

Zeitschrift: Museum Helveticum : schweizerische Zeitschrift für klassische Altertumswissenschaft = Revue suisse pour l'étude de l'antiquité classique = Rivista svizzera di filologia classica

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Vereinigung für Altertumswissenschaft

Band: 43 (1986)

Heft: 1

Artikel: Plotinus V 5, 3, 21ff., a passage on Zeus

Autor: Solmsen, Friedrich

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-33389>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 02.02.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Plotinus V 5, 3, 21ff., a passage on Zeus

By Friedrich Solmsen, Chapel Hill

In Ennead V 5, which bears the title ὅτι οὐκ ἔξω τοῦ νοῦ τὰ νοητὰ καὶ περὶ τὰγαθοῦ, powerful arguments of the first two chapters demolish every possibility that the intelligibles, τὰ νοητά, could have their place outside the mind¹. Only if they find themselves right in the mind, in the ἀληθινὸς νοῦς (ch. 2, 8f.), is it possible to distinguish between truth and falsehood, to say nothing of other dire results which would have to be faced if the νοητά were ‘outside’².

Having built up in the Mind this realm of true realities, which is at the same time a kingdom of truth (ἀλήθεια) – irrefutable; οὐ γὰρ ἄλλο ἀληθέστερον ἢν εὔροις τοῦ ἀληθοῦς (2, 23f.) – Plotinus waxes enthusiastic on this wonderful possession of the Mind. It represents for him a great and comprehensive deity: θεὸς τις μέγας (3, 2ff.), yet still only the “second deity”. Above it ὑπερκάθεται καὶ ὑπερίδρυται (4ff.) a still greater god, the ultimate source of all reality, the One. Plotinus here praises it in his most sublime language and by resorting to very solemn comparisons. It, or rather He (scil. the divine One) is the king of kings, worshipped by all who are able to find their way up to Him. His kingdom is described as the δικαιοσύνη καὶ φύσει ἀρχὴ καὶ ἀληθῆς βασιλεία (17ff.). What he rules are not people different from himself and in that sense strangers (ll. 15–17), but his own entire progeny and divine community (τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἀθροῦ γεννήματος καὶ θεοῦ συντάγματος, ll. 19f.). At the conclusion of this panegyric passage the One is described as πατὴρ δικαιότερον ἢν κληθεῖς θεῶν, ὃν ὁ Ζεὺς καὶ ταύτη ἐμιμήσατο τὴν τοῦ ἑαυτοῦ πατρὸς οὐκ ἀνασχόμενος θεωρίαν, ἀλλὰ τὴν τοῦ προπάτορος οἷον ἐνέργειαν εἰς ὑπόστασιν οὐσίας (ch. 3, 20–24).

What is here said of Zeus and why is he introduced? The obvious answer to the former question is that he too bears the title πατὴρ θεῶν and bears it, as we here learn, in imitation of the great Neoplatonic ἔν. Beutler and Theiler³ translate: “den Zeus auch hierin nur nachahmt ...”. The addition of ‘nur’ seems perfectly justified: Zeus is here considered a mere imitator. But what about the

1 For the historical antecedents of this distinctly un-Platonic doctrine see A. H. Armstrong’s contribution to vol. 5 of the *Entretiens sur l’antiquité class. Les sources de Plotin* (Vandœuvres-Genève 1960) 343ff. Valuable information is also found in Richard Harder (transl.), *Plotins Schriften*, Neubearbeitung ... von Rudolf Beutler und Willy Theiler (Munich 1956–1971) vol. III b, pp. 398ff.

2 See for such results ch. 1, esp. ll. 50ff.

3 Op. cit. (note 1) vol. III a, p. 79.

‘auch’ (καὶ)? This may cause us to stop and wonder, but when we remember that for Homer and quite generally in Greek mythology Zeus is also, just as the One in these chapters, a King of Kings and the master (κύριος) of his own entire γέννημα and θεῖον σύνταγμα (ll. 19ff.) we may feel confident that we have a correct answer even if it may not be the complete answer.

From Beutler’s and Theiler’s rendering we may now turn to their “Anmerkungen”: “Zeus, die Weltseele (V 8, 13, 2f.) imitiert nicht so sehr die Betrachtung seines Vaters (gen. subj.), des Geistes, sondern die uneigentlich so genannte – darum οἶον – Tätigkeit des Einen, das τὰ ὄντα γεννᾷ (5, 6f.)” A good Neoplatonic explanation, to be sure, but we fear less to the point than most of their comments. Whether it is correct to bring in “Geist” and “Weltseele”, even though nothing in these lines suggests them may for the present be left undecided; what must be said is that ἀνέχεσθαι does not mean ‘imitate’ (ἀνασχόμενος is also treated arbitrarily in the translation where the two last lines of ch. 3: τὴν τοῦ ἑαυτοῦ πατρὸς οὐκ ἀνασχόμενος θεωρίαν ... are rendered: “der sich nicht mit dem Anschauen begnügte wie sein Vater, sondern der sogenannten Tätigkeit seines Vorfaters zur Verwirklichung der Existenz nacheiferte”)⁴.

