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Changing Interpretations of Plotinus: The 18th-Century Introduction of the Concept of a ‘System of Philosophy’

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Abstract

This article critically explores the history and nature of a hermeneutic assumption which frequently guided interpretations of Plotinus from the 18th century onwards, namely that Plotinus advanced a system of philosophy. It is argued that this assumption was introduced relatively late, in the 18th and 19th centuries, and that it was primarily made possible by Brucker’s methodology for the history of philosophy, dating from the 1740s, to which the concept of a ‘system of philosophy’ was essential. It is observed that the concept is absent from Ficino’s commentary from the 15th century, and that it remained absent in interpretations produced between the 15th and 18th centuries. It is also argued that the assumption of a ‘system of philosophy’ in Plotinus is historically incorrect—we do not find this concept in Plotinus’ writings, and his own statements about method point in other directions.

Eduard Zeller (active in the second half of the 19th century) is typically regarded as the first to give a satisfying account of Plotinus’ philosophy as a whole. In this article, on the other hand, Zeller is seen as having finalised a tradition initiated in the 18th century. Very few Plotinus scholars have examined the interpretative development prior to Zeller. Schiavone (1952) and Bonetti (1971), for instance, have given little attention to Brucker’s introduction of the concept of a ‘system of philosophy’. The present analysis, then, has value for an understanding of Plotinus’ *Enneads*. It also explains why “pre-Bruckerian” interpretations of Plotinus appear alien to the modern reader; the analysis may even serve to make some sense of the hermeneutics employed by Renaissance Platonists and commentators, who are often eclipsed from the tradition of Platonism.

Keywords

Plotinus, historiography, Brucker, Creuzer, Zeller, Renaissance Platonism

Introduction

The term ‘historiography’ can take on a variety of meanings in the context of philosophy.¹ In this article I use the term ‘historiography of philosophy’ to denote two things. Firstly, the history of interpretations of a specific topic, in this case Plotinus’ philosophy. Secondly, the general methodological concepts or schemes employed by historians of philosophy, in this case those working on Plotinus’ texts, when expounding the philosophical content of a given work. I also speak of such concepts as ‘historiographical concepts’. My intention is to analyse and discuss these two issues in relation to Plotinus’ philosophy from the 15th century to the present: in this period Plotinus’ *Enneads* became available to the West through Ficino’s 1492 Latin translation, and the history of philosophy was established as a philosophical discipline by the German Lutheran minister and historian Jacob Brucker. His *Historia critica philosophiae* (first edition 1742-44) was one crucial work in this respect. Ficino’s contribution was acknowledged immediately and has remained so ever since. Brucker’s methodological concepts, engrafted upon the ensuing history of philosophy, have not been articulated to the same extent—not even among Plotinus scholars—although they have had, and in some quarters still have, a marked effect upon the interpretation and evaluation of Plotinus’ philosophy.

The literature pertaining to historiography, even when defined as above and restricted to Plotinus, is vast. It can be divided into three interconnected groups, of which the first two relate to the history of history of philosophy and to the history of Plotinus interpretation. The last group is concerned with methodology.

The first group of studies deals with the emergence and development of general histories of philosophy from the 17th century onwards. Plotinus typically features in such general histories of philosophy, where his texts are subjected to the methodology applied generally. Through the studies of Braun (1973) and Santinello (1979-2004) we have begun to know more

¹ For the concept of the historiography of philosophy, see Passmore [1967]. I should like to thank Giannis Stamatellos, Matthew Gaetano and James Snyder for their comments.

about the history and the nature of history of philosophy and its changing methodology.² Below I shall connect my analysis with this group of studies, insofar as it is relevant to Plotinus' historiography.

The second group of studies is concerned with the history of Plotinus interpretation from the 15th century onwards. Here we find studies by Schwyzer (1951), Schiavone (1952), Bonetti (1971), Tigerstedt (1974), Matton (1992), O'Meara (1992, 1993), Horn (2010) and others, who examine the reception of Plotinus' *Enneads* in this period.³ I shall use their work as one point of departure, observing that these scholars have failed to identify and examine one crucial methodological concept employed on Plotinus' texts, namely the concept of a 'system of philosophy', which was invented by 18th-century German historians, Brucker foremost among them.

The third group is concerned with the methodology applied to ancient philosophical texts by historians of philosophy.⁴ In this third group we find Michael Frede, largely adopting analytic philosophy's historiography of ancient philosophy. None of the scholars in the third group discusses the concept that I intend to examine.

None of the studies mentioned in the second group explains when, where, how or why the historiographical concept 'system of philosophy' was applied to Plotinus' texts in the 18th century.⁵ Nor do they, or indeed other Plotinus scholars, present a thorough study of those figures that were instrumental to the development of the system concept in the 18th century, and its subsequent introduction into Plotinus scholarship: namely, the Germans Christoph August Heumann (1681-1764) and Jacob Brucker (1696-1770).⁶ In the writings of Schwyzer, Schiavone and Bonetti,

² Braun (1973); Longo (1986); Santinello (ed.) (1979-2004).

³ Schwyzer (1951) cols. 471-592; Schiavone (1952a) 45-76; Schiavone (1952b) 97-108; Bonetti (1971) 487-511; Tigerstedt (1974); O'Meara (1992) 58-60; O'Meara (1993) 111-119; Horn (2010) 137-152. See also the inventory in O'Brien (1982) 143-186.

⁴ Frede (1987, 1988, 1992); Mann (1996); Kenny (2005).

⁵ One example of an authoritative survey of Plotinus' philosophy and its reception is Schwyzer (1951); on col. 589, where Schwyzer offers a survey of Plotinus' reception in the 17th and 18th centuries, he ignores the works of Bayle, Mosheim, Heumann and Brucker.

⁶ In addition to the studies indicated in n. 3 above, I have examined the following bibliographies, where I have searched the words 'Heumann', 'Brucker', 'historiography', 'system'. For the period up till 1949: Mariën (1949) 389-627. For the period 1951-71: Blumenthal (1987) 528-70. For the period 1971-86: Corrigan and O'Cleirigh (1987) 571-623. For the period 1950-2000: Dufour (2002). For the period 2000-09: Dufour (2010).

for instance, it passes for a truism that Plotinus had a system and there is no effort to identify the historical origin of this assumption. These scholars tend to assume, conforming to the tradition going back to Brucker, that ancient philosophers like Plotinus strove to formulate philosophy in the guise of so-called systems, without defining what this word means.

If we leave studies of Plotinus' reception and focus instead on studies of his philosophy, we find the same assumption. Eduard Zeller (1814-1908), the great nineteenth-century historian of philosophy, thus structured his interpretation of Plotinus according to this concept, as I explain below. In 1949, the Plotinus scholar Mariën praised Zeller's exposition as "the first complete and satisfying account of the fundamental ideas in Plotinus".⁷ In the 20th century, the term 'system' retained its currency and can be found among even the most authoritative Plotinus scholars, e.g. Bréhier, Schwyzer and Armstrong.⁸ Armstrong thus claimed in the Preface to his Loeb translation of the *Enneads* from 1966, that Plotinus' *Enneads* "give us . . . an extremely unsystematic presentation of a systematic philosophy".⁹ If we pass on to the 21st century, we see that the historiographical role of the system concept is diminished in Plotinus scholarship, although we still find scholars like Juanes, who, in a study from 2002, assumes that Plotinus had a system, and makes it his main task to explain its nature.¹⁰ He does not question its very existence.

Of course, we need to be careful and distinguish between the various meanings of the phrase 'system' when used as a historiographical term—the strong sense we find in 18th-century authors like Brucker has certainly evaporated when we come to thinkers like Bréhier and Armstrong. The latter scholars did not attribute to Plotinus a fully-fledged system in the deductive sense. Instead, the system concept is typically watered down to a loose, regulative ideal. To many modern historians of philosophy, the term 'system' simply denotes a complex of philosophical theories or a scheme of interpretation. However, the fact that the term remains in use raises the suspicion that some of its original meanings are still intact and

⁷ Mariën (1949) 458.

⁸ Bréhier (1924) xxxviii; Schwyzer (1951), cols 547-550; Armstrong (1966) viii, xiv, xv.

⁹ Armstrong (1966) viii. Among many other examples of historians of philosophy who, at least nominally, attribute a system of philosophy to Plotinus, we find Dodds (1973) 129; and Gatti (1996) 13-14.

¹⁰ Una-Juárez (2002).

deserve attention and critical discussion if historians of philosophy wish to attain a reasonable degree of self-reflection. Below I list further reasons for examining the historical context and methodological implications of this term.

One reason is that the term, and the concept denoted by it, tend to guide the narrative scheme adopted in the reconstructions of past thinkers' ideas. The analysis set forth in the present article offers interpretive detachment from the narrative scheme laid down by this concept. On a more specific level, there is a discrepancy between Porphyry's arrangement of Plotinus' *Enneads*, on the one hand, and the narrative order chosen by many modern Plotinus scholars accounting for the *Enneads*, on the other. In Porphyry's arrangement, the order is as follows, roughly speaking: Ethics (I), natural philosophy (II-III), the human soul (IV), and the three hypostases (V-VI). By contrast, modern Plotinus scholars often reverse that order in their accounts, beginning with three hypostases, eventually turning to Plotinus' natural philosophy, psychology, and (if at all) ethics.¹¹ I argue below that the modern scheme originates with the Bruckerian concept and its adaptation to Plotinus' texts in the 19th century, and that it is extrinsic to Plotinus' *Enneads*.

Second, the term 'system' is a contingent methodological invention from the 18th century, and Brucker's system concept tends to divide modern interpretation of Plotinus from that of Renaissance thinkers, to whom the concept 'system of philosophy' was unavailable. The interpretations of pre-Bruckerian Platonists are often scorned by modern historians as 'unsystematic', or 'allegorical', and therefore omitted from the view of modern historians of philosophy working on the Platonic tradition. I do not mean to suggest, of course, that pre-Bruckerian thinkers had a truer knowledge of ancient philosophers like Plotinus, simply because they had not been influenced by Brucker's ideas. Instead, my point is that we should not reject the interpretations of Renaissance thinkers solely on the ground that they do not conform to the methodological idea of a system. There may be other and very good reasons for rejecting Renaissance interpretations, but to count this among them would be anachronistic.

¹¹ This tendency may be changing; see references to O'Meara, Dillon and Gerson in n. 139 below.

The third reason for analysing the concept has to do with its normative function of exclusion in philosophy and history of philosophy. The intended force of Brucker's concept is to include past thinkers in the canon of the history of philosophy on the basis of their demonstrable conformity with this concept; those philosophers who failed to produce a system, were termed "syncretists" and degraded, others were left out. Hence, inclusion in the canon depended upon the historian's ability to advance a convincing determination of that system.¹² It was therefore necessary to posit the existence of a system in Plotinus' philosophy, in order to justify his position in the canon. If his texts did not yield easily to this procedure, the last resort was to claim that the system is somehow hidden in the texts. Armstrong's paradoxical statement—cited above—about Plotinus' philosophy as an "unsystematic presentation of a systematic philosophy", is one example of such an oblique strategy. However, an analysis of the system concept allows us to reject this criterion of inclusion as anachronistic and illegitimate in regard to ancient philosophers, including Plotinus.

What I want to argue in the following is basically twofold. First, the idea of philosophical systems in ancient philosophies is a historiographical invention of the 18th century, employed on Plotinus in the 18th and 19th centuries (section I, III and IV). And second, it is erroneous to assume that Plotinus presented a system of philosophy, or even intended to do so (section II). In the final section (V) I point out some hermeneutic problems caused by this historiographical concept.

I. Brucker's Use of the Historiographical Term 'System of Philosophy'

Before the seventeenth century, the Greek term *systema*, and its corresponding Latin term, *systema*, were not used in the context of methodology, but in various other contexts: The organization of a government;¹³ the organization of an institution;¹⁴ harmonies in music;¹⁵ the composition of

¹² For two later examples (Copleston and Gadamer), see n. 25 below.

¹³ E.g. Plato, *Leges* 686B; Aristotle, *Ethica nicomachea* 1168^b32.

¹⁴ E.g. Polybius 21.13.11.

