiful, it would be the intellection and substantial intellection, for it is the truest” (V, 3 [49], 5, 36-38). And this Intellect is the first and cannot exist in potentiality: “... this Intellect would be the first, for it is not in potentiality” (5, 39-40). It always remains one with its activity: “It would be one and the same with its activity” (5, 42-43).

As early as his fifth treatise Plotinus rejects the idea that Intellect could be in potentiality: “We must consider Intellect, if we are to take the word in its true sense, as not being in potentiality and to not go from stupidity to intelligence” (V, 9 [5], 5, 1-3). The reason he alleges is that “if this is not so, we would have to search again for another Intellect prior to this one.” (V, 9 [5], 5, 3-4). Unfortunately Plotinus does not give more information in this passage as to why we should thus admit another Intellect. But in II, 5 [25], *On What is Potential Existence and Actual Existence*, we find the same argument again: “The Intellect does not pass from the potentiality of thinking to the actuality of thinking, for there should be another principle, before it, that would not pass from potentiality to actuality.” (3, 25-27); and this time Plotinus provides the justification we are looking for: the potential existence is what needs the preexistence of another thing in actuality so that it might attain actuality (3, 28-29). The answer thus lies in the definition of the potential existence. If Intellect was in potentiality, it would need another Intellect before it which would always remain in actuality and would explain how the potential Intellect passes from potential to actual thinking.

It is of the utmost importance, according to Plotinus, for Intellect to be in actuality. For an Intellect in potentiality implies the existence of another Intellect, and thus there would be two Intellects in the intelligible universe. This is utterly unacceptable, since Plotinus always believed in only three intelligible principles and wrote a whole treatise on this topic, namely *On the Three Primary Principles* (V, 1 [10]), and also fought vigorously against the Gnostics, who tend to multiply unwisely the amount of intelligible realities (II, 9 [33], 1). To preserve the true number of intelligible principles Plotinus therefore has to consider Intellect as an activity.

Hitherto the description of Intellect is coherent with the general view Plotinus holds regarding the intelligible universe. But a very puzzling difficulty arises when the relationship between the whole Intellect and its parts is dealt with. We observe that Plotinus admits potential existence in Intellect when he says that the whole Intellect is potentially all the intelligibles, and that every intelligible is potentially the whole Intellect. Even though this question has been studied by Andrew Smith in his paper “Potentiality and the Problem of Plurality in the Intelligible World”¹⁵, we think it can be useful here to restate all the evidence and stress many particular points which Smith did not sufficiently take into account. We will not, however, discuss, as he did, the position held by later Neoplatonists on the question of

¹⁵ In *Neoplatonism and early Christian thought. Essays in honour of A.H. Armstrong*, ed. by H.J. Blumenthal & R.A. Markus, London Variorum Publ., 1981, 99-107.

actuality and potentiality in the intellectual realm (p. 102-105). Plotinus' thought remains our only concern.

The relationship between Intellect and the intelligibles it contains is stated for the first time in the fifth treatise: "We assume that Intellect is the beings, all of which are inside it not as if it possesses them in place, but as possessing itself and being one with them. And all things are together there and nonetheless they are separate." (V, 9 [5], 6, 1-4). In this important chapter Plotinus tries to explain his position, but it should be noted that he nowhere talks about potential existence in Intellect. On the contrary he insists on the actual existence of Intellect, saying that "Intellect is always in actuality" (7, 6) and that "each intelligible exists in actuality and not in potentiality" (10, 15). Moreover Plotinus holds each intelligible to be a power (6, 9; 8, 8), that is to say they have the capability of producing something on their own, and do not exist in potentiality. So we must keep in mind that the first time Plotinus introduces the question of the interrelation between Intellect and its intelligible parts no mention is made of potential existence.