The reference in the “Anmerkungen” makes it easier to understand why Beutler and Theiler resorted to Plotinus’ νοῦς and cosmic ψυχή, and as V 8 is the Ennead immediately preceding V 5 in the chronological sequence, the hope to derive light from it for our passage is *prima facie* reasonable⁵. However the section of V 8 most relevant for us has several facets and it may be doubted whether the commentators have focussed on the right one.

V 8, 12f. embodies a glowing account of someone who has experienced the νοητὸν κάλλος. What has he to report? To have seen a god who is pregnant with beautiful children and who as the pregnancy is ἄλυπος enjoys keeping these children within himself (12, 3–5). Only one of them, the youngest ἐξ-εφάνη εἰς τὸ ἔξω and conveys a kind of image (εἰκὼν, l. 10) of his father’s and of the other children’s beauty (ll. 5–11). He brings into existence another Cosmos – evidently the physical world (ll. 11ff.). The father god who is so unwilling to let go forth his progeny is, we learn shortly afterwards, “fettered” (δεδεμένος, 13, 1); otherwise he would hardly have become tired of the beauties he possessed and would not have yielded the rule to his son. When yielding it he places his own father in control of what is above himself and his son of what is below, and here again it is the fether (δεσμός, l. 10) which ensures his separation from his son below.

4 In Liddell-Scott-Jones s.v. ἀνέχω C II 3 an instance of the medium in the sense of “to be content with” is quoted from Plotinus V 9, 2. The rendering is correct; note however that the verb is here (9, 2, 4f.) construed with the genitive case.

5 See Porphy. *V. Plot.* 5, 28f. and note V 8, 13, 22ff. For an even closer connection of these and two other Enneads (III 8 and V 9) see R. Harder, *Hermes* 71 (1936) 1ff. = *Kleine Schriften*, ed. Walter Marg (Munich 1961) 303ff. The content of these four Enneads is summarized by H. R. Schwyzer s.v. *Plotinos*, *RE* 21, 1 (1951) 538f.

This summary has omitted a few items nor does it in its brevity do justice to Plotinus' conception of beauty or to the beauty of his own presentation. What matters for us is that here two modes of thought, the philosophical and the mythical, are fused; for Plotinus unmistakably avails himself of the standard, i.e. Hesiodic succession story to enhance the vividness and ἐνάργεια of his account. We cannot fail to recognize the motif of Kronos who swallowed his children (Theog. 459ff.), thus making sure to have them "with (ἐν) himself"; we recall that Zeus escaped to embark on an independent course of action (vv. 468ff. 492ff.) and we need not hesitate to infer that the δεσμός which fixes Kronos to his place refers to the imprisonment in Tartarus where he and the Titans are kept after their defeat by Zeus (δεσμοῖσιν ἐν ἀργαλείοισιν, Theog. 718)⁶.

Ennead V 1 includes a comparable interpretation of Kronos' idiosyncratic dealings with his progeny. Myths and mysteries, we read in ch. 7, tell in a veiled, riddling manner (αἰνίττονται, ll. 34f.) of Kronos who swallowed what he produced, keeping his children to himself rather than letting any of them be brought up by Rhea (here suggesting 'matter', ὕλη, ll. 31f.). Finally, however, being satisfied⁷ he produced Zeus; for, perfect as he is, he was bound to be productive, though the offspring could not match this perfection but had to be inferior. In this context it is essential that Kronos = νοῦς and Zeus = ψυχή. Their names and philosophical identities emerge simultaneously (ll. 27–42).

In the passage of V 5, 3, to which we now return, such equations would lead to absurdities, for it is no part of Plotinus' system that soul cannot endure the contemplation of mind nor is νοῦς limited to a contemplative existence and by implication devoid of productive powers⁸. What helps us in V 5, 3 and in fact provides the clue for the last lines of the chapter is Plotinus' now established familiarity with the Hesiodic Theogony. Where Hesiod tells us of Kronos' swallowing of his children he also recounts Zeus' escape. Rhea, when about to give birth, takes refuge in Crete (vv. 468ff., esp. 477–480). There she hides Zeus (κρύψεν δὲ ἔ, v. 482) in a cave beneath the concealing earth. Kro-

6 V. Cilento in his contribution to the *Entretiens* (cited above n. 1) *Mito e poesia nelle Enneadi di Plotino* 291–293 lists some other echoes of the *Theogony*. On pp. 262ff. he comments on the succession of divine rulers in *Enn.* V 5, 3 and V 8, 13 (not without some misunderstanding; for Zeus in our passage of V 5, 3 is not dethroned "in favore dell'avo Uranos"). Cilento's general discussion abounds in sensitive observations.