¹⁵ E.g. Plato, *Philebus* 17D.

a literary work;¹⁶ a biological organism (including man), consisting of several parts;¹⁷ and, finally, in an astronomical context, denoting the universe and its parts.¹⁸

In addition to these classical meanings, the term took up a methodological meaning within the sciences of the seventeenth century.¹⁹ More than a hundred seventeenth-century works were thus titled 'system'.²⁰ As I have argued elsewhere, this methodological use spread to the history of philosophy, established by Brucker as a philosophical discipline in the 18th century.²¹ The system-concept was applied retrospectively to all past philosophers for the first time in Brucker's *Historia critica philosophiae*, first published 1742-44 (an appendix, published in 1767, was added to the second edition). He believed that all past philosophers since the Ionian natural philosophers had aimed to construct a system.

Brucker's views about philosophical systems may be summarised as follows:

- (a) A system of philosophy, comprising principles and doctrines within various branches of philosophy, is autonomous with regard to other, non-philosophical disciplines such as medicine, astronomy, theology, etc.
- (b) All doctrines within a system of philosophy are deduced from one or a few principles. (Here the term 'principle' is used in the logical sense of a hypothesis.)
- (c) A system of philosophy, made up of doctrines deduced from principles, extends over all branches of philosophy.
- (d) The doctrines stated within the various branches of philosophy are internally coherent.²²

¹⁶ E.g. Aristotle, *Poetica* 1456^a11.

¹⁷ E.g. Aristotle, *De generatione animalium* 740^a20, 758^b3.

¹⁸ E.g. Fulgentius, *Mythologiae* 3.9. A search for the term '*systema*' and its cognates on *Thesaurus Linguae graecae* does not reveal methodological uses of the term in ancient philosophy.

¹⁹ Ritschl (1906) cols 26-40. Stein (1968) 2-6, similarly claims that the system-concept was not used in a methodological context in ancient philosophy.

²⁰ For a list of titles, see Ritschl (1906), Anhang, i-vii.

²¹ Catana (2008) 11-34.

²² For these four features, see Brucker (1742-67) I: 3.6-16, 15.10-18.

All this implies a specific hermeneutic procedure for the historian of philosophy, as explained by Brucker:

In order to pass a sound and proper judgment on the propositions of philosophers, it is necessary to reconstruct the whole system on the basis of their writings. First of all, the general principles, which constitute the foundation underlying the entire edifice of doctrines, should be reconstructed; on these [general principles] the conclusions should be erected, conclusions that derive of their own accord from these sources [the general principles]. For since it is the main task of the philosopher to deduce the special ideas from some general principles by means of an apt connection, you [i.e. the historian of philosophy, to be distinguished from the past philosopher] should prefer, due to higher merit, the interpretation that aptly conforms with, and internally coheres with, the form and order of the whole system, even though it seems to suggest something else at first sight.²³ (Brucker's italics.)

There are two main problems with the practice of these novel historiographical precepts. First, Brucker mistakes two distinct meanings of 'principle' (in Latin *principium*, in Greek *archê*), namely a logical meaning (that is, a hypothesis from which a deduction is made), and an ontological meaning (that is, the beginning of the universe). For instance, Thales' dictum that water is the beginning, in Greek *archê*, should not be taken in the logical, but in the ontological meaning. Brucker, however, confounds these two meanings when he identifies the so-called principle in Thales' system of philosophy.²⁴ Second, Brucker ignores the fact that the methodological ideal of doing philosophy by means of system building emerged relatively late, in the seventeenth century, for which reason it is

²³ Brucker (1742-67) I: 15,10-18: "*Ut itaque de sententia philosophorum sanum rectumque iudicium ferri queat, totum ex eorum scriptis systema ita eruendum est, ut ante omnia principia generalia, quae fundamenti loco toti doctrinarum aedificio subiiciuntur, eruantur, et his demum illae superstruantur conclusiones, quae ex istis fontibus sponte sua fluunt. Quemadmodum enim hoc praecipue philosophi officium est, ut ex positis quibusdam principiis generalibus, specialia dogmata iusto nexu derivet, ita eam interpretationem merito alteri praetuleris, quae cum toto systematis habitu et connexione convenit apteque inter se cohaeret, etsi prima facie aliud dicere videatur.*" (Brucker's italics. My translation.)

²⁴ For Brucker's exposition of Thales' philosophy, see *ibid.*, I: 457.1-478.11. For Brucker's exposition of Thales' philosophy, see Catana (2008) 64-72.

inadequate and anachronistic to apply it to pre-seventeenth-century philosophy. This is not to deny that these early philosophies, including Plotinus', were devoid of method and order, only that they were different.

Historians of philosophy from the nineteenth century were critical of Brucker's method. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel thus complained that Brucker's axiomatic-deductive method was formalistic and ahistorical, but nevertheless kept to his concept of a 'system of philosophy' and his periodization. Despite criticism from Hegel and others, Brucker's concept has remained central, in some form or another, to the ensuing tradition of general histories of philosophy, the latest examples being the introduction to Copleston's, first published 1946 to 1976, and Gadamer's 1998 introduction to the 13th edition of Ueberweg's history of philosophy.²⁵

Until recently, this continuous influence has gone unnoticed among historians of philosophy. Even Michael Frede, an important historian of ancient philosophy, ignores it.²⁶ More importantly, though, he promotes a model of explanation within the history of philosophy that has been influential, but which does little to disentangle Plotinus from the methodological precepts of Brucker.²⁷ Frede asserts that Georg Horn (1620-1670), Thomas Stanley (1625-1678) and Brucker carried on what he calls a doxographical tradition, which was devoid of chronological order, and which went back to Diogenes Laertius' *Vitae philosophorum*. This text of Laertius had been rediscovered in the Renaissance and translated into Latin and the vernacular.²⁸ Unfortunately, Frede's assertions are undocumented and

²⁵ For Brucker's introduction of the historiographical concept of a system of philosophy, see Catana (2008) 11-34. For the influence of this Bruckerian concept, see *ibid.*, 193-282. Copleston (1985) I: 2-9 and Gadamer (1998) xviii-xxi, similarly latch on to this concept.

²⁶ Frede (1987, 1988, 1992) does not examine the system concept as a methodological concept.

²⁷ For this model, see Frede (1987) ix-xxiii; Frede (1988) 666-672; Frede (1992) 311-325. Mann (1996) is indebted to Frede's views, as he acknowledges on 165 n. 1, 180 n. 27, 182 n. 34, 194 n. 70, 195 n. 195. Frede (1988) 666, states: "Little thought has been given to the nature of the history of philosophy as a discipline". He ignored existing studies on this topic, e.g. Passmore (1965) and Braun (1973).

²⁸ Frede (1988) 666-667 places Horn's *Historiae philosophicae libri septem* (1655) and Brucker's *Historia critica philosophiae* (1742-67) in the same doxographical tradition, ultimately going back to Laertius. Frede (1992) 311-312, 318-322 groups Laertius and Brucker in the same doxographical tradition, and *ibid.* 321 he adds Thomas Stanley to it. Horn is left

misleading, as can be attested by anyone caring to look up Brucker's work.

In fact, Brucker did structure his account chronologically in the *Historia critica philosophiae*, as indicated in its full title.²⁹ Although Brucker praised Laertius' *Vitae* as an invaluable source to the historical circumstances of past philosophers, he criticised Laertius' work as a history of philosophy: Laertius had not paid sufficient attention to the ideas of past philosophers, he did not possess the required power of judgement, and he had been misled by (pagan) beliefs.³⁰ Brucker's forerunner Heumann had lamented Laertius' weak power of judgement, and Brucker praised Heumann for his depreciation of Laertius' *Vitae*.³¹ For much the same reason, Brucker approved of Heumann's castigation of another ancient biographical work, Porphyry's *Vita Plotini*; Porphyry too had lacked a solid power of judgement.³² Contrary to Frede's postulate, Brucker and his compatriot Heumann did not see themselves within the doxographical tradition of Laertius, but as an alternative to it. As Brucker saw things, Laertius and his 17th-century followers—Stanley, for instance—did not reconstruct the

out of the doxographical tradition in Frede's 1992 article. For the rediscovery and dissemination of Laertius' *Vitae* in the Renaissance, see Tolomio (1993). For the doxography of ancient philosophy, see Mansfeld (2008).

²⁹ Frede (1988) 666, claims that "they [the histories of philosophy composed by Horn and Brucker] do not even follow the chronological order". The statement is indeed puzzling. Brucker's work was indeed structured by a chronological table, although he occasionally crossed the scheme in order to connect temporally distant figures belonging to the same school. For the chronological scheme in Brucker's *Historia critica philosophiae*, see his chronological table in Brucker (1742-67) I: 43-45, which is put to use in his account.

³⁰ For this evaluation of Laertius, see Brucker (1742-67) I: 32.21-33. Ibid. I: 32.26-29, Brucker subscribes to the following characterisation of Laertius and similar doxographers: "Licet enim supinam in eo negligentiam et aliquam quoque in attendendo ad mentem veterum philosophorum incuriam, iudicii item in tanto argumento proditam paupertatem, nimirumque credulitatem culpaverint, viri docti." These "learned men" (*virii docti*) include Heumann, to whom Brucker refers immediately afterwards (*ibid.*, I: 32.34 n. 1).

³¹ Heumann (1715c) 348, praises Laertius' *Vitae* for its wealth of biographical information, but laments Laertius' poor power of judgement. Brucker approves, as is clear from n. 30 above.

³² Heumann (1715b) 139, regards Porphyry's *Vita Plotini* as an example of the genre of *vitae philosophorum*. Like Laertius, Porphyry had a weak judgement, according to Heumann; see Heumann (1715b) 159. Brucker approves of Heumann's criticism; see Brucker (1742-67) II: 217.37-218.33. For Heumann's criticism of Porphyry, see Catana (2012a).

systems of past philosophers, and they did not employ their power of judgement critically in order to assess the soundness of these systems as regards internal coherence and conformity with Christian doctrine.³³ Also in opposition to Frede's claim, Brucker explicitly distanced himself from Horn's philosophical history, which Brucker regarded not as a history of philosophy but as a problematic history of universal learning, where Horn, "with juvenile haste", had found philosophers "in heaven, in hell, in paradise, and who knows where else?"³⁴ Brucker insisted that he himself was not writing a 'philosophical history', like Horn, but a 'critical history of philosophy'.³⁵ In other words, Frede's doxographical category—comprising authors as heterogeneous as Laertius, Horn, Stanley and Brucker—fits badly with the textual evidence, which suggests very different categorisations. Lastly, Frede ignores that Brucker developed a new methodology that distinguished his history of philosophy from those of his predecessors, namely the one centred on the system concept, which had been absent from Laertius' *Vitae* in its methodological sense.³⁶

Let me return to Brucker, the main source of the system-concept. He held that those past thinkers who deserve to be included in the history of philosophy—and not in the history of literature or religion, for instance—produced systems of philosophy. He claimed that Plotinus did possess a system of philosophy, though one that was almost metaphysical in itself, and certainly one that was too obscure and confused to make any sense.³⁷ Although Brucker did not elaborate a distinct account of Plotinus' system, he did rely heavily on Plotinus' *Enneads* when accounting for the system of philosophy developed by ancient Neoplatonism (or the "eclectic sect", as he calls it) as a whole. As I have argued elsewhere, Brucker interpreted ancient Neoplatonism as one single, multi-authored system of philosophy,

³³ For the importance of reconstructing systems of philosophy, see Brucker (1742-67) I: 10.13-11.33. For the role of critical judgement to the historian of philosophy, see *ibid.* I: 12.5-10, and 15.10-18, as cited in n. 23 above. For conformity with Protestantism, see Catana (2008) 147-191. For Stanley as a follower of Laertius, see Brucker (1742-67) I: 36.24-28.

³⁴ Brucker (1742-67) I: 6.17-24. *Ibid.* I: 6.23-24 reads: "hic [Horn] juvenili praecipitantia lapsus in caelo et inferno, in paradiso, et ubi non?"

³⁵ For 17th-century 'philosophical history', see Malusa (1993).

