

“If It Was What It Speaks”: The Human Soul’s Attainment of Self-Knowledge according to
Plotinus

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“And if it was what it speaks, then it would in this way know itself.”—Plotinus

It is easy to underestimate what is involved in becoming self-aware or having self-knowledge. We think we already know who and what we are. We might think that self-knowledge involves knowing what we are thinking, feeling, and doing; our motivations, desires, and values; and our history and how we have been shaped by nature and nurture. But according to many of the great spiritual teachers of humanity, we would be mistaken.

We err in three ways: first, we don’t see deeply enough into the sources of our thoughts, emotions, and character. We are not normally aware of the primary sources of our life but only of the way they are reflected in, or phenomenalized as, our consciousness. Second, we have mistaken ideas about the solidity and coherence of the person we take ourselves to be. Our ego identities aren’t as solid as we believe them to be. Third, we are not aware of the fact that the world that seems external to us is really a world that is presented within awareness. So part of achieving self-knowledge is becoming aware of the world as part of ourselves.

In this paper, I will try to articulate a more ancient meaning of self-knowledge, one that can be discerned in the writings of the Neoplatonic philosopher-sage Plotinus. To appreciate the stature that self-knowledge has for Plotinus, we need to know two things about his metaphysics. First, the primary self-knower is the divine mind, the Intellect, eternally abiding in repose, not the soul.¹ Second, the divine mind contains all of real being and knows it as itself; its self-contemplation consists of a tranquil, blessed, utterly complete vision of itself. If Plotinus is accurate about these truths, we may need to alter our understanding of what self-knowledge is and rise to a new conception of its value.

¹ V.3.6.1–4. All extracts from Plotinus are from *The Enneads*, vols. 1–7, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966–88).

Since the life of the divine mind is the paradigm of self-knowledge, and the soul is sourced in this mind, then two possibilities for the soul's attainment of self-knowledge become salient: either the soul's self-knowing is its coming into identity with the Intellect, and thus shares the Intellect's self-knowledge, or the soul knows itself by achieving a likeness of the Intellect's self-knowledge.² However, even a self-knowledge that is a trace of the divine mind's self-knowledge will be utterly astounding, vast, and incomprehensible to our merely human minds.

It is with such a noble concept of the soul that we must approach Plotinus's discussion of the soul's attainment of self-knowledge. I will focus on passages from two texts: V.3 [49] On the Knowing Hypostases and That Which Is Beyond and III.8 [30] On Nature and Contemplation and the One.

V.3 begins by asking: "Does that which thinks itself have to be complex, in order that it may with one of its constituents contemplate the rest, and so be said to know itself, on the supposition that the absolutely simple would not be able to return to itself and the intellectual grasp of itself?" (V.3.1.1–4). By the end of chapter 5, Plotinus has partially answered this question by demonstrating that the Intellect thinks itself: it is itself the intellection that is thinking the intelligible object, which is also itself.³ After arguing this, Plotinus then asks:

Has then our argument demonstrated something of a kind which has the power to inspire confidence? No, it has necessity, not persuasive force; for necessity is in Intellect but persuasion in the soul. It does seem that we seek to persuade ourselves rather than to behold truth by pure intellect. For while we were above in the nature of Intellect, we were satisfied and [really] thought and saw, gathering all things into one; for it was Intellect thinking and speaking about itself, and the soul kept quiet and went along with the workings of Intellect. But since we have

² Put in religious language: God's self-knowledge is God's wisdom. The soul comes from God, and any self-knowledge that it has will be either a participation in God's self-knowledge or a stepping down of God's self-knowledge to accommodate the soul's being more limited than God.

³ V.3.5.48–50. The initial dilemma is not fully resolved at this point because as Plotinus goes on to show, the Intellect is a one-many and thus is not absolutely simple. It doesn't know itself by having one part know another part, so it is truly self-knowing. But it is another matter to ascribe self-knowledge to something that is absolutely without parts, as the One, the highest principle in Plotinian metaphysics, is often asserted to be. In the final eight chapters, Plotinus shows that the One has no need of self-knowledge—it is beyond self-knowledge—as indicated in the title of the tractate. This is a very profound point, and it has implications for our quest for what is deepest in our being, but it lies outside the scope of this paper to pursue them here.

come to be here below again and in soul, we seek for some kind of persuasion, as if we wanted to contemplate the archetype in the image. (V.3.6.10–19)

Plotinus describes two situations, one where we are “above,” in the nature of Intellect, in which we “were satisfied and [really] thought and saw” and one where we are “here below again and in soul,” presumably not satisfied, and seeking for “some kind of persuasion.” When we are “above,” we see the truth the way Intellect sees it and see the necessity with which intellect has self-knowledge, and thereby we too are self-knowing. The intellect’s self-knowledge could not be otherwise. It doesn’t sometimes know itself and sometimes not. It could not possibly not know itself since its self-knowing is what it is.