7 The etymological play with Κρόνος = κόρος is given a different turn in Plato's *Cratylus* 396 b. Henry-Schwyzler ad loc. refer to that passage. I am indebted to Georgia Minyard for pointing out to me its relevance.

8 To this large topic with its ramifications – νοῦς as δημιουργός, as cause of ψυχή, as (in some instances) producing τὰ ὄντα – no justice can be done in a footnote. I must content myself with a reference to Theiler's very good and clear *Überblick* (op. cit., n. 1, vol. VI) ch.s 26 (p. 114) and 36 (p. 119). *Enn.* V 1 may be singled out as throwing a great deal of light on these relations (see esp. ch.s 3. 7. 8; at 3, 14f. read οἶον πατρὸς ἐκθρέψαντος (υἱόν), ὃν οὐ τέλειον ... ἐγέννησε). Note also e.g. II 3, 18, 12ff.; VI 2, 21f.

nos, instead of swallowing Zeus, receives a stone wrapped in clothes (vv. 485ff.). All this surely bears out the assertion that Zeus could not bear (or suffer, endure) the contemplation of his father. For the contrasting statement about the grandfather the Theogony allows more than one explication. The choice is difficult because there is a far cry from Plotinus' Aristotelian and Neoplatonic terminology to Hesiod's epic vocabulary. Hard as it is, we must resist the temptation of taking liberties with ἀνασχόμενος; strict attention to its meaning may in the end be rewarded.

The ἐνέργεια εἰς ὑπόστασιν οὐσίας qualified by οἶον, *quasi*⁹, may refer to the help Zeus receives from his grandparents to achieve his own ὑπόστασις εἰς οὐσίαν (cf. Theog. 468–491). On this interpretation: “Zeus ... to come into existence did not endure the sight of his father but the activity” (or rather “the getting active”) “of his grandfather”; οἶον would be in place because the normal or typical actualization of Ouranos' δύναμις would hardly take the form of helping his daughter in a scheme of deception. In one of the latest Enneads, III 5, περὶ ἔρωτος, we read of Aphrodite Ourania whose ἐνέργεια, while she looks to Ouranos for her orientation, ὑπόστασιν καὶ οὐσίαν εἰργάσατο of the better and heavenly Eros (ch. 2, 33ff.). Here the ἐνέργεια described in terms similar to those of V 5, 3, 21ff. leads to a generation¹⁰. In V 5, 3, 16ff. generation is out of the question. The absence of οἶον in III 5 and its presence in V 5 may make enough difference to justify us in relating the latter passage to the councils and the guidance without which Zeus would not have attained οὐσία but have remained enclosed in his father's body.

Alternatively the ἐνέργεια of Ouranos might be understood as the creation of Ocean, rivers and wells, of Sun, moon and stars¹¹, in a word of the physical world which forms the theatre of operation for Zeus' own activities. Going a step farther we may find it relevant that Zeus, to defeat the Titans, allies to himself the Cyclopes and Hundredhanders, sons of Ouranos (Theog. 501–506. 624–719), and that to build up his reign he marries Themis and Mnemosyne, daughters of Ouranos (Theog. 901ff. 915ff.).

It must be admitted that on either of the two interpretations here propounded Plotinus is rather unfair to Gaia, the oldest of all deities in the Hesiodic scheme (Theog. 116ff.). In the steps taken to spare Zeus the fate of his siblings Gaia plays an even larger part than Ouranos (see e.g. vv. 479f.), and while she participates in all cosmic creations of Ouranos and is the mother of all his children she has even before her union with him produced a consider-

9 οἶον alone would suffice to rule out any thought of the most truly productive One. And how should the One become Zeus' grandfather? Cf. on οἶον Cilento, loc. cit. (n. 6) 261. 264.