³⁶ Laertius uses the term *systēma* occasionally (e.g. II.87.9, VII.45.5, VII.138.4-5), but not in a methodological sense. For further discussion of Frede's opposition between "doxographical" and "philosophical" methods in the history of philosophy, see Catana (2012e).

³⁷ Brucker (1742-67) II: 223.19-27.

and to this end he made use of Plotinus' *Ennead* V.1 to account for the metaphysical parts of this Neoplatonic system. Brucker separates this Neoplatonic system from that of genuine Platonism, that is, the system of the Middle Platonists.³⁸

Accordingly, Brucker made no serious effort to delineate the assumed principles in Plotinus' system.³⁹ Instead, he scorned Plotinus as a psychologically unstable thinker, whose early acquaintance with the Egyptians had infected his mind with the "fanatic disease of superstition",⁴⁰ and whose excessive melancholy had corrupted his power of judgement. Such grave psychological defects could only have a negative impact upon the clarity and coherence of his system of philosophy.⁴¹ Therefore, what we find in Plotinus' writings is nothing but incoherence.⁴² In the eyes of Brucker, Ficino's commentary (i.e. his *argumenta*) to Plotinus' *Enneads* was of little help, since it was marked by the "vices" of the commentary tradition and therefore dismissed by Brucker without further ado.⁴³

Brucker was not the first to attribute a system to Plotinus—other philosophers from the beginning of the 18th century had done so too. The German philosopher and theologian Michael Gottlieb Hansch (1683-1749), for instance, may have done so indirectly already in 1716, as I explain in section IV. However, the central hermeneutic position of Brucker's historiographical concept 'system of philosophy' institutionalised a heroic search among subsequent historians of philosophy for the proper principles in past philosophies, including that of Plotinus, for which reason

³⁸) Brucker separated his accounts of Middle Platonism (*Ibid.*, II: 162-188) and Neoplatonism (*Ibid.*, II: 189-462). For this theme, see Catana (2012c).

³⁹) Brucker (1742-67) II: 217.26-233.26.

⁴⁰) *Ibid.*, II: 219.1-5. For this unfortunate effect of the Egyptians, see *ibid.*, II: 220.10-35.

⁴¹) *Ibid.*, II: 227.12-20. For Plotinus' weak judgement and its unfortunate effect on his philosophy see also *ibid.*, II: 229.18-21.

⁴²) *Ibid.*, II: 222.16-33.

⁴³) *Ibid.*, II: 223.12-15. Ficino's adherence to the tradition of ancient theology, according to which Moses and other Christian figures were perceived within the Platonic tradition, was unacceptable to Brucker, and it may have added to Brucker's negative view of him; see *ibid.* IV: 59.38-60.4. Zedler (1741), 867, similarly denigrates Ficino's commentary. *Ibid.*, 728, in his entry on Platonic philosophy, Zedler refers approvingly to Brucker's early work on the history of philosophy. Compare with Bayle (1697), 856, who had praised Ficino's commentary to Plotinus for its philological and philosophical depth. For Ficino's translation and commentary on Plotinus' *Enneads*, see O'Meara (1992) 58-60, 68-73; Saffrey (1996).

Brucker's intervention remains crucial. It was not clear from the outset how these principles should be understood in the case of Plotinus' system—it took some time before 18th- and 19th-century historians of philosophy settled for a scheme with three principles, that is, three general theories (about the One, Intellect and Soul) and defined their nature. I shall return to this development in section IV. There is no doubt that the notions of the One, Intellect and Soul are real and important in Plotinus' philosophy; my doubt regards the adequacy of an all-encompassing scheme within which they, and their philosophical corollaries, are interpreted, namely the scheme of a system.

II. Plotinus' Use of the Term 'System'

Let me move on to my second claim, that Plotinus did not develop a system or philosophy, nor intended to do so. Contrary to some historians of philosophy, I shall not turn this into a matter of reproach. What does Plotinus himself say about his alleged system and its principles? And what does he say, if anything, about the method of his philosophy?

Plotinus did not use the Greek noun 'system' (*systema*) at all.⁴⁴ This is hardly surprising, given the fact that Plato, one of Plotinus' key sources, used the noun neither to describe philosophy in general nor his own philosophy. In his dialogues and letters, Plato used the term about mathematical relations;⁴⁵ harmonies in music;⁴⁶ and the organization of a government.⁴⁷ These three senses fall within standard usage in ancient Greek. None of them refer to a science, or a philosophy, and its methodology. On a crude philological level, we can thus observe a terminological

⁴⁴ For Plotinus' text I rely on the *editio minor* of his *Opera*, edited by Henry and Schwyzer. For Plotinus' use of various terms I rely on Sleeman and Pollet (eds) (1980), which is keyed to Henry and Schwyzer's Greek text; the relevant information is to be found on cols 979-980.

⁴⁵ Plato, in the spurious *Epinomis* 991E.

⁴⁶ Plato, *Philebus* 17D.

⁴⁷ Plato, *Leges* III 686B. Here I rely on the entry 'σύστημα, τό', in Ast (1956) III: 344. For the works of Plato covered by Ast, see *ibid.*, I: iv-v: Six pseudo-Platonic works are covered in this work: *Axiochus*, *De virtute*, *Demodocus*, *Sisyphus*, *Eryxias* and *Definitiones*. A search for the term and its cognates on *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* does not alter this typology of meanings in Plato's works.

discrepancy between, on the one hand, a Brucker's way of characterizing Plotinus' philosophy as a system, and, on the other hand, Plotinus' own terminology, from which this term is absent.

Plotinus may, of course, have expressed the idea of philosophy as a system by means of terms other than *systema* itself. The noun *systema* is derived from the verb *synistêmi* (I bring together), composed of the prefix *syn*, 'together', and the verb *histêmi*, 'I set up'. This Greek verb is used in a number of phrases in ancient Greek philosophy. Therefore, when suggesting words which Plotinus might have used instead of *systema*, one could look out for terms in which this verb features.

One such candidate is *systasis*, also related to *histêmi*. *Systasis* means 'combination' or 'coherence', i.e. the result of a process in which parts have been 'placed' in an internally ordered fashion.⁴⁸ The two Greek words *systema* and *systasis* are often used synonymously in ancient Greek philosophy.⁴⁹ The noun *systolê*, meaning 'contraction' or the act of giving something some kind of order (and the related verb, *systellô*, meaning 'I contract' or 'I concentrate') is a second related term denoting a synthesising process and its outcome. Did Plotinus use these terms in a manner that resembles the methodological ideal implicit in Brucker's hermeneutic precepts for writing the history of philosophy?

Plotinus frequently used the noun *systasis*, though not in a methodological sense. Instead, he used it as an ontological term: either on the level of an individual living being—the composition of its body, or its relation to its individual soul; or on a universal level—the structure of the ensouled universe; or to denote the unification of the good and levels of being.⁵⁰ Before Plotinus, the term *systasis* had been used in various senses, among which we find the ontological one featuring in philosophical theories of individuation, either on a particular or a universal level. Here, *systasis* connoted the genesis, structure or constitution of the universe, of

⁴⁸ For its meanings in ancient Greek, see the entry for this term in Liddell and Scott (eds) (1996) 1734-35.

⁴⁹ Hager (1998) col. 824.

⁵⁰ For *systasis* in the *Enneads*, see I.8.8.4; I.8.15.17; II.1.2.22; II.1.2.25; II.1.3.25; II.1.4.23; II.1.5.11; II.1.6.28; II.1.6.55; II.1.7.10; II.3.14.27; II.4.11.1; II.4.11.12; II.9.5.19; II.9.6.5; II.9.6.45; II.9.7.25; II.9.7.27; III.2.1.2; III.2.16.33; III.2.16.51; III.3.4.27; III.3.6.24; III.5.5.18; III.6.3.11; III.6.11.15; III.6.11.16; III.6.19.11; III.6.19.12; IV.4.28.35; IV.4.29.34-35; IV.7.1.17; IV.7.3.33; V.9.11.3; VI.2.2.10; VI.2.4.10; VI.2.14.4; VI.3.25.10; VI.3.25.23; VI.7.11.55; VI.7.35.37.

a person, or of a thing. Early Greek thinkers like Thales, Pythagoras and Democritus had thus used the term in its ontological sense to describe the genesis and structure of the universe.⁵¹ Plato had used the term in *Timaeus* 32C and 36D, though in a slightly different linguistic form,⁵² when describing the formation of the universe out of its primordial chaos and the construction of Universal Soul. Similarly, he had used the term when describing the physiological structure of an animal, also in *Timaeus*, 75B. He had also used the term for political institutions,⁵³ but Plotinus did not pick up on this sense.⁵⁴ Given this long and complex tradition, it is difficult to identify one privileged source for Plotinus' ontological usage of the term. This problem need not detain us, however, since it is clear that Plotinus did not use the term *systasis* in a methodological, but in an ontological sense.

Let me turn to the second term, the noun *systolê*. Plotinus used this noun to denote reduction in number;⁵⁵ physiological contraction;⁵⁶ or the individual soul's inward concentration.⁵⁷ Again, he did not use the term in the methodological sense of construing an ordered whole of philosophical doctrines; it remained keyed to ontological, physiological and noetic themes. He also used the verb to which 'contraction' is etymologically related, namely *systellein*, 'to contract' or 'to concentrate'.⁵⁸ In the *Enneads*, this verb functions as an ontological term denoting a series of causal dependencies, and as a noetic term, denoting the individual soul's noetic ascent towards the One. This usage was central to Plotinus' metaphysics and reflected in the works of later thinkers susceptible to Plotinus' thought, e.g. Proclus, Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno (1548-1600).⁵⁹ This is interesting in itself, but again, irrelevant to our enquiry, since Plotinus does not use the term methodologically.

⁵¹ Diels (1952) III: 415.

⁵² See ξύστασις, also derived from *histêmi*.

⁵³ E.g. Plato, *Res publica* 546A, *Leges* 702D.

⁵⁴ These references in Plato I owe to the *Greek-English lexicon*, compiled by Liddell and Scott (1996); 'systasis'. For a more complete list of references to 'systasis' in Plato's works, see Ast (1956) III: 343-344.

⁵⁵ Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.3.12.10.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, IV.4.29.23-24, IV.5.7.28.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, IV.4.20.14.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, II.9.9.35; III.7.3.13; II.4.11.21; II.4.11.35; VI.4.16.46.

⁵⁹ See Catana (2005) 29-49, 103-152.

To sum up, these philological examinations do not point in the direction of the 17th-century methodological ideal of a deductive model *ex principiis*. The possibility still remains that Plotinus used other terms, etymologically unrelated to *systema*, to articulate his method—the terms *methodos*,⁶⁰ or *hodos*,⁶¹ and *methodeuein*⁶² being among such alternative terms.

Plotinus gives a clear idea about his philosophical method in III.7.1, where eternity and time are considered. Here he articulates a method consisting of three steps. He starts by reflecting upon and clarifying his own experience of a question or a subject matter. In a second step he seeks clarification and analysis among ancient philosophers who had treated the same subject. If one or more ancient thinkers provide a satisfying answer, the method comes to a halt after this second step. If the philosopher thinks it possible to attain a more complete understanding of the matter at hand, Plotinus recommends a third step. Here the philosopher leaves tradition behind and works out his own view.⁶³ This method of Plotinus does not conform to Brucker's methodological precepts about a philosophical system derived from pre-established principles.

In *Ennead* I.3 On dialectics, Plotinus also mentions the eternal as a subject matter for the dialectician.⁶⁴ In this context Plotinus uses the word *methodos* in I.3.1.1 for the practice of noetic ascent towards the good.⁶⁵ He is careful to distinguish dialectics from logic; logical activity is concerned with propositions and syllogisms, whereas dialectics is concerned with the Forms and their internal relationship and not subordinated to logic.⁶⁶ Plotinus' explanation of *methodos* in I.3.1 fits badly with Brucker's idea of the philosopher moving from principles, articulated as propositions, to

⁶⁰ For *methodos*, see Sleeman and Pollet (1980), col. 630: Plotinus, *Enneads* I.3.1.1, I.3.4.23.