Yet, we don’t remain in Intellect. Plotinus doesn’t explain here why we don’t remain there, where we were satisfied, but his rueful or perhaps ironic language suggests that we *prefer* to be *here*: “It does seem that we seek to persuade ourselves rather than behold truth by pure intellect.” Once we are “below,” we seek to be persuaded that the Intellect has self-knowledge because we seem unable to access or unable to appreciate the necessity of Plotinus’s abstract demonstration of the Intellect’s self-knowledge.

It’s strange. When we are here below, we seek to be persuaded about the very things we seemed to know directly when we were in Intellect, and moreover, following a reasoned demonstration of truth fails to inspire confidence in us. What is going on here? Something in us wants to obtain conviction about what the truth really is and who or what we really are and whether knowing ourselves is a worthwhile pursuit. We are seeking the kind of certitude about this that comes from personal experience or in realization. A realization that we have made our own, one with ourselves, part of our own lives. It seems that the necessity of the truth we beheld when we were “above” is too impersonal for us to grasp. The Intellect spoke to us about itself (and about ourselves, since we are included in its nature) when we were “above,” but we have not yet made this truth our own. In a sense, we leave Intellect (speaking metaphorically) *in order to* persuade ourselves of the truth we beheld there. The implications of this are vast: our journey into the cosmos, involving many lives and embodiments, stems from this desire to persuade ourselves of the truth we weren’t able to grasp directly when we were “above.”

So now that we are “here,” how can we be persuaded and obtain confidence that our deepest being lies in Intellect? Here’s what Plotinus suggests:

Perhaps, then, we ought to teach our soul how Intellect contemplates itself, and to teach that part of the soul which is in some way intellectual, since we call it discursively intelligent and by this naming indicate that it is a kind of intellect or that it has its power through and from Intellect. (V.3.6.18–22)

We need to teach our soul how Intellect contemplates itself. Whatever this process of teaching involves, its goal is to provide the persuasion and confidence that the soul here desires. The part of the soul to be taught is said to be “discursively intelligent” and to receive its power “through and from Intellect.” Earlier in 5.3, Plotinus says that “it is we ourselves who reason and we ourselves make the acts of intelligence in discursive reasoning; for this is what we ourselves are” (V.3.3.35–37)

When Plotinus says that *we* should teach the soul how the Intellect has self-knowledge, does this mean that the reasoning phase is to teach itself? Yes and no. The reasoning phase must learn by its own activity of using reason, so in this sense it is teaching itself. We must persuade ourselves. No one can do this for us. It is in, through, and as our own reasoned form of life that personal realization must come. But the wisdom that will truly transform us must ultimately come from the divine Intellect’s illumination; this is what enlightens us.⁴ Thus, it seems that the “we” here is not just the reasoning phase of soul. The reasoning phase together with the Intellect constitutes the “we” and are included in the selfhood that we are.⁵ In the following passage, when Plotinus says “we,” he is speaking with the sovereign authority and confidence of someone who has brought himself into accord with Intellect; he is speaking as the self-knower who is “double”:

Sense-perception is our messenger, but Intellect is our king. But we too are kings when we are in accord with it. . . . so that the man who knows himself is double, one knowing the nature of the reasoning which belongs to soul, and one up above this man, who knows himself according to Intellect because he has become that Intellect. (V.3.3.45–V.3.4.1–10)

⁴ “This light shining in the soul illuminates it; that is, makes it intelligent, that is, it makes it like itself, the light above” (V.3.8.24–25).

⁵ I am indebted to the far-seeing work of my teacher Anthony Damiani for this insight that the “we” in Plotinus refers to the double self-knower. See his *Living Wisdom* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Larson Publications, 1996), where he uses Plotinus to illuminate extracts from Paul Brunton, *The Notebooks of Paul Brunton* (Burdett, N.Y.: Larson Publications, 1984–88). See, for example, *Living Wisdom*, 160–62, 229–30.

This passage is another gem from Plotinus and encapsulates in a few sentences a profound teaching about the soul and its attainment of self-knowledge.⁶ It deserves to be contemplated. Here, I am touching on it only to suggest that the “we” that teaches the soul is the divine Intellect plus the reasoning phase of soul.