Again in the fifth treatise Plotinus gives three analogies describing the nature of Intellect and of its relation to its intelligible content. The first describes Intellect as a genus and a whole: "The whole Intellect encompasses all things as a genus does with its species and as a whole does with its parts." (V, 9 [5], 6, 10-11). The second presents the analogy of the seed: "And the powers of seeds has a resemblance with what we say, for, in the whole seed, all parts are undistinguished, their rational principles are as if they were in one single center, and yet there is one principle for the eye and another one for the hands (...) Consider then the powers in the seed: each of them is a rational principle as a whole which has its parts included in it." (6, 12-15). The third appeals to the sciences: "And the whole Intellect is all the Forms, and each Form is an individual intellect, as the whole science contains all theorems, each part of the whole not being spatially distinct, but having a particular power in the whole." (8, 4-7).

None of these examples expresses any intention of introducing any potential existence in the Intellect. None of them are really explained, they are merely stated. Plotinus will have more to say about them in further treatises and will often compare Intellect with a genus, a seed and a science.

It is in his sixth treatise that Plotinus avers for the first time that the "Intellect contains potentially all other things (...) while each thing is in actuality what Intellect contains in potentiality." (IV, 8 [6], 3, 14-16). Now Plotinus states clearly that the whole Intellect is potentially all the particular things it possesses. Potential existence thus belongs, in one way

or another, to Intellect. In order to make himself clearer, Plotinus proposes two paradigms: the soul of a city (16-19) and the universal fire (19-22). 1) Let us suppose that a city has a soul and includes in itself the other beings who have a soul. The soul of the city would be more complete and powerful, but nothing can prevent the other souls from being of the same kind as the soul of the city. 2) Each little fire that we encounter in our world comes from the great universal fire. There is a universal fire from which come all the other partial fires. And the substance of everyone of these fires is the same as that of the universal fire. Plotinus' point here seems to be the community of nature or kind between the whole and its parts. The souls in the soul of the city are of the same kind as the soul of the city, that is to say they all are souls. So do the little fires, being of the same nature or substance as the universal fire. In the same way Plotinus believes Intellect to be composed of particular intellects, which are of the same kind as the whole Intellect (see for instance V, 9 [5], 8, 4-5).

We must see that these two paradigms are in no way committed to the idea that Intellect presents some potential existence. Plotinus does not say that the soul of the city and the universal fire should be potentially all their parts. After all, the argument here may not be designed to prove the possibility of potential existence in Intellect. Before drawing any conclusion on this point, let us review the rest of the evidence.

The evidence is very meager, since Plotinus returns for the second and last time to this question in his 43rd treatise. The fact is significant in itself: potential existence is not a proper characteristic of the Intellect. The text that we are alluding to is VI, 2 [43], 20. The whole paragraph is of the utmost importance, but we can only sum up here the brunt of the argument.

The general doctrine is as follows: "the partial intellects are included in the whole, and the whole is included in the parts (...), and all the intellects are potentially in Intellect, which exists by itself and is in actuality all intellects at once, but potentially each of them separately, whereas these are actually what they are, but are the whole potentially." (20, 18-24). Here Plotinus states a more complete theory insofar that not only Intellect is potentially the partial intellects, but that the intellects are also potentially Intellect. And this is, to our knowledge, the only place where Plotinus says that the partial intellects are potentially the whole Intellect. So Intellect and the partial intellects would all be in some way in potential existence. This doctrine is defended by two analogies that are already known to us: the genus-species and the science-theorems relationship.

1) On one hand, the partial intellects are potentially the whole Intellect because they are contained in that whole as in a genus (20, 23-25); and on the other hand, the whole Intellect, as it is the genus, is the potentiality of the species and is none of them in actuality, but being in actuality what it is before the species, it is none of them (20, 25-28).

Plotinus' explanation about the genus-species relation stresses the fact that the genus, as well as the species, are actually what they are, but are potentially one another. In the first version of this argument, in IV, 8 [6], 3, 13-15, this justification was only used to prove that Intellect is potentially all the partials intellects. But this time Plotinus takes it to be suitable for both cases. He seems thus to think that Intellect and partials intellects are actually what they are by themselves, but because they possess a community of nature expressed by their relation as genus and species, they are in some way potentially contained in one another. We can see how this works for the genus, for it is power of the species, that is to say the genus brings the species into existence. The genus is not the species, but it produces the species and is therefore potentially those species: the genus Animal is not the species Man, but it is responsible for its existence and, by sharing the same nature, is potentially Man. Regarding the species, maybe Plotinus means that the whole series of species, if we sum them up, should give the total Intellect. This answer may seem far fetched, but it would explain why Plotinus takes for granted that, the minute we talk about genus and species, the species should be considered as potentially the whole genus.