⁶¹ For *hodos* (journey, way, method), see Sleeman and Pollet (1980), col. 722: Plotinus, *Enneads* I.3.5.12; I.4.7.32; III.2.5.19; III.5.1.52; III.6.8.9; IV.2.1.10; V.8.13.24; V.9.3.3; VI.7.19.21; IV.4.8.24; IV.8.1.13; VI.3.22.4; VI.9.4.15.

⁶² For *methodeuein* (to treat methodically), see Sleeman and Pollet (1980), col. 630: Plotinus, *Enneads* III.1.6.23.

⁶³ For Plotinus on philosophical methodology, see Strange (1994) 23-31, who argues that Plotinus' methodology, as presented in III.7, is mainly inspired by Aristotle.

⁶⁴ E.g. Plotinus, *Enneads* I.3.4.6-9.

⁶⁵ For the noetic ascent, see I.3.1-4.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, I.3.4.9-23.

doctrines deduced logically from these principles. It is not the ultimate aim for the Plotinian philosopher to exercise this logical power of judgement, employed in a procedure determining the internal coherence of propositions in a given system.

Even worse: *Ennead* I.3[20] On dialectics is placed immediately after I.2[19] On virtues, reflecting their chronological order. I.3 examines the soul's noetic ascent towards the good, using Plato's determination of the philosopher, the lover and the musician in *Phaedrus* 284D as its starting point. According to Plotinus, the philosopher (*philosophos*) is the one who ascends upwards "by nature" (*tên physin*).⁶⁷ In this *Ennead* we get the impression that Plotinus' method in philosophy is reflected in his metaphysics, and *vice versa*. I.3.3 states that the dialectician (*dialektikos*), that is, the philosopher, should be morally virtuous. Hence, the method mentioned in I.3, pertinent to the genuine philosopher, is related to the practice of virtue, especially the higher virtues and their purification, dealt with in the preceding *Ennead* I.2.⁶⁸ The ethical dimension, emphasising the purification of the soul's virtues, is clearly an integral part of Plotinus' method for the philosopher. Plotinus' ideas about the human soul being part of the divine, and his idea about the higher virtues transcending the civic virtues, were not only foreign to Brucker and his separation of philosophy and theology, which owed much to his Lutheranism, but a serious theological challenge.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Ibid., I.3.11-10.

⁶⁸ Trouillard (1953) regards this feature—noetic and ethical purification—as essential to Plotinus' methodology.

⁶⁹ These Plotinian ideas offered a theory of *eudaimonia*, in this life and in the afterlife, which was independent of the moral instructions of Revelation, which Brucker held to be a supreme authority in ethical matters (Brucker (1742-67) I: 7.27-34; see Catana (2008) 147-191). Brucker's aversion to such a theory was far from isolated. In 1699, the Lutheran theologian Friedrich Christian Bücher had published his *Plato mysticus in pietista redivivus*. Pietism was a theological position that did not fit into the standard Protestant confessions such as Lutheranism and Calvinism. Bücher compared this new 17th-century pietism to ancient Platonism (including Plotinus) and warned against the Platonic theory of *furor* on theological grounds; the theory was not warranted by the Bible or by Luther, and its theory of a personal, unificatory experience with the One, facilitated by the higher virtues, bypassed Christology (e.g. 30-37). The rejection of Plotinian virtue ethics was typical of the anti-Platonic campaign that went on in Northern Europe from the last decade of the 17th century and well into the 18th century (see Catana (2012d)). Brucker's "systematisation" of

Let me return to Plotinus' method. One might object that my line of inquiry has only focused on Plotinus' comments regarding the philosopher's method for discovering truth, not for explaining or transmitting discovered truths. Plotinus did not articulate such a distinction, but I will turn to his "editor", Porphyry, for clarification. Porphyry, in his *Vita Plotini*, neither employed the term *systema* nor the idea it signifies.⁷⁰ Porphyry offered two orderings of Plotinus' *Enneads*, one thematic, which is used in his edition and which is not structured by Bruckerian principles, and one chronological, which also sidestepped Brucker's system concept. In other words, it is very hard to discern the system concept even as a pedagogical device in Porphyry's orderings.

If we turn to Porphyry's report of Plotinus' method during his seminars, we find no information that corroborates the idea of Plotinus' philosophy as a system. In the *Vita Plotini* 3.10-21, Porphyry informs us that Plotinus found great inspiration in Ammonius' seminars. Plotinus stayed with Ammonius for eleven years and was trained in his philosophical school. After Plotinus had gone to Rome and established his school, he lectured for ten years without committing his ideas to writing. In this period Plotinus' seminars were less ordered, according to Porphyry, partly because they were based on questions posed by the students (3.32-38). These seminars were probably inclusive and spontaneous in their form, but the form was hardly adequate for a philosopher intent on conveying a system. Moreover, Porphyry's analogy between the spirit (*nous*) of Ammonius' seminars and those of Plotinus—stated in relation to Plotinus' use of philosophical commentaries—also conveys the impression that Plotinus favoured a method in which commentaries were used only as a starting point for a free and personal reflection on the matter under discussion (14.14-16).⁷¹ This free use of philosophical commentaries does not seem to conflict with Plotinus' own methodological precepts in III.7.1. What is of interest to us, however, is that Porphyry's *Vita Plotini* hardly supports the notion of Plotinus as a system builder.

Plotinus, and of Neoplatonism in general, was one way of separating the theological from the philosophical content. For this theme, see Catana (2012d).

⁷⁰ Porphyry (1964). Nor does the Greek term *systema* occur in Porphyry (1992).

⁷¹ Here I follow Gatti (1996) 16: Porphyry's reference to the *nous* of Ammonius denotes the style of Plotinus' treatment of commentaries and other sources.

If neither the term 'system' and its synonyms, nor the concept referred to by the term 'system', can be found in Plotinus' *Enneads*, and if Plotinus' own statements in I.3 about the genuine philosopher's method point in another direction, then one is led to ask: When did the idea of a system enter Plotinus scholarship? And what were its hermeneutic consequences?

III. The Term 'System of Philosophy' Entering 18th- and 19th-Century Plotinus Scholarship

The appendix to this article contains a chronological list of works from the 15th to the 19th century. In these works we find various statements about Plotinus' philosophy. In the left-hand column of the appendix, I have indicated whether these works attribute a system to Plotinus or not. This list suggests that something important took place in the first decades of the 18th century: From the 15th to the end of the 17th century, Plotinus is not attributed a system of philosophy; after Brucker's history of philosophy from the 1740s, Plotinus is typically attributed such a system. What happened?

In Ficino's Latin translation and commentary of 1492, the term, and the concept, 'system of philosophy', was completely absent. Ficino's commentary runs from I.1 to IV.3. He only makes annotations (brief introductions) to each ennead from IV.4 to VI.9. Neither commentary nor annotation has recourse to the system concept.⁷² One might object that Ficino would have employed the term, or at least the concept of a system, if he had commented on V.1. However, the term and the concept is also absent in complete commentaries on other works in the Platonic tradition, e.g. his commentary on Plato's *Symposium*.⁷³ If we turn to an independent work of Ficino that develops Plotinian ideas, namely his *Theologia platonica* (1469-74), we shall also search in vain.⁷⁴ It was not a historiographical concept used by Ficino.

Philosophers commenting on Plotinus' *Enneads* in the period between Ficino's Latin translation and Brucker's *Historia critica philosophiae* (1742-67) also refrained from using the term 'system' about Plotinus' philosophy.

⁷²) Ficino [1492]. The same applies to Plotinus (1580).

⁷³) Ficino (2002).

⁷⁴) Ficino (2001-2006).

As is evident from the appendix, this also applies to publications by Benito Pereira (1576), Giordano Bruno (1582-1591), Johann Heinrich Alsted (1630), Paganino Gaudenzio (1643), Hugo Grotius (1648), Georg Horn (1655), Gerhard Johann Vossius (1658), Johann Joensen (1659), Henry More (1668), Leonardo Cozzando (1684), Pierre Bayle (1697 and 1722), Johann Albert Fabricius (1723), Johann Lorenz von Mosheim (1725), Johann Georg Walch (1726 and 1740), Friedrich Gentzken (1731), Johann Franz Budde (1731) and Johann Heinrich Zedler (1741). Although this is not a complete list of works from this period commenting on Plotinus philosophy, it strongly suggests that the historiographical term 'system' had not yet become part of the vocabulary used to describe philosophy of the past. We have to wait until the first half of the 18th century before it emerges. This pattern fits into the wider picture: the history of philosophy was established as a philosophical discipline in the first half of the 18th century, and here the Bruckerian notion of system begins to play a controlling role.

In the case of Plotinus, we begin to see his philosophy measured against the system concept with people like Heumann (1715) and Brucker (1742-67), as can be seen in the appendix. Like several others in this group, Heumann and Brucker were active in the first half of the 18th century, they lived and published in Germany, and they were practising Lutherans.⁷⁵ They rejected Laetius' biographical model for writing the history of philosophy, largely focusing on the philosopher's *persona* (that is, his life or character), and championed a new model in which the philosopher's *systema* was at the centre of attention. It is from these 18th-century authors that we have inherited the ideal of a genuine philosopher as one who develops a system of philosophy. They laid down the premise for many subsequent discussions about the legitimacy of Plotinus and other philosophers in the history of philosophy. Rather than trying to justify Plotinus' role on this premise, I think it is time to question the legitimacy of the premise itself.

In the period after Brucker's *Historia critica philosophiae*, we typically see Plotinus' philosophy assigned a system. This applies to a series of

⁷⁵ For Brucker's confessional stance, see Alt (1926) 80; Francois (1998). For Heumann's stance, see Freudenberg (2001). For the role of confessional identity in Germany between the 16th and the 18th centuries, see Hsia (1989).

publications by historians of philosophy, mainly working in Germany: Anton Friedrich Büsching (1774), Johann Georg Walch (1775), Christoph Meiners (1782), Dietrich Tiedemann (1795), Johann Gottlieb Buhle (1799), Marie Degerando (1804), Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann (1807), Hegel (1830s) and, finally, Eduard Zeller (late 19th and early 20th century).

There were exceptions to this trend in Plotinus scholarship. One example is the English Platonist Thomas Taylor, who belongs to the end of this transitory period, and who was not moulded in the educational culture in which the transition took place. In his first publications on Plotinus, from 1792 and 1794, Taylor did not speak of a system in Plotinus, but he did so in his publication of 1817. Likewise, the Frenchman Jean Henri Samuel Formey (1760) and the German Georg Gustav Fülleborn (1793) described Plotinus' philosophy without employing the term 'system'. Despite such exceptions, the introduction of the term caught on in the first half of the 18th century and became standard in subsequent accounts of Plotinus' philosophy.