How does the divine Intellect educate us? Tersely put: the Intellect educates us by providing the intelligible world that as reasoning souls we contemplate. The soul’s contemplation of real being appears as the sensible universe when we are “below.” The sensible world is a unity whose integrality evidences the rational principles structuring it, the archetypes that the soul has translated from the intelligible world.⁷ Therefore, in a very concrete sense, the world is our teacher, and contemplating the world thus teaches us about ourselves. Our souls are active in manifesting the world through contemplating its archetype and then active in contemplating the world and assimilating the intelligence buried in it.⁸ A breathtaking vision is thus at work in Plotinus’s presentation of the relationship of our souls with the eternal divine mind on the one hand and the cosmos of becoming on the other.⁹ Our many human lives are phases of our greater soul’s life, one that runs through an indefinite sequence of embodiments in the cosmos. Our life includes the cosmos we experience, and this cosmos in turn is the expression of the Idea each of us receives from the divine mind.

⁶ For Damiani’s explanation of this passage, see *Living Wisdom*, 160–62, 180–86, 257–64 and *Astronoesis* (Burdett, N.Y.: published for Wisdom’s Goldenrod by Larson Publications, 2000), 232–34.

⁷ There are many places in the *Enneads* where Plotinus speaks of the soul’s serving as the intermediary between the intelligible world and the sensible, for example, 4.3.11: “Yes, the nature of the All, too, made all things skillfully in imitation of the [intelligible] realities of which it had the rational principles, and when each thing in this way had become a rational principle in matter, shaped according to that which was before matter, it linked it with that god in conformity with whom it came into being and to whom the soul looked and whom it had in its making. For it was certainly not possible for the thing made to be without a share in the god, nor again for the god to come down to the thing made.”

⁸ Damiani emphasizes that the soul or mind is learning something in the very process of manifesting a world because this manifesting is structured by the intelligence of the Intellect: “Think of wisdom in the sense that the mind is becoming the universe Think of wisdom as the recognition of that, and the application of that . . . And as it’s doing so, it’s beginning to understand the laws that govern manifestation. When it begins to understand this, and it applies this to itself, then this is wisdom.

We say that the mind becomes the world that you experience. And in the process of the mind becoming the world, it assimilates a certain wisdom that is inherent in the world that it is going to manifest. In that process of assimilating the World-Idea, the mind is assimilating the wisdom that is inherent in it” (*Living Wisdom*, 59).

⁹ One of Damiani’s central concerns in his book *Astronoesis* is to show how the sensible cosmos is an expression of the Nous and embodies and expresses its wisdom. This has implications for cosmology and epistemology, as well as soteriology. For a brief statement of his view of this “intertwining of cosmology and epistemology,” see “Deliberate Repetition: Cosmic Epistemology,” in *Astronoesis*, 232–34.

To unpack this idea a bit more, let's continue with the exposition of V.3.6. Plotinus has said that insofar as we are in soul, we seek to be persuaded of the truth that the Intellect knows itself "as if we wanted to contemplate the archetype in the image" and that perhaps "we ought to teach our soul how Intellect contemplates itself." V.3.6 then continues:

This therefore should know that in its own case too it comes to know *what it sees* and knows *what it speaks*. (V.3.6.23–24)

"What it sees" refers to the intelligible cosmos that is the deep and ultimate source of the soul's experience of the sensible cosmos. The divine Idea of the cosmos, which includes the divine Idea of each soul itself, is what the soul is really seeing. The reasoning phase of the soul eternally receives this Idea from Intellect,¹⁰ and its reception, which is its contemplation, is simultaneously transformed into the sensible cosmos, which includes the body that it will associate with. The intelligible world within itself is what the soul is coming to know. What the soul receives from Intellect can be considered a logos, a divine word, the rational principle of the cosmos, and the soul's contemplation of that logos, naturally and without deliberation, results in the sensible cosmos.¹¹

This visioning forth of the cosmos, which is the soul's life, that is, our life, is what Plotinus means by the soul's *speaking*. The soul speaks forth what it receives from Intellect. What it receives, the divine Idea, is, ultimately, *what it knows*, but it *comes to know* the divine Idea initially as the sensible cosmos as a secondary act. This interpretation that *what* the soul speaks is what it receives from Intellect is supported by Plotinus's explanation two lines later that "the things *which it speaks* are above, or come to it from above, whence it also comes itself" (V.3.6.25–28). Thus, we are constantly receiving this divine logos in the center of our being and simultaneously coming to know it as the sensible cosmos. What we thereby know is ourselves, but we (as the soul here "below") do not yet recognize this because the world is known as

¹⁰ Speaking of the soul's reception of the Intellect, Plotinus says, "We are then in accord with it by our rational power which first receives it" (V.3.3.32).