2) Plotinus also presents the science analogy: "Every science is none of its parts, but is power of them all, whilst each part is in actuality what it is and potentially all of them" (20, 5-6). In the same way, Intellect, which commands from above the partial intellects, is power of them all, whereas every intellect is the whole Intellect (20, 13-15). So the whole Intellect is contained by the partial intellects, and the partials intellects by the whole Intellect (20, 18-19).

In order to grasp the complete meaning of the science analogy, we must come back to an earlier treatise where Plotinus gives more information on this topic than he does in VI, 2 [43] 20. In IV, 9 [8], 5, we learn how a part of a science can become the whole science: "... a part of a science contains also all the other parts in potentiality. Then the knower, when he knows, brings the other parts as a kind of consequence. And the geometer, in his analysis, makes clear that one proposition contains all the others that come before and by which the analysis took place, and he also makes clear the propositions that follow and are generated from it." (5, 22-26). So there is another way for a part to become the whole than the mere summing up of all the species of a given genus. In fact, a single part can become all parts and

then the whole. Taking one proposition, a geometer can explain how it derives from previous propositions and demonstrate how the remaining propositions of a science can come out of it. We may then assume that the partial intellects, in a similar way, can become the other intellects and finally the whole Intellect. That is what is suggested by the science analogy used by Plotinus in VI, 2 [43], 20, 4-19, and formerly explained in IV, 9 [8], 5, 23-28.

In short Plotinus, in two passages (IV, 8 [6], 3, 13-22; VI, 2 [43], 20), states that Intellect is in some way in potential existence. This plainly contradicts his doctrine that the Intelligible realm in general, as much as Intellect in particular, is devoid of any potential existence. And as a matter of fact, the first time Plotinus explains that Intellect is all the partial intellects, and that each of these intellects exists separately while remaining a part of Intellect, he never mentions any potential existence and he declares moreover that all of these are in actuality, never in potentiality (V, 9 [5], 7, 9; 10, 15). How can we explain this discrepancy?

We think that there is no discrepancy. The danger here is to be misled by the expression “potential existence”, as if the intelligible universe would admit potential existence in the same way that the sensible world does. Plotinus, as we have seen, defines potential existence as a change that occurs in something either by the influence of another thing or by itself. But how can we apply this definition to Intellect? Not only is it always described as unchangeable and an activity but nothing can act on it. The Intellect is immutable and impassible. The difficulty might well be that Plotinus tries to explain something really hard for us to imagine: how Intellect and the intellects are different but, at the same time, present to one another. This is the conceptual challenge, everywhere present in the *Enneads*, of describing the one-multiplicity of Intellect. Then arises the unfortunate though necessary use of the terms “potential existence” in the description of Intellect. This is in part necessitated by the inescapable need for illustrative analogies. The science analogy is a particularly brilliant illustration of the complex unity of Intellect, but it unfortunately calls for the notion of “potential existence”. We thus agree with Andrew Smith, who finds an extenuating circumstance in the fact that Plotinus is here using analogies and that “potential existence” cannot be strictly applied to Intellect: “... Plotinus deployed an apparently unsuitable concept that must be seen for what it is, an analogy that, in the end, cannot directly define the intelligible but only indicate its nature. This use of analogy might suggest a certain looseness

of thought in Plotinus.”¹⁶. This looseness, we must repeat, has luckily been kept to only two passages throughout the Plotinian corpus.

We therefore conclude that Plotinus coherently maintains the actuality of Intellect and refuses to admit any potential existence in its constitution.

The Soul

The Soul is one of the central and rather complicated issues in Plotinus’ work and cannot be exhaustively accounted for in these few pages. Still we must consider Soul, the partial souls and the inferior levels of soul (sensitive and vegetative).