In the nineteenth century, the idea spread from the history of philosophy to philology. In this context, the German philologist Georg Friedrich Creuzer is of interest. His edition of Plotinus' *Enneads* from 1835 was probably the most important edition after Ficino's 1492 edition. In the front matter to the edition, Creuzer quoted Fabricius' entry on Plotinus at length. Fabricius had not attributed a system to Plotinus in either edition of his erudite *Bibliotheca graeca*. Creuzer, however, inserted a new passage into Fabricius' quoted text, written by Creuzer himself and marked in sharp brackets in order to signal his interpolation. In this new passage, Creuzer lamented that Ficino had not explained the system in Plotinus' thought, adding that he intended to remedy this omission. He then assigned a system to Plotinus, as had become standard over the last seventy years before Creuzer, and explained the outlines of Plotinus' system of philosophy by means of its principles—the One, Intellect and Soul.⁷⁶ In the front matter to this 1835 edition of Plotinus, Creuzer referred explicitly to several historians of philosophy, among them Tennemann, who had

⁷⁶ For the new passage written by Creuzer, see Creuzer (1835) xxvi-xxx. The three principles are explained *ibid.* xxvi-xxviii. *Ibid.*, xxix-xxx, this scheme is related to Plotinus' doctrines on ethics and beauty, the latter reflecting the order of the One, Intellect and Soul. Creuzer had published an edition of Plotinus' *ennead* on beauty (I.6) in 1814.

identified the same three principles in Plotinus' philosophy in 1807.⁷⁷ In this way Brucker's historiographical system concept entered the scientific community of philologists working on Plotinus. This time Creuzer used the famous Fabricius as a Trojan horse.⁷⁸

It is a matter of straightforward historical analysis to determine the *terminus post quem* of the use of the term 'system' in Plotinus scholarship. It is insufficient, however, only to observe the absence of the phrase 'system of philosophy' in 18th- and 19th-century accounts of Plotinus' philosophy, since this absence may be motivated in various ways that are significant to a deeper understanding of the interpretation at hand. We have to ask if the author of the account was unfamiliar with the phrase and therefore refrained from using it, or, if he was familiar with it, found Plotinus' philosophy unworthy of it. Ficino, for instance, was unlikely to have known the phrase in its methodological and historiographical senses, whereas Heumann was indeed familiar with it in these two senses, but consciously denied Plotinus the honour of having produced a philosophical system.⁷⁹

Heumann, in his 1715 article on Porphyry's *Vita Plotini*, was thus silent about Plotinus' system and its principles.⁸⁰ On the very first page, Heumann points out to the reader that his intention was not to pass judgement on Plotinus' philosophy, only to examine his personality and Porphyry's report of it.⁸¹ As is soon clear to the reader, Heumann had a very low opinion of Plotinus: Plotinus was suffering from a state of melancholy that severely weakened his power of judgement, he was prejudiced, he was blinded by religious superstitions imbibed in Alexandria, his philosophy ruined the Christian doctrine of Trinity, and he had no regard for Christianity whatsoever.⁸² As regards Porphyry's *Vita Plotini*, it was

⁷⁷ Creuzer (1835) xxii-xxiii, mentions Tiedemann, Tennemann and Fichte by name. *Ibid.*, xxii, Creuzer mentions Tennemann's *Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 6, where we find these three principles in Plotinus' system.

⁷⁸ Neither Fabricius (1713-28) IV.2 [1723], 147-164, nor Fabricius (1790-1812) V [1796], 694-696, has a section corresponding to Creuzer (1835) xxvi-xxx; the passage is clearly by Creuzer. This also explains the inclusion of intermediary figures in Creuzer (1835) (e.g. Tennemann (1798-1819)).

⁷⁹ In the index to Plotinus, *Opera*, ed. Ficino (1580) 811, the Latin term *systema* is not listed.

⁸⁰ Heumann (1715b) 138-159, does not refer to principles or system in Plotinus.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 144-150, 159.

fraudulent, it made comparisons between Plotinus and Christ that were offensive to Heumann's religious sentiments, and it was clearly written in the detestable tradition of Laertius' *Vitae*.

Heuman was very conscious about the essentiality of the system concept to any genuine philosopher of the past, as is clear from several other passages in his *Einleitung zur historia philosophica* (1715), and of which his article on Porphyry's *Vita Plotini* is part.⁸³ The fact was that Heumann did not acknowledge Plotinus as a genuine philosopher, but scorned him for his psychological and intellectual incapacity to produce a system. As this case also suggests, Heumann did not attribute a system to a past philosophy solely on the basis of the logical coherence of its doctrines; effective conformity with true religion, that is, Christianity, was also required. Heumann's Lutheranism thus played a considerable role in his evaluation of past philosophers and their systems.

Having observed the difficulty relating to the mere use of the term 'system', my next task is to determine the hermeneutic consequences of the introduction of this concept in the case of Plotinus' philosophy in the 18th and 19th century. Many aspects could be addressed in this context, such as the following: How did those historians of philosophy determine the number and identity of the principles in Plotinus' philosophy? How did they adduce two other historiographical categories that were strictly related to the system concept, namely 'syncretism' and 'eclecticism', in relation to Plotinus' texts? How did the system concept contribute to the formation of the dichotomy between 'Middle Platonism' and 'Neoplatonism'? How did they handle those philosophical theories and arguments of Plotinus that were not deductively connected with the principles identified in his system, e.g. ethical theories on virtue in I.2.1-4, or theories about sense perception and memory in IV.6.1-3? And how did these historians of philosophy—mostly Protestants from Northern Europe—relate the alleged system of Plotinus to their religious, cultural and social background and its historical self-consciousness? An examination of these and other aspects clearly surpasses the limits of this article. In the remaining part I shall confine myself to one aspect, namely the first, a brief survey of how some 18th- and 19th-century historians came to determine the

⁸³) For the centrality of the system concept in the history of philosophy, see Heumann (1715a) A3r-A4r. See also Catana (2008) 150-151.

number and identity of the so-called principles in Plotinus' system of philosophy.

IV. Early Determinations of the Architecture of Plotinus' System: Its Principles

In the 18th and 19th centuries it was customary to claim that Plotinus' system was derived from Plato's, without further clarification. This claim may be rooted in V.1.8, where Plotinus declares himself an exegete of Plato, though this statement may have been misunderstood, as argued by Strange and Brisson. This explanation, however, called for a new explanation not always given by these 18th- and 19th-century historians of philosophy, namely, which were the principles in Plato's system? Brucker's identification of Plato's doctrine of ideas as the unique principle in Plato's system proved influential, also in regard to subsequent determinations of Plotinus' system, even though Plotinus himself did not claim in V.1.8 that he carried on Plato's system, only that he took note of Plato's hierarchy of being.⁸⁴

It appears that the earliest effort to claim the existence of a system among Platonists, and hence in that of Plotinus, dates from 1716. As stated in the appendix, the German philosopher, mathematician and theologian Michael Gottlieb Hansch spoke of the "system" of "Platonists". Hansch included Plotinus among these Platonists.⁸⁵ (The term "Neoplatonism" was introduced in the second half of the 19th century—until then it was commonplace to use the term "Platonists" for philosophers now labelled "Neoplatonists".)⁸⁶ Elsewhere in the text Hansch identified two principles, or "hypotheses", as he also called them. Hansch did not claim that these hypostases were to be understood as principles in a system, and we should be cautious not to read historiographical ideas into Hansch's text that only appeared with Heumann and Brucker; when Hansch spoke of a system in relation to the Platonists, he may simply have transferred the term from 17th-century methodology of science and thus used the term

⁸⁴ Brucker (1742-67) I: 695,30-37. For Brucker's reconstruction of Plato's system, see Catana (2008) 73-94.

⁸⁵ Hansch (1716) 8, for instance, includes Plotinus among the "Platonists".

⁸⁶ See Catana 2012c.

independently of the conceptual innovation brought about by Heumann and Brucker in the field of history of philosophy later on.⁸⁷ According to Hansch, these two “hypotheses” were: (1) that the universe does not originate *ex nihilo*, and (2) that evil (i.e. matter) furnishes something positive in the universe.⁸⁸ The ultimate source of Hansch’s account was Plato’s *Timaeus* 32C-34B, where pre-existing and formless matter counted as one of the two principles of the universe (‘principles’ in the ontological sense of the word); the other principle being the Demiurge.⁸⁹ The first hypothesis was an error, Hansch asserted, since it is contrary to Christian doctrine about God creating *ex nihilo*. The second hypothesis was similarly contrary to Christian doctrine. For this reason he rejected the notion of Platonic enthusiasm with all its ontological, soteriological, ethical and theological implications.

Brucker, as said already, contended in the *Historia critica philosophiae* that Plotinus possessed a system, though an incoherent one, but he did not identify any principles in Plotinus’ system. As far as I know, we have to wait until the 1790s before we find efforts to identify the principles in Plotinus’ own system: Between 1793 and 1807, Tiedemann, Buhle and Tenemann, among others, offered suggestions. All of a sudden it had become urgent to sort out this issue.

Of these, Dietrich Tiedemann was the first. In his *Geist der speculativen Philosophie*, he offered a lengthy account of Plotinus’ philosophy in the third volume (1793).⁹⁰ Introducing Plotinus’ system, he called upon the authority of Proclus and Augustine to corroborate his claim that Plotinus was the mastermind behind a philosophical system whose material could also be found among other Alexandrian philosophers. Plotinus deserved praise for constructing the system singlehandedly, Tiedemann insisted. It

⁸⁷ Hansch (1716) ‘Praefatio autoris’ [1], 49, 68, uses the term *systema*. However, he does not connect the term *systema* with these two hypotheses in the Platonic theory of enthusiasm, as explained on 44-71.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 44: “Duos autem enthusiami Platonici hypotheses fundamentales agnoscimus, a quibus reliquae omnes suo modo dependent. Prima: mundum non esse productum ex nihilo: secundo vero: Malum esse positivum adstruit.” The first hypothesis is explained *ibid.*, 44-51, the second 51-71. *Ibid.*, 51, Hansch explains that matter, together with God, is considered one of the two beginnings (*principia*) of the universe among the Platonists.

⁸⁹ This idea was also reported in Alcinous (1990) 29-31.

⁹⁰ Tiedemann (1791-97) gives an account of Plotinus’ philosophy in III: 263-433. The third volume was published in 1793. He identifies these principles *ibid.*, III: 283-294.

is worth observing, however, that although Proclus and Augustine did praise Plotinus as an outstanding and original thinker, neither had attributed a system to Plotinus in the cited passages.⁹¹ The warm climate in Egypt, Tiedemann continued, stimulated a method among Alexandrian philosophers characterised by intellectual perversion and self-deception. Unfortunately, this method blocked the only source to knowledge, namely *a priori* knowledge derived from “the most universal concepts, explanations, or definitions, and the most basic principles of all thinking”. This *a priori* knowledge is achieved independently of sense experience, including that kind of experience produced by ecstasy and its non-verbal and emotional state of mind. Plotinus managed to overcome this obstacle and formulated a system based on such an *a priori* truth.⁹²

As explained in section II, Plotinus himself had proposed a quite different method for the philosopher, or the dialectician, in which propositional operations were extrinsic. Tiedemann’s reading clearly accommodates Plotinus’ *Enneads* to a preconceived scheme of a system, in which universal propositions are required as a starting point for a logical deduction. Brucker had provided this scheme by means of his system concept, and he had also prepared Tiedemann’s oscillation between an ontological and a logical interpretation of the principle of the system, deriving from the two distinct meanings of the Latin term for principle, *principium*. On some occasions Tiedemann determined the principle ontologically, identifying God as the first cause in Plotinus’ hierarchy of being.⁹³ On other occasions, however, he determined the principle logically, referring to “logical emanation” (“logische Emanation”): Here ecstasy does not denote a negation of rationality, by which the most fundamental principle is comprehended, but a completion of rationality.⁹⁴

Given the lack of clear and ordered exposition of this logical principle in the *Enneads*, Tiedemann went on to determine it himself, pointing out

⁹¹ Ibid., III: 265. Here Tiedemann refers to Proclus (*The elements of theology*, ed. E. R. Dodds [1963], prop. 1; *De theologia platonica* I.10, Greek and Latin text [1608], 21-23) and Augustine (*Contra academicos* iii.18; *De civitate dei* ix.10). For a critical discussion of the claim that Proclus presented a system, see Beierwaltes (1987) and (1989).

⁹² Tiedemann (1791-97) III: 279-282.

⁹³ Ibid., III: 282-287.

⁹⁴ Ibid., III: 283.

eternal and unchangeable being (“Sein”).⁹⁵ Tiedemann’s explanation is somewhat unsatisfying, since this principle was an ontological one, and since he did not care to explain to his readers how this principle was transferred into a logical, propositional principle, an *a priori* proposition, from which other doctrines in Plotinus’ system were deduced. Nevertheless, Tiedemann’s adoption of the system concept in the *Enneads* meant that Plotinus’ hierarchy of being became synonymous with his system of philosophy. I argue below that we do find the former in Plotinus, but not the latter, and that we should distinguish between the two.