¹¹ Does it result in the sensible cosmos as a relatively objective cosmos or a sensible cosmos for itself, within its experience? Paul Brunton's teaching of mentalism seems to suggest that the Overself as part of the World-Mind is involved in fabricating the world-idea that all creatures receive, and then as the witness-I, it fabricates the sensible world that its representative, the creaturely ego, experiences as its unique spaced and timed thought. See Paul Brunton, *The Wisdom of the Overself* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1970).

something other than us. Thus we lack self-knowledge despite having such an intimate connection with the real being we are.

What then must we do to know ourselves? Plotinus tells us that we must *be* what we speak (again, F): “And if it *was* what it speaks, then it would in this way know itself” (V.3.6.25). We are coming to know the logos as the world and ourselves in the world. By following Plotinus’s argument, we may come to understand that the divine Idea is what we are speaking forth, but there is still a felt duality between us and the logos: we have not yet shifted our identity so as to include the logos as one with ourselves. We must *be* what we speak by rising to the more inclusive position of the Intellect, as Plotinus argued earlier in 5.3.4:

A man has certainly become Intellect when he lets all the rest which belongs to him go and looks at this with this and himself with himself: that is, it is as Intellect he sees himself. (V.3.4.29–32)

So far I’ve argued that the reasoning soul sets out on its journey into the cosmos in order to persuade itself, that is, realize for itself, in its own life, how the Intellect contemplates itself.¹² This interpretation is supported and filled out by Plotinus’s account of the soul’s contemplative activity in chapter 6 of III.8, On Nature and Contemplation and the One. We will see there the same themes of the soul’s speech, quiet contemplation, and achieving confidence through unifying knower and known that we saw at work in 5.3.6.

III.8 begins with Plotinus suggesting, playfully, that all things aspire to contemplate; even Nature contemplates. After explaining how Nature could be said to contemplate in the first four chapters, in chapter 6, Plotinus begins as follows:

¹² The long process whereby the soul has been educated by its slow assimilation of the logos appearing as the world has prepared it to realize its identity with the Intellect. We have in fact been knowing ourselves all along as we contemplate the world and assimilate the rational principles that structure it, but we haven’t understood that the real source of our knowledge is our heavenly identity with the Intellect. The reasoning phase of the soul has been enriched and enlarged by this process, possessing more and more of the logos as itself. This personal realization is the way that we gain confidence that we are the Intellect that knows itself; we are persuading ourselves that the Intellect knows itself by seeing this process at work in our own life. The gradual realization of this by the soul is what Plotinus means by the *image* of the Intellect’s self-knowledge when he says that when the soul seeks persuasion it is “as if we wanted to “contemplate the archetype in the image” (V.3.6.18-19). But now, if we have made some progress in our contemplation of the image, we can “transpose the image to the true Intellect” and realize the Intellect as being our own self.

Action, then, is for the sake of contemplation and vision, so that for men of action, too, contemplation is the goal, and what they cannot get by going straight to it, so to speak, they seek to obtain by going round about. (III.8.6.1–4)

Our discussion of 5.3.6 suggests a plausible interpretation: When we were “above” in Intellect, Intellect spoke about itself to us, but we were not able to grasp what it was saying directly, so we undertake a more circuitous path to contemplating the Idea, the path that propels us into the activity that Plotinus calls a “weakened form of contemplation.”¹³ This involves both the activity that results in the sensible world and the secondary contemplation of that world.¹⁴ All of our activity here, our life, aims at contemplation and is contemplation. “Going round about” may be a veiled reference to the soul’s involvement with the cosmic circuit and the rational principle of the universe that governs the descents and ascents of soul.¹⁵ III.8.6 continues:

So action bends back again to contemplation, for what someone receives in his soul, which is rational form—what can it be other than silent rational form? And more so, the more it is within the soul. For the soul keeps quiet then, and seeks nothing because it is filled, and the contemplation which is there in a state like this rests within because it is confident of possession. And, in proportion as the confidence is clearer, the contemplation is quieter, in that it unifies more, and what knows, in so far as it knows—we must be serious now—comes into unity with what is known. (III.8.6.10–17)

We are quiet when we truly understand something and have made it part of our being. The degree of quiet indicates the degree of confidence we have; the turbulence of doubt contrasts with the quiet confidence of knowing by being. Think of the peaceful atmosphere in which we

¹³ III.8.5.23–24.