As a matter of general doctrine Plotinus holds that Soul and all partial souls are activities. The Soul is the second activity after Intellect (IV, 4 [28], 16, 18), which is the first activity (V, 3 [49], 5, 36). The *lógoi* are the activities of this higher Soul (III, 3 [48], 1, 4). Plotinus here assumes that Intellect possesses the real forms in itself and gives them to Soul, which receives them in a degenerated state. In other words, although Intellect possesses Forms, Soul can only be filled with *lógoi* (V, 9 [5], 3, 26; 35-36; 5, 28-31; 36-37). These *lógoi* are the means by which Soul will afterwards make the physical universe (5, 27-28; 30)¹⁷. As for the lower souls, such as the vegetative soul, they too are activities: “The soul which is in matter is also an activity: the vegetative soul, for instance. It is indeed an activity and remains what it is.” (II, 5 [25], 3, 33-34). In fact the partial souls possess two activities, one directed above, the other below: “And the activities of these souls are double: the one which is directed above is Intellect, whereas the other which is directed below is the other powers in conformity with the *lógos*, and the last soul is already grasping and shaping matter.” (VI, 2 [43], 22, 29-33, see also IV, 8 [6], 8, 12-14). This last soul is the vegetative soul, since Plotinus believes that when this soul comes into matter it produces a body (II, 3 [52], 17, 6-8; III, 4 [15], 1, 2), and that it is the form of the body (III, 4 [15], 1, 16-17). Even though they join matter, these souls are always in actuality before entering it (VI, 4 [22], 4, 38-43).

The question may arise whether or not Plotinus contradicts this general view about Soul and souls. Did he apply the notion of potential existence to Soul or to the partial souls? We will first examine how Plotinus uses the analogies of genus-species and science-theorems

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 102.

¹⁷ For a similar account, see II, 3 [52], 18, 10-21. The whole process is accurately described by L. Brisson, *op. cit.*

regarding Soul and its parts. Then we will explain how some kind of potential existence is granted to the individual souls but not to Soul.

1) Analogies

As we have seen, Plotinus tries to describe the uni-multiplicity of Intellect by means of two analogies: the genus-species and the science-theorems. These analogies are also used to illustrate the relationship between Soul and the partial souls.

Plotinus qualifies Soul as the genus of all partial souls: “There must be many souls and one Soul, and the multiplicity of different souls comes out of the one Soul like the species of one genus” (IV, 8 [31], 3, 11-13); “And since Soul acts as a genus or form, the other souls act like species” (VI, 2 [43], 22, 28-29). This is one way for Plotinus to express his innovative doctrine that all souls are in fact one soul (see IV, 9 [8]). All souls are the parts of one Soul, like all the intellects are parts of one Intellect (VI, 6 [34], 15, 14-15). But even though the analogy is identical in both cases, Plotinus refrains this time from asserting that a partial soul is potentially all the others, or that Soul is potentially all particular souls. It would seem that the aim of the analogy is not, as we hinted earlier, to introduce potential existence in Intellect or Soul, but solely to depict how a unified multiplicity is possible.

We also find an interesting chapter (IV, 3 [27], 2,) in which Plotinus seeks the real meaning of the notions of whole and parts when related to Soul and to the partial souls (2, 13-57). We can rule out, he says, all the meanings that apply to the bodies (13-21). And among those that concern the bodiless, the numbers (21-35) and the continuous geometrical surfaces (35-50) are inadequate. So it seems that the only suitable meaning or analogy that might describe Soul and its parts is the science analogy (50-54), which implies that each theorem contains the whole science potentially (54-55). If this is so, concludes Plotinus, all the partial souls are parts of a greater Soul and all have the same form (55-57). We notice that Plotinus does not draw here the conclusion that we were expecting. Even if he suggests that science and its theorems can account for Soul and its parts and then adds that in this case each theorem is potentially the whole science, he does not go on to say that the partial souls should potentially possess the whole Soul. It might well be that Plotinus refuses the possibility of any potential existence in Soul. He refrains from using this hazardous concept lest we find it confusing in the given context. We may at least conjecture that potential existence is not at issue in the science analogy, neither for Intellect or Soul.