In 1799, Johann Gottlieb Buhle followed Tiedemann in his *Lehrbuch der Geschichte der Philosophie*, praising Plotinus for having the intellectual power to free himself of the dogmatic philosophy of his time, and for developing philosophical reasons (“Vernunftsprincipien”) in his own system.⁹⁶ Also like Tiedemann, Buhle determined being (“Sein”) as the one and only principle in Plotinus’ system: Everything else is derived from this principle, and Plotinus’ philosophy is rendered into a unitary whole by means of this principle.⁹⁷ Buhle’s interpretation marked the completion of an important shift in the interpretation of ‘principle’ in the Platonic tradition: With Buhle, it is quite clear that ‘principle’ (*principium*) is not only considered an ontological term (the origin of the universe) as in Alcinoüs, who had identified pre-existing and formless matter as an *archê* in Plato’s *Timaeus*; with Buhle it was mainly a logical term. In Hansch’s interpretation of 1716, ‘principle’ still denoted the Platonic idea of matter as the origin of the universe; in Buhle’s interpretation of 1799, on the other hand, ‘principle’ is first of all a logical term from which a propositional content can be deduced.

Tennemann made it clear in the first pages in his *Geschichte der Philosophie* (1798-1819) that his intention was not to write a history of philosophers (as Laertius), nor a history of *placita* (“Philosophemen”; probably an allusion to Brucker), but to write a history of philosophy as a science (“Wissenschaft”).⁹⁸ Such revolutionary statements may have led

⁹⁵ Ibid., III: 283-284, 286-287.

⁹⁶ Buhle (1796-1804) IV: 310. Here Buhle cites the above-mentioned work of Tiedemann. This fourth volume was published in 1799.

⁹⁷ Buhle (1796-1804) IV: 313.

⁹⁸ Tennemann (1798-1819) I: 3v. Ibid., I: lxxiv, Tennemann rejects Laertius’ work as a mere compilation. Ibid., I: v, Tennemann distances himself from Brucker’s works, characterising

people like Frede to assume that Tennemann completely abandoned Brucker's methodology, but a cautious reading reveals that this is not the case. Certainly, Tennemann abandoned Brucker's use of *placita* as an expository device, and he favoured Fülleborn's emphasis on philosophical problems,⁹⁹ but he nevertheless affirmed that an exposition of past philosophers' systems was a key element in this new endeavour of his.¹⁰⁰ In his fervour to stage his method as novel, he overlooked that Brucker—together with Heumann—was the source of this historiographical element.

Tennemann's interpretation of Plotinus' philosophy, presented in the volume published in 1807, conformed to these precepts.¹⁰¹ Having declared, much like Tiedemann and Buhle, that the Alexandrians had projected their undisciplined imagination into nature,¹⁰² Tennemann praised Plotinus as the first to establish a system of philosophy governed by one single principle, though he pointed out another principle than the one identified by Tiedemann and Buhle, i.e., being.¹⁰³ Plotinus' system, Tennemann explained, was grounded in the doctrine of ideas.¹⁰⁴ Here Tennemann relied on *Ennead* V.1.8, where Plotinus had explained that he was only interpreting Plato (though without, of course, saying that Plato had a system). Brucker had introduced the idea that Plato's doctrine of ideas was the main principle in his system, and Tennemann built on this interpretation.

them as compilations without plan, and *ibid.*, I: lxxvi, Tennemann similarly criticises Brucker's work.

⁹⁹ Tennemann (1798-1819) I: iv, vi.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, I: 3v-4r, [6r], viii-ix, xiv, xix, xxviii, xxxii, xxxv, lxvii-lxix. *Ibid.*, I: xlvi, Tennemann explicitly subscribes to the idea of systems comprising principles from which doctrines are deduced. Compare with Frede (1988) 667, and Frede (1992) 322-323, who claims that the breakthrough of a novel tradition came with Christoph Meiners' *Grundriss der Geschichte der Weltweisheit* (1786), which was soon followed by Dietrich Tiedemann's *Geist der speculativen Philosophie* (1791-97), Johann Gottlieb Buhle's *Lehrbuch der Geschichte der Philosophie* (1796-1804), and Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann's *Geschichte der Philosophie* (1798-1819). Frede only gives the title and publication year of Meiners' work, not the titles of the other three authors (Tiedemann, Buhle and Tennemann). I have suggested the intended titles for these three authors.

¹⁰¹ Tennemann (1798-1819) VI: 19-186, presents Plotinus' philosophy. This sixth volume was published in 1807.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, VI: iv.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, VI: 18.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, VI: 44. *Ibid.*, VI: 52, Tennemann affirms that Plotinus took over Plato's system.

What was the principle in Plotinus' system? To begin with, Tennemann was reluctant to answer this question, complaining about the system's circularity: the principles are derived from the doctrines of the system, and these are derived from the principles.¹⁰⁵ As far as I can see, Tennemann did not identify any principle in Plotinus' writings from which its doctrines were deduced logically. He silently gave up on such an endeavour. Instead, he identified three hypostases—the One, Intellect and Soul—as three 'principles', but these are clearly principles in an ontological sense, and Tennemann does not connect these three hypostases to the logical aspect of the system concept.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, Tennemann based his final judgement of Plotinus' system on the truth of its so-called principles (without discerning between different meanings of 'principle') and the validity of logical deductions made from these principles. As one can imagine, Tennemann's verdict was unfavourable: Plotinus' system was nothing but imagination ("Einbildung").¹⁰⁷

As is now clear, Tennemann's interpretation of Plotinus' system belongs—just like those of Buhle and Tiedemann—to the historiographical tradition going back to Brucker. Contrary to Frede's contention, these historians were not providing problem-based accounts, shaped by their respective "philosophical positions". Instead, they emulated the tradition of 18th-century general histories of philosophy.

It is noteworthy that Tennemann did not speak of the One, Intellect and Soul as "hypostases", but as "principles" in Plotinus' system. Thereby he led the reader to assume that these three concepts—important as they are in Plotinus' hierarchy of being—make up the foundation of Plotinus' system.¹⁰⁸ In this way, Plotinus' system became synonymous with his hierarchy of being, as conveyed in V.1.¹⁰⁹ This is misleading and unfortunate,

¹⁰⁵) Tennemann (1798-1819) VI: 53.

¹⁰⁶) For the One ("Das Eine") as the first principle, see *ibid.*, VI: 68-92, especially 74; for Intellect ("Das Intellegenz") as a second principle, see *ibid.*, VI: 92-105, 108, especially 105 and 108; for Soul ("Seele") as the third principle, see *ibid.*, VI: 105-108. Tennemann does not bring the system concept to the fore on the pages where these three hypostases are treated (IV: 68-141). *Ibid.*, VI: 105 n. 113, he brings V.1 as documentation for his account of these three principles.

¹⁰⁷) Tennemann (1798-1819) VI: 172, 174.

¹⁰⁸) *Ibid.*, VI: 53.

¹⁰⁹) *Ibid.*, VI: 105 n. 113, Tennemann brings V.1 as documentation for his account of these three principles, the One, Intellect and Soul.

if some or all of the four characteristics assigned to the system concept by Brucker (see section I above) are transferred to his hierarchy of being and its three hypostases understood as the principles in such a system.

It is also of interest that Tennemann used his identification of these three principles—the so-called theoretical part of Plotinus' system—as a basis for his account of Plotinus' theory of free will and ethics, the so-called practical part.¹¹⁰ Hereby Tennemann emulated the method employed by Brucker when expounding past philosophers' systems, which had very little to do with logical deduction from logical principles. Instead, Brucker's method was about summarising (or construing) a few vague propositions within the past thinker's metaphysics, subsequently using these propositions as "background" to other propositions in the field of ethics or political philosophy.¹¹¹ Although Brucker's precepts put emphasis on logical deduction, his practice did not reflect such a rigorous use of logic, amounting only to this: the attribution of great explanatory power to principles within theoretical philosophy, serving to explain doctrines within practical philosophy. Tennemann adheres to this method and establishes a pedagogical scheme in which Plotinus' three hypostases, or principles, serve as a basis for doctrines within Plotinus' ethics. Thereby Tennemann sidestepped the thematic order in Porphyry's edition of the *Enneads*. By implication Tennemann also adhered to another tenet in Brucker's methodology and method, namely to regard a past philosophy as a unitary, inward-looking and self-contained unity, the principles in theoretical philosophy placed at the centre.

Hegel lectured on the history of philosophy during the first decades of the 19th century. In 1833-36, Karl Ludvig Michelet, a student of Hegel, edited and published these lectures. In several respects Hegel's reading of Plotinus was original, congenial (at least seen from Hegel's perspective), and more sensitive to Plotinus's texts than had been the case over the preceding century.¹¹² He had a much better sense of the dialectical method in Plotinus' *Enneads*, and he rejected the widespread idea, outlined above,

¹¹⁰ For the distinction between theoretical and practical philosophy in Plotinus' system, see Tennemann (1798-1819) VI: 68.

¹¹¹ For Brucker's method in his accounts of Plato's and Aristotle's systems, see Catana (2008) 73-113.

¹¹² We find an account of Plotinus' philosophy in Hegel (1959) XIX: 37-69. *Ibid.*, XIX: 37 n. and 69 n., Hegel (or Michelet?) refers to Tiedemann (1791-97) and Buhle (1796-1804), the

that Plotinus' ideas can be explained as logical deductions. Instead, Plotinus' philosophy was a "metaphysics of the spirit" ("Geistes Metaphysik") aiming at the unification of the individual soul with the One.¹¹³ Hegel was also keenly aware of the importance of intellectual virtues in this process of deification.¹¹⁴ His reading of Plotinus clearly stood out from those of Tiedemann, Buhle and Tennemann, which accused Plotinus of "enthusiasm" ("Schwärmerey"); Plotinus' idea of ecstasy cannot be reduced to physiological states or a self-inflicted seduction by mental images, Hegel argued.¹¹⁵

Although Hegel claimed that we do find a "systematic development" in Plotinus' thought, based on one single idea, as if in a system,¹¹⁶ he was reluctant to use the phrase 'system' about Plotinus' philosophy.¹¹⁷ There is no doubt for Hegel that the Alexandrian philosophers, and Plotinus in particular, had been treated unfairly when historians of philosophy like Brucker had called them 'eclectics' or 'syncretists', thereby signalling inconsistent and contradictory samplings of past systems of philosophy.¹¹⁸ Hegel rejected Brucker's interpretation of Alexandrian philosophers, including Plotinus, as 'eclectic', in order to defend Plotinus as someone with a system with internal coherence, which the simple-minded Brucker had been unable to comprehend. The reason for this inability, he thought, was that Brucker had lacked the notion of 'system in development' ("System in der Entwicklung") and was therefore unable to grasp its manifestation in Plotinus, who actually made a synthesis of several past systems in

only two historians of philosophy discussed in XIX: 37-69. For Brucker's influence on Hegel, see Catana (2008) 212-27.

¹¹³ Hegel (1959) XIX: 39-40.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42-47, rejects the characterisation of Plotinus as an "enthusiast" ("Schwärmer").

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹¹⁷ Hegel does not use the term 'system' in his section on Plotinus (*ibid.* 37-69). In these lectures, Hegel did not give up Brucker's system concept, despite his criticism of Brucker for being ahistorical and formalistic, and despite his novel concept of system in development ("System in der Entwicklung"). For Brucker's influence on Hegel, see Catana (2008) 212-27.

¹¹⁸ See Hegel (1959) XIX: 33-34, where he defends Alexandrian philosophy from the charge of eclecticism, which Brucker had employed. For Brucker on eclecticism and syncretism, see Catana (2008) 13-21.

his own.¹¹⁹ The principles in these earlier systems were “aufgehoben” in Plotinus’ system.

It did not cross Hegel’s mind—so it seems—that the historiographical desire to find a system in a past thinker was indebted to Brucker. Hegel, when explaining the “main elements” (“Haupt-Momenten”) in Plotinus’ philosophy, took recourse to the scheme of interpretation prepared by Brucker’s system concept and applied to Plotinus’ writings by Tennemann; Hegel thus identified the One, Intellect and Soul as the three principles (“Prinzipien”) in Plotinus’ philosophy.¹²⁰ Although Hegel did not latch on to the term ‘system’ in this account of Plotinus, the outcome of his reconstruction resembled that of Tennemann, since he too structured his narrative on the three levels of being in *Ennead* V.1.

When we reach the second half of the 19th century, the assumption that Plotinus had a system, comprising one or more principles, was effectively implemented as a reading technique among historians of philosophy. One conspicuous example of this is Zeller’s *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, which first appeared 1844-52, and which came out in several editions, the sixth edition of 1919-23 being the latest edition bearing the mark of Zeller himself. This sixth edition has been reprinted several times, e.g. 1963 and 1990, and still enjoys a considerable authority.