10 Not to a physical generation, however. We are on too high a level.

11 Theog. 133f.: Okeanos and Hyperion. Rivers and wells are children of Okeanos (vv. 337–378), Sun, moon and stars of Hyperion (vv. 371–374). I discount here, perhaps wrongly (see below pp. 71f.) parts of the Cosmos produced by Gaia alone.

able part of the physical Cosmos, scil. the Sea and the mountains (vv. 129–132). Does Plotinus deliberately slight the female partner? Has she for him connotations of ὕλη? Fortunately we need not enter upon this complex question. At V 5, 3, 16ff. the contrast between father and grandfather suffices for his point, and the presence or absence of Zeus' grandmother would be of interest only if it facilitated the decision between the two interpretations offered here. My own preference is for the proposal which relates both observations about ἀνέχεσθαι, the negative as well as the affirmative to the identical situation, i.e. to the circumstances surrounding Zeus' birth (for the syntax of the sentence it is a gain if both observations converge toward the last three words of the sentence). By comparison with this approach, the alternative interpretation strikes me as rather far-fetched and I cannot feel sure that it secures a sufficiently concrete meaning for ἀνέχεσθαι. Still I could imagine that scholars more familiar than myself with Plotinus' habits of thought may object to the weight which οἶον has to bear in my exegesis and will come forward with a different solution.

We have still to make up our minds about the reason why Plotinus saw fit to bring in Zeus at this point and why he added comments about his relation to his father and his grandfather. How far is it possible to discern his intention? Having early in this paper accepted Theiler's 'nur' as qualifying Zeus' imitation of the great Neoplatonic king, we may without fear of prejudicing the answer, ask whether the information about what Zeus did and did not endure raises or lowers his status. It is at this point that the meaning of ἀνέχεσθαι, which has so far been a hindrance rather than a help, comes into its own. A Zeus who did not endure the contemplation of his father and who did endure what his grandfather undertook to bring him into existence is certain to rank far below the great and true king of kings and father of the gods, the entity at the top of the Neoplatonic hierarchy whose titles he merely copies. No doubt, Zeus is "put in his place", and Plotinus feels the need for it because he has in actual fact (if for a moment we shift to the historical point of view) transferred many predicates of glory from Zeus to the philosophical begetter of all that is τίμιον and σεμνόν.

Thus understood the passage seems to be without a close parallel in the *Enneads*¹² but this should be no reason for preferring a different interpretation. Plotinus often employs the figures and myths of the Olympian gods for allegorical purposes¹³, yet when the name of Zeus appears in his treatises it is usually in quotations from or allusions to Platonic passages which inspire,

12 For 'imitation' V 8, 4, 41 may be compared: Dike as the companion of Zeus imitates the relation of αὐτοεπιστήμη to νοῦς.

13 For a complete list of these allegories see Harder-Beutler-Theiler VI (Theiler's *Überblick*) p. 172. V 5, 3, 16ff. is in the list by mistake.

substantiate or confirm his own speculative endeavors¹⁴. It would be a mistake to suppose that Zeus has anything like a fixed place in his system or that the Olympian gods have retained some of their Homeric vitality¹⁵. Confronted with the majesty and glory of the great philosophical One, Zeus is bound to be the loser.

Addendum. I did not see a copy of A. H. Armstrong's Loeb translation of Plotinus V (1984) before this paper had been made ready for submission. It is pleasant to find the "successive mythological chief gods, Ouranos, Kronos and Zeus" recognized in V 5, 3, 21f. but their suggested "identification" with the Three Hypostases remains baffling. Armstrong's rendering of the sentence seems open to similar objections as that of Beutler and Theiler ("Zeus ... aspires to ... the active power ..." does not correspond to ἀνασχόμενος and cannot for reasons of syntax take up ἐμιμήσατο).

14 See e.g. for Zeus in the *Phaedrus Enn.* II 3, 13, 30ff.; III 5, 2, 15ff.; V 8 10, 1ff. 22ff. Cf. the 'Index nominum' in the large Henry-Schwyzler edition (III p. 413f.).

15 'Definitions' of Zeus in III 5, 8ff. (νοῦς and ψυχή) and in IV 4, 10, 3 (sometimes the δημιουργός, sometimes the ἡγεμονοῦν) are context bound. Cilento loc. cit. (see n. 6) 251 observes correctly that Plotinus in these matters has no concern for 'ortodossia' and does not shun contradictions. – E. R. Dodds in his edition of Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*² (Oxford 1963) 259f. is very illuminating on the fate of the Hellenic gods in Neoplatonism; note esp. 260 n. 2: Plotinus' 'casual' handling of the gods of mythology; and n. 3: Proclus' use of Hesiod (comparable to Plotinus').

My debt to the editorial (and exegetical) achievements of Henry-Schwyzler and Beutler-Theiler will be evident. I also wish to thank my fellow student of Plotinus Georgia M. Minyard.