2) *Potential existence in the souls*

We can divide our analysis of the individual souls in two sections: when the soul leaves the intelligible realm; and the period during which the soul stays in the sensible universe.

When the soul leaves the intelligible realm

In a revealing passage Plotinus says: “the soul potentially possesses in itself, through the whole of it, the power to put things in order according to rational principles (*katà lógous*).” (IV, 3 [27], 10, 11-12). He means that when the soul goes out of the intelligible world, whenever it comes in contact with something, the soul makes this thing according to the rational principles that it possesses (10, 14-15). The rational principles work in the soul in the same way that they do in a seed, which “moulds and shapes living beings like some small universes.” (10, 12-14). A power is thus said to be in potentiality: before it enters the physical universe the soul neither moulds nor shapes anything. Its power to shape things is present, but not actual. As long as it remains in the intelligible world the power of the soul to organize matter according to rational principles remains in potentiality, since there is nothing there to act upon. But the soul starts acting as soon as a part of it comes out of the intelligible universe, its power being now free to exercise its sway. We can therefore say that the souls in the intelligible realm have some kind of potential existence, because they have a power which cannot exert itself, but is at rest, and will come in actual existence the minute they approach the physical universe.

We must insist that this line of reasoning does not imply the definition of potential existence as something which needs something else in order that it may attain actuality. Here the soul is not said to be in potentiality so that it would need something else to achieve a new actuality. On the contrary, the soul is a power and achieves actuality by itself: it is in potentiality in so far that it can bring itself to a new actuality but is actually in another state. There are many cases in which the soul may be said to undergo some changes that are instigated by the soul itself. Another example is when Plotinus asserts that when the soul leaves the intelligible realm, it recovers its memory (IV, 4 [28], 4, 15). The soul had memory even in the intelligible, but it was then in potentiality. Whenever a soul is in the intelligible world, its actuality overpowers any possibility to make recollections, so memory becomes

potential (4, 16-17). Therefore the soul has some kind of potential existence since its memory passes from potential to actual existence when the soul falls in the physical world. Plotinus accounts for this potential existence by considering it to be a power: the soul is the power of memory and will exercise this power as soon as it leaves the intelligible (4, 18-19). The presence of the Forms were too overwhelming for the soul to have recollection there. But if nothing prevents the soul from doing so, it will regain its memory. In this sense we can say that the soul had memory in potentiality and recovered its capacity to recollect, owing this not to another but to itself.

The soul's sojourn in the sensible world

We arrive at the same conclusion when we consider the life of the soul in the sensible universe. A good example is the way the soul learns a science. Plotinus believes that the acquisition of a science depends on the soul and that a science is nothing else than an activity in the soul. He starts with the following hypothesis: "And the soul, if it is in itself appropriately disposed, is the potential existence by which a man becomes learned." (II, 5 [25], 2, 21-22). In this passage Plotinus endeavours to explain how the soul which is not grammarian or musician can become grammarian or musician. The soul must in some way be in potential existence since it becomes something that it was not before: "... the soul is potentially musician and all the other things which it becomes and is not always. In this way the potential existence also exists in the intelligible." (3, 20-21). This hypothesis is finally dismissed when Plotinus replies that "all these things are not in potential existence, but the soul is the power of these." (II, 5 [25], 3, 22). Considering the context of the treatise II, 5 [25] and the definitions herein given of the potential existence and of power, Plotinus surely means that the soul has the power of science and can become learned by itself. The soul is not primarily in potential existence so that something else already in actuality makes it pass from potentially learned to actually learned. The soul is able to actualize a science by itself and does not necessarily need the help of a teacher. Once again we find one of the specific senses of potential existence: the soul is in potential existence in so far as it does not possess now the science it will later acquire by itself. Plotinus cannot deny that the soul becomes musician or many other things that it was not before (II, 5 [25], 3, 20-21). Even if the soul is not in potential existence in the specific sense, yet it passes from a state of non-musician to

musician. Something which did not exist is generated and now exists, thus implying the general definition of potential existence.