On a general methodological level, Zeller subscribed to Hegel’s criticism of Brucker’s logical-deductive aspirations as ahistorical, but he was equally critical of Hegel’s notion of a ‘system in development’. Instead, Zeller endorsed an alternative method in which past systems of philosophy were reconstructed “from below”, not “from above”; not from grand, preconceived schemes of historical development, but on the basis of historical evidence.¹²¹ Zeller thus rejected Hegel’s interpretation of Plotinus’ system as one in which earlier Greek philosophical systems were “aufgehoben”.¹²² Zeller did not abandon the historiographical concept ‘system of philosophy’, either in his precepts or in his practice, but his reconstruction of principles in past systems was based on comprehensive and first-hand knowledge of the sources, and it accommodated internal

¹¹⁹) Hegel (1959) XIX: 34-35.

¹²⁰) *Ibid.*, 47-69, especially 56: “Die drei Principien sind das Eins, der *nous* und die Seele.”

¹²¹) Zeller (1888) 8-9.

¹²²) Zeller (1919-23) III.2: 472-475.

historical development within each system.¹²³ This also applies to his account of the philosophical systems in Neoplatonism, including that of Plotinus.¹²⁴

Despite Zeller's methodological revision, his account of Plotinus' philosophy conformed in some respects to the interpretative scheme laid down around 1800. Zeller argued that Plotinus' system relied on that of Plato,¹²⁵ and he identified three principles in Plotinus' system as the One, Intellect and Soul.¹²⁶ The exposition of these three principles in his system—also called a “system of emanation” (“Emanationssystem”) by Zeller,¹²⁷ though not a “logical emanation”, as in Tiedemann—provided a survey of the imperceptible world (“Die übersinnlichen Welt”) and its distinct ontological realms. Here Zeller transferred one tenet of the Brucke-rian, logical-deductive system concept to his account of ontological levels in Plotinus; he transferred the distinctiveness of propositions in a logical deduction to an ontological distinctiveness, i.e. an ontological stratification, inhabited by the One, Intellect and Soul.

There is no doubt that Plotinus claims a series of causal dependencies between the One, Intellect, Soul and matter,¹²⁸ but there is reason to doubt whether he conceives of these realities as ontologically distinct. Although one should be careful not to read Plotinus' spatial images too literally, it is worth mentioning that several of his statements about the ontological relationship between these realities point in another direction: the body of the individual is in its soul, not *vice versa*.¹²⁹ The hypostasis Soul is in Intellect: “Soul is not in the universe, but the universe in it: for body is not the soul's place, but Soul is in Intellect and body in Soul”.¹³⁰

¹²³ For Zeller's methodology, see Zeller (1888) 1-10, where the system concept remains important.

¹²⁴ For Zeller's account of Plotinus' philosophy, see Zeller (1919-23) III.2: 468-735; for Neoplatonism in general, see *ibid.*, 468-500. For 'systems' in these two accounts, please see the Appendix.

¹²⁵ Zeller (1919-23) III.2: 474-475.

¹²⁶ For these three principles, see Zeller (1919-23) III.2: 529-598. For Zeller's account of Neoplatonism, see also Horn (2010). Compare with Beierwaltes (1987) and (1989).

¹²⁷ E.g. Zeller (1919-23) III.2: 561.

¹²⁸ E.g. Plotinus V.1, especially V.1.6.38-50.

¹²⁹ Plotinus IV.3.20-23, especially IV.3.20.14-15. See also IV.8.2.42-53 and IV.8.7-8.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, V.5.9.30-32 (trans. Armstrong). For the relationship between Soul and Intellect, see also II.9.1.13-63; III.2.16.15-17; V.3.9.15-17; V.6.4.14-25; V.9.3-4; VI.7.20.12-13.

Intellect is an image of the One.¹³¹ The soul of the individual is compared to a centre in a circle, approaching the centre of another circle, namely Intellect.¹³² This sphere-centred ontological scheme is in contrast to the post-Bruckerian pyramid-like scheme. Finally, Plotinus' ontological notion of *systasis*, treated above, suggests that these realities exist in an enfolded rather than in a distinct mode.

Although Plotinus' metaphysics is a vast and complex area that I cannot hope to explain in this article, I do hope that my observations allow us to ask whether the ontological stratification into distinct realities is less central to Plotinus' philosophical concerns than to the familiar 19th-century scheme of interpretation. I also hope that my analysis renders pre-Bruckerian interpretations of the Platonic tradition less alien and more intelligible to the modern reader. Thinkers like Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) and Giordano Bruno were certainly aware of a hierarchy of being in the Platonic tradition (including Plotinus' contribution, in the case of Bruno), but their critical and innovative attention was not directed against a stratified system, but against the concept denoting the relationship between the One, Intellect, Soul and matter, namely the Latin noun *contractio*, translated from the Greek noun *systasis*, denoting an enfolded relationship between these realities.¹³³ Bruno conveyed this non-stratified interpretation of Plotinus' ontology when explaining that "the body exists in soul, the soul exists in Intellect, and Intellect either is God or is in God, as Plotinus said."¹³⁴ Similarly, Ficino and Bruno frequently used the image of the ontological relationship between the One, Intellect and Soul that is now marginalized by the system concept; the image of man's soul as the centre of a circle approaching the centre of another circle, that of Intellect.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Ibid., V.1.7.1-4. See also V.3.15.22-26; VI.7.25-30; III.8.8-11; V.1.8; V.2.1.7-13; V.3.11; V.4.2.

¹³² Ibid., VI.9.8-11. See also I.7.1.24; III.8.8.32-48; IV.2.1.24-29; IV.3.17.13-22; IV.4.16.20-31; V.1.7 and 11; VI.2.12; VI.5.5; VI.8.18.8-24.

¹³³ Nicholas of Cusa (1932) 79.19-28; For the concept of contraction in Bruno's thought, see Catana (2005) 29-49.

¹³⁴ Bruno (1999) 139: "Il corpo dunque è ne l'anima, l'anima nella mente, la mente o è Dio, o è in Dio, come disse Plotino".

¹³⁵ Ficino, *In Plotinum* VI.9.11, 769.48-51. This is a comment on Plotinus VI.9.10.13-17. For Bruno's use of the image, see Catana (2005) 12.

Zeller's account of the intelligible world served as a background for his exposition of the so-called sense world ("Die Erscheinungswelt") and the human soul, including its will and moral virtues.¹³⁶ In this way Plotinus' "theoretical" philosophy was endowed with a decisive explanatory superiority to his "practical" philosophy.¹³⁷ Hereby Zeller emphasised the metaphysics of V.1, paraphrasing it into a cognitive and propositional content that provided the key components in Plotinus' system. In 1807, Tennemann had also relied on V.1 in his outline of Plotinus' system, and so did several other 19th-century historians.

This practice of Zeller is in contrast to Plotinus' methodological precepts in I.3.1, where primacy is given to the philosopher's dialectical skills and moral virtue, and where these issues are reflected in his metaphysics. It is also in contrast to Porphyry's edition of Plotinus' *Enneads*, where metaphysics is not placed first, but where we first find ethics (I), then natural philosophy (II-III), the human soul (IV) and, finally, the three hypostases (V-VI). One can even glimpse a circular composition in Porphyry's chosen order, since *Ennead* I deals with ethics, related to the ethical purification of the human soul, a theme to which the final *Ennead* (VI.9.10-11) returns. This link is also prominent in *Ennead* V.1.1, on the three hypostases, opening with an exhortation to the reader to return to the soul's ultimate origin, the One.

As mentioned above, in 1949 Mariën complimented Zeller's exposition as "the first complete and satisfying account of the fundamental ideas in Plotinus".¹³⁸ One could equally well point out that Zeller in certain respects finalised a historiographical tradition that had emerged over the preceding hundred and twenty years or so, ultimately inspired by Brucker. It would certainly be wide of the mark to think that Zeller's interpretative scheme remains unchallenged among Plotinus scholars.¹³⁹ However, Zeller's history of philosophy is still widely circulated and its interpretative scheme has featured in prominent 20th-century expositions of Plotinus' philosophy, for which reason it would also be untrue to claim that its

¹³⁶ For the sensory world, see Zeller (1919-23) III.2: 598-649.

¹³⁷ For the primacy of Plotinus' so-called theoretical philosophy to an understanding of human nature, see *ibid.*, III: 2, 483.

¹³⁸ Mariën (1949) 458. My translation.

¹³⁹ O'Meara (1993), and Dillon and Gerson (2004), do not use an exposition of The One, Intellect and Soul as a starting point in their accounts of Plotinus' philosophy.

most fundamental hermeneutic tool, the system concept, has lost its currency today.¹⁴⁰ Brucker's magical spell, the 'system', still plays its tricks on modern scholars, though its efficaciousness may be diminishing.

V. Hermeneutic Problems Caused by the System-Concept

As I have argued above, the system-concept was applied to the *Enneads* in the 18th and 19th century, serving as a regulative ideal for reconstructing Plotinus' philosophy. I think this innovation obscures more than it reveals and I suggest that we give it up entirely.

The model of explanation implies that Plotinus' idea of the One, the first principle, is met, at least in its early Bruckerian form, with the expectation of a proposition from which deductions can be made. However, the One is ineffable, non-discursive and therefore non-propositional, for which reason it cannot serve as such a model. If paraphrased and used in propositional form, Plotinus' theory about the One as a first principle appears as a highly questionable postulate. Clearly, the system model implies that the system is as vulnerable as its first principle. This is fatal in the case of Plotinus' philosophy, since it would turn it into a matter of belief. Tennemann drew this conclusion and characterised Plotinus' system as nothing but "imagination" ("Einbildung"). Even if the One is not interpreted as a logical principle but interpreted as an ontological principle in Plotinus' system, and used as such in a reconstruction of Plotinus' system, as Zeller did, its outcome is problematic, as I shall argue in the remainder of this article.

The pedagogical outcome of this historiography is one in which Plotinus' theory of the three hypostases is presented first, i.e. Plotinus' system is introduced via V.1. This means, in turn, that the credibility of Plotinus' philosophy is judged on the cogency of his theory of the One. Given that the One is beyond rational comprehension and only articulated by means of metaphors and images, Plotinus' entire philosophy appears to the novice as an untenable postulate. If the system concept is abandoned, it is easier to dispose of this pedagogical strategy and introduce the *Enneads* via other treatises.

¹⁴⁰ For earlier studies using the three hypostases as a starting point for their accounts of Plotinus' philosophy, see, for instance, Armstrong (1940) and Wallis (1995).

The system concept introduces the idea of philosophical originality based on the past philosopher's choice of principles. This conception is manifest in Brucker's precepts for the historian of philosophy, as explained above, and it surfaces even in recent literature on Plotinus' originality. In 1996, Gatti thus stated: "the essence of his [i.e. Plotinus'] system is contained in its comprehensive meaning, and cannot be reduced to a mosaic; his true originality stands in its [i.e. the system's] overarching design, not in the parts out of which it is made".¹⁴¹ These words are premised on an anachronism, namely that the system concept was available to Plotinus as a methodological ideal, and that Plotinus intended to construe a new system. This is not said in order to deny Plotinus' originality, only to point out that is unwise to justify such a claim on his endeavour as a system-builder. Indeed, many of his original philosophical analyses and arguments are presented independently of the principles traditionally identified in his so-called system.

Another problem derived from this Zellerian system construction is that it introduces misconstructions of Neoplatonism. According to Zeller, philosophical 'isms', such as Neoplatonism, are best accounted for through an exposition of the main principles in the system of the founder of the movement; Plotinus' system of philosophy was foundational to Neoplatonism.¹⁴² Apart from the fact that Plotinus' system is an anachronistic reconstruction, this usage turns philosophical movements like Neoplatonism into a more inward-looking and unitary movement than was actually the case, and it becomes hard for the historian to accommodate historical development, conceptual innovation, discussion and openings towards new scientific areas inside and outside that movement.¹⁴³

The concept of a 'system of philosophy' implies the idea that something is constitutional and internal in a past philosophy, namely the system's principles, and other things are external to this. The past thinker is no longer seen as being in a continuous dialogue with his or her philosophical, theological and scientific communities, but as a solitary figure, who, heroically, erects complexes of doctrines based on a few principles. Apart

¹⁴¹ Gatti (1996) 14. Compare with Catana (2008) 283-299, where the unfortunate consequences of the anachronistic system concept are presented.

¹⁴² E.g. Zeller (1919-23) III.2: 498-499. For the division between Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism, see Catana (2012c).

¹⁴³ Compare with Kristeller (1956) 279-283.

from being an anachronistic construction on the part of the historians, this also hinders one from identifying links to such communities and disciplines. To abandon the system concept is to open up Plotinus' *Enneads* to a more interdisciplinary examination. This problem is acute to the period from the 15th to the 17th century, where the system concept was unavailable as a methodological term, and where Plotinus' writings were interpreted and discussed in the Platonic tradition according to different concerns that crossed the idea of a closed system.

I now turn to a different group of problems related to the Platonic tradition. As pointed out in the Introduction above, the system concept suggests a divide between modern interpretations of Plotinus, to a considerable extent based on the system concept, and those "pre-systematic" interpretations advanced between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Ficino's commentary on the *Enneads* is one case in point. Ficino carries out an extensive and original discussion of *Ennead* I.1-IV.3, i.e. Plotinus' ethics and natural philosophy, and he does so without making the Bruckerian mistake, that is, without reducing Plotinus' ethical theories to his so-called principles. In this respect, Ficino offers a much fuller account of Plotinus' ethics than is typically the case in 19th- and 20th-century general accounts of Plotinus' philosophy, where ethics is typically treated as an appendix to the system. As Section II above indicated, the cognitive and ethical purification of the philosopher's individual soul is an integral part of Plotinus's conception of a genuine philosopher, and it is closely related to his metaphysical hierarchy. Ethics is reflected in metaphysics, and *vice versa*. Ficino's commentary is subject to a variety of criticisms, but at least he did not derail the ethical impulse in the *Enneads*. In another Renaissance philosopher, Giordano Bruno, we also find Plotinus' ethics interwoven with his metaphysics.

Brucker and Zedler looked down on such poor spirits as Ficino and Bruno, who seemed to be unable to master the system concept, and the two historians regard Ficino's commentary as insignificant and exclude it from their interpretations. Tennemann goes one step further and institutionalises a lasting dismissal of pre-Enlightenment interpretations of Plotinus, labelling them "allegorical".¹⁴⁴ From then onwards, "pre-systematic" expositions of Plotinus' philosophy are labelled as allegorical,

¹⁴⁴ Tennemann (1798-1819) I: lxxv.

clearly excluding them from serious attention. Consequently, Tennemann does not care to consult Ficino's commentary on Plotinus. Although Ficino was sensitive to potentially allegorical issues in Plotinus' text (just as Plotinus was sensitive to such things in Plato's dialogues), this is not all we find in his commentary: We certainly also find something else, namely an analysis of philosophical concepts, theories and arguments. It is precisely this "something else" that has been written off, quite unfairly.

The historiographical concept of a 'system of philosophy' has not only laid down anachronistic criteria for the inclusion of past thinkers in the philosophical canon, it has also unnecessarily restricted our hermeneutic strategies when interpreting those figures once in the canon. This restriction is a result of a historical accident, and it may be abandoned without harming the historical evidence examined through it. I think it is time to give it up, and to let in what the concept left out.

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Appendix

Is Plotinus' philosophy characterised by the term 'system' or 'system of philosophy'?¹⁴⁵

Plotinus, <i>Enneads</i> : No	See section II.
Porphyry, <i>Vita Plotini</i> : No	See last pages in section II.
Ficino [1492]: No	<i>In Plotinum</i> (1580 edition): Ficino uses neither the Latin term <i>systema</i> in his commentary nor in his marginal notes.
Pereira 1576: No	Where Pereira mentions Plotinus or Porphyry, he does not assign a system of philosophy to either of them (127, 130).
Bruno [1582-91]: No	In his Latin and Italian works published 1582-91, Bruno does not attribute a system of philosophy to Plotinus.
Alsted 1630: No	Alsted occasionally uses the term <i>systema</i> in his short history of philosophy (<i>systema</i> used in II: 2013b, 2017b; the adverb <i>systematice</i> <i>ibid.</i> , 2013b). He mentions Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus in his history of logic without using the term <i>systema</i> for their philosophies (II: 2020b).
Gaudenzio 1643: No	Gaudenzio does not use the term <i>systema</i> at all in his account of the philosophies of Plotinus, Aemilius and Porphyry (423-424, 425, 428-429).
Grotius 1648: No	Grotius accounts for Plotinus' philosophy without using the word <i>systema</i> (74-88).
Horn 1655: No	Although Horn does employ the term <i>systema</i> in regard to past philosophers, e.g. Aristotle, he does not use it for Plotinus' philosophy (193-194, 269-274).
Vossius 1658: No	Vossius does not characterise Plotinus' philosophy as a <i>systema</i> (II: 72, 78).
Joensen 1659: No	Joensen does not characterise Plotinus' philosophy as a <i>systema</i> (264-265, 281-282, 293).
More 1668: No	Even though Platonic philosophy is important to More, he never attributes a system to Plotinus in this work (e.g. 7, 26, 165).
Cozzando 1684: No	Cozzando describes Plotinus' philosophy without using the term <i>systema</i> (76-86).
Bayle 1697: No	Bayle uses the term 'system' only twice in his entry on Plotinus: Once in relation to Spinoza, who reduced his philosophy to a 'system' according to the geometric method; Plotinus too

¹⁴⁵ If I cite a multi-volume work published over several years, I indicate the year in which the relevant volume appeared.

	was accused of Spinozism (855). And once in relation to the Platonists and their doctrine of occasional causation (857).
Heumann 1715b: (No)	Heumann does not use the term 'system' in his commentary on Porphyry's <i>Vita Plotini</i> , but he says that Plotinus was superstitious, deprived of the power of judgement and subject to prejudices (138-159); all this is essential to system building, and Heumann is among the first to regard the system as a criterion of philosophy in regard to past philosophy (Heumann 1715a, A3r-A4r).
Hansch 1716: (Yes)	Hansch does not explicitly attribute a system of philosophy to Plotinus, only implicitly: All Platonists—Plotinus included, we must assume—developed systems of philosophy ('Praefatio auctoris' [1], and 49, 68).
Bayle 1722: No	Apart from orthographic changes, the 1722 article on Plotinus is identical with the 1697 version.
Fabricius 1723: No	Fabricius does not attribute to Plotinus a <i>systema</i> (Fabricius (1713-28) IV.2 [1723]: 147-156).
Mosheim 1725: No	Mosheim does not attribute a <i>systema</i> to Plotinus, Porphyry or Iamblichus.
Walch 1726: No	Walch does not attribute a system to Plotinus in his entries 'Dreyfaltigkeit' (cols 557-566), 'Genius' (col. 1173), 'Seelen-Beschaffenheit' (col. 2267), 'Seelen Unsterblichkeit' (col. 2315).
Deslandes [1730]: (Yes)	Deslandes does not attribute a system to Plotinus directly (Deslandes (1737) III: 133-138). The same applies to Porphyry and Iamblichus (III: 138-143). However, he claims that all three revived Plato's system of philosophy (III: 121-122).
Gentzken 1731: No	Gentzken does not attribute a <i>systema</i> to Plotinus, Porphyry or Iamblichus (121-124).
Budde 1731: No	No mention of 'system', no effort to reconstruct a system in Plotinus (155-156).
Walch 1740: No	Walch does not attribute a system to Plotinus in his entries 'Dreyfaltigkeit' (cols 566-567), 'Geist' (col. 1135), 'Genius' (cols 1179-1180), 'Seelen-Beschaffenheit' (col. 2276), 'Seelen Unsterblichkeit' (col. 2324).
Zedler 1741: No	The term <i>systema</i> is not used in the entry on Plotinus.
Brucker 1742-67: Yes	See section I above, especially the last page.
Formey 1760: No	Plotinus produced obscure writings to which no system is assigned (165-166).
Büsching 1774: (Yes)	Eclectic philosophers from Alexandria had a system. Plotinus was part of this movement and therefore had one indirectly (II: 472-481).
Walch 1775: Yes	Hennings' abbreviated account of Brucker's <i>Historia critica philosophiae</i> , appended to this 1775 edition of Walch's <i>Lexicon</i> ,

- is in II: 1745-1804. Here (Alexandrian) eclectic philosophers, among whom we find Plotinus, are said to develop a system of philosophy, though an imperfect one, derived from Plato (II: 1780). Compare with Walch 1726 and 1740.
- Meiners 1782: Yes Plotinus and other Neoplatonists are attributed a system, though an imperfect one (13-14, 16, 48, 52, 60, 94, 102).
- Taylor 1792: No Taylor does not use the term 'system' in his explanation of *Ennead* I.6 (xiii-xxii), nor does he have recourse to this term in his notes to I.6.
- Fülleborn 1793: No Fülleborn does not claim that the Alexandrian philosophers (Ammonius, Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus) had a system.
- Taylor 1794: No Taylor does not use the term nor the concept system of philosophy (i-lxvii).
- Tiedemann 1795: Yes 'System' is profusely used in the account of Plotinus' philosophy (Tiedemann (1791-97), III [1795]: 263-433, e.g. 265, 270). Since Plotinus expresses his system so badly, it is necessary for the historian of philosophy to reconstruct it (III: 283-284).
- Fabricius 1796: No Plotinus is not attributed a system of philosophy in this second edition (Fabricius (1790-1809) V [1796]: 694-696).
- Buhle 1799: Yes Alexandrian Neoplatonists had syncretistic systems (Buhle [1796-1804] IV [1799]: 282, 283). Plotinus too had a system (IV: 300-326, 420-422).
- Degerando 1804: Yes Neoplatonists are attributed a system, which is said to derive from that of Plato (I: 182-197). Occasionally, Plotinus is attributed a system (e.g. I: 217).
- Tennemann 1807: Yes Plotinus' system is based on one single principle (Tennemann (1798-1819), VI [1807]: 18). The term 'system', as well as the concept system, is used frequently (VI: *passim*). Plotinus' system is presented in an "unsystematic" way (VI: 50-51). Plotinus did not develop his own system, but that of Plato (VI: 52).
- Taylor 1817: Yes Plotinus developed a system of philosophy, which was first presented by Plato (lxxviii-lxxix). Compare with Taylor 1792 and 1794.
- Hegel [1833-36]: (Yes) Plotinus' *Enneads* reveals a systematic development, based on one single idea (Hegel (1959) XIX: 39). The three "main elements" in Plotinus' philosophy are the three principles the One, Intellect, and Soul (XIX: 56). The Alexandrian philosophers, however, were able to synthesise past systems into one single and comprehensive system (XIX: 34-35).
- Creuzer 1835: Yes Creuzer's front matter to his edition of Plotinus, *Opera*, 3 vols (1835) quotes Fabricius' entry on Plotinus in I: xix-xli. He entitles this long quote 'Prolegomena literaria'. It is cited from the second edition of Fabricius' *Biblioteca graeca*, vol. V [1796]: 691-701. Creuzer inserts a text of his own, marked with sharp brackets,

into Fabricius' cited text, namely section Vb, which explains Plotinus' system (Plotinus, *Opera*, ed. Creuzer, I: xix, xxvi-xxx). (Compare with Fabricius 1723 and 1796, who did not attribute a system to Plotinus.) Creuzer observes that Ficino had not explained this system in his commentary (*ibid.*, I: xxvi), and determines three principles in Plotinus' system (I: xxvi-xxx).

Zeller 1919-23: Yes The system concept is fundamental to Zeller's account of Neoplatonism (III.2: 470, 476, 478, 480, 482, 484, 497, 498-499) and of Plotinus (III.2: 470, 471, 473, 484, 485, 486, 495, 512, 516, 519, 520, 521, 527, 528, 559, 560, 564, 578, 582, 602, 621, 634, 640, 644, 649, 658, 664, 673, 675, 695, 700).