The same doctrine seems implied when Plotinus says that all the things in Intellect are “in the soul more in potentiality, but are in actuality when soul is directed toward Intellect.” (VI, 6 [34], 15, 22-23). Intellect contains the real beings and has in itself the real knowledge, all the virtues and all the Forms. Therefore the soul does not primarily possess all of these but should turn its attention toward Intellect so that it may participate in beings, knowledge, virtues and Forms. If it turns its attention elsewhere, the soul will relinquish all these and will thus be potentially virtuous or learned; all those being regained the very moment the soul gazes back to Intellect. As we saw earlier the partial souls have two activities, one directed above, which is intelligence, and the other directed below, which tries to shape bodies according to the *lógos* (VI, 2 [43], 22, 29-33). So Plotinus assumes that when it is directed below, the soul is only intelligent in potentiality for it can potentially be directed above. This theory is a counterpart of the general view that a partial soul never completely leaves the intelligible realm. Some part of it always remains there (IV, 8 [6], 8, 2-4). But when our soul is too preoccupied with earthly matters, it no longer perceives its highest part (8, 4-6). What happens in the upper part of our soul does not reach the whole soul and we do not have conscience of what is going on above (8, 6-12). So Plotinus considers that “every soul has something of what is below, directed toward the body, and of what is above, directed toward Intellect.” (8, 12-13). And when its lower faculties trouble it, the soul loses contact with its transcendent element (8, 16-22). So it seems that our soul presents some potential existence because it can look below, toward the body, and forget its homeland. Since the soul itself decides which way it wants to turn its gaze — and not by any external agent —, we would again be faced with the specific sense of potentiality as power.

These considerations, it must be said, surely apply to the partial souls but not to Soul nor even to the soul of the universe. According to the doctrine the soul might cease to contemplate Intellect and take more care of the physical world than of the intelligible world. This is out of the question regarding Soul, and even the soul of the universe never swerves from its contemplation of higher beings: the soul of the universe “contemplates the better beings, always directing itself toward the intelligible nature and toward God” (II, 3 [52], 18, 8-10). Its infallible contemplation gives to the soul of the universe a formidable power, and it can thus produce and govern the physical universe simply by contemplating the higher

principle (II, 9 [33], 2, 14-15; IV, 3 [27], 6, 20-23). Therefore it is only our soul that is led astray by the physical realm.

To sum up, Plotinus believes that Soul and all souls are in actuality and do not have any potential existence in the general sense. This doctrine appears several times in the *Enneads* and reflects Plotinus' main opinion on the status of souls. We realized however that souls in fact present potentiality in a specific sense: they can bring themselves into an actuality they did not possess previously, they are powers. Souls can learn new sciences or regain some faculties that were deactivated while they were in the intelligible. We should not be surprised at this, since souls are of an "amphibious" nature, being at the limit of both worlds, the sensible and the intelligible. Souls leave the intelligible universe where everything stays still, equal, impassible, immutable, and fall in a region where transformation, time and passions reign. This disreputable connection with the physical world makes it possible for the soul to acquire different states in different times.

This completes our survey of the intelligible realm and its parts. We endeavoured to show that Plotinus holds the entire intelligible universe to be in complete actuality, the only exception being the souls, who allow potential existence to a slight degree when they *leave* the intelligible. The One is in fact beyond activity, while Intellect and Soul (and partial souls when they return to Soul) are in actuality. We can then easily sketch an even more general theory of actuality and potentiality according to Plotinus: the One is beyond activity; the intelligible world is an activity always in actuality (II, 5 [25], 3, 24-40); the physical world is a mixture of actuality and potentiality (4, 1-3); prime matter is never in actuality, but only in potential existence (chap. 4-5). Plotinus thus believes in four levels that have a dissimilar relationship with actuality and potentiality: the first and lowest is sheer potential existence; the second is between potential and actual existence; the third is pure activity and actual existence; and the fourth and highest is beyond all those distinctions.