¹⁴ In V.3, Plotinus also refers to this activity here below as contemplation: “Again, Intellect is an activity contained in itself, and, as for soul, the part of it directed to Intellect is, so to speak, within, and the part outside Intellect directed to the outside. In one part then, it is made like that from which it comes, in the other even in its unlikeness it is made like, *even here below in its action and production; for its action is simultaneously contemplation, and in its production it produces forms*, which are like intellections carried out in practice, so that all things are traces of intellection and Intellect proceeding according to their archetype” (V.3.7.25–30, my emphasis).

¹⁵ IV.3.12. 20–34.

receive intuition, contemplate beauty, know without hesitation what needs to be done and do it, or glimpse paradoxical truths. The closer the unity between the soul and the rational principle, the more completely the soul possesses it, and the greater the soul's confidence, and the quieter the contemplation. Plotinus explains:

For if they are two, the knower will be one thing and the known another, so that there is a sort of juxtaposition, and contemplation has not yet made this pair akin to each other, as when rational principles present in the soul do nothing.

(III.8.6.17–20)

Contemplation is an active process. It can make the knower and known *akin*; when it doesn't, they are merely juxtaposed and the rational principles are not active. Making the object akin seems to involve cognizing the object by means of the Ideas in the soul, what Plotinus calls "fitting the object to the imprints of the Intellect."¹⁶ It seems that these Ideas have not ever been directly known by us, but in trying to understand our sense experience, we draw upon something we don't clearly know we possess, and this use of them is a step toward making them part of us. III.8.6 continues:

For this reason the rational principle must not be outside but must be united with the soul of the learner, until it finds that it is its own. The soul, then, when it has become akin to and disposed according to the rational principle, still, all the same, utters and propounds it—for it did not possess it primarily—and learns it thoroughly and by its proposition becomes other than it, and looks at it, considering it, like one thing looking at another. (III.8.6.20–25)

The passage suggests that there is a *process* of assimilating the rational principles into us, and thus there will be variations within the same soul with respect to how akin it has become to a given rational principle at a given time, and over time, and variations between souls as well. The evolution of each soul's understanding follows a path unique to it. Here lies the real discursivity of the reasoning phase.

¹⁶ V.3.2.13–14.

But even if we make the rational principle akin to us, this is not yet to *fully* possess it. For once we have become akin to the rational principle, we “utter and propound it” because we do not possess it primarily. We propound it so we can look at and examine it. The activity of propounding the rational principle constitutes our life “here”—experiencing the world through living through the body—only secondarily might it involve understanding in terms of propositions, definitions, and arguments. That is, propounding the rational principle seems to be the same kind of activity as we saw in 5.3.6, where the soul speaks what it receives from Intellect. We “propound” the object because we don’t yet *fully possess* it, there are aspects and levels of the object that remain veiled from our understanding. III.8.6 continues:

For it is not full, but has something wanting in relation to what comes before it; yet it itself sees also quietly what it utters. For it does not go on uttering what it has uttered well already, but what it utters, it utters because of its deficiency, with a view to examining it, trying to learn thoroughly what it possesses. But in men of action the soul fits what it possesses to the things outside it. (III.8.6.26–30)

There’s a connection between which rational principles we “utter,” “speak,” “manifest,” or contemplate and the degree to which we have united with them by assimilating them and thus fully possess them. What has been *fully* understood need not be expressed or lived out. What we have uttered well, we need not keep uttering. Plotinus concludes the sixth chapter thus:

Because it [soul] does not have perfect possession it desires to learn more thoroughly what it has contemplated and gain a fuller contemplation, which comes from examining it. And when it leaves itself and comes to be among other things, and then returns again, it contemplates with the part of itself it left behind; but the soul at rest in itself does this less. The truly good and wise man, therefore, has already finished reasoning when he declares what he has in himself to another; but in relation to himself he is vision. For he is already turned to what is one, and to the quiet which is not only of things outside but in relation to himself, and all is within him. (III.8.6.30–40)

The soul that has enlarged its intelligence through contemplating and assimilating the world possesses imperfectly many rational principles that it has made its own. Perfect possession would mean there would be no need to learn more about the rational principles and thus no need to utter or examine them. This seems to be the case with Intellect and with those beings identified with Intellect because they possess all to the fullest extent because they are in identity with all; they are the All. There is no need for Intellect to look outward; all its attention is self-directed.¹⁷ But the souls of all humans below that of the sage will look outward to some extent or will alternate between periods of self-recollection and periods of outward attention. The soul matured by many human lives will look outward less, content with the intelligible world it finds within that it now possesses as its own.

Thus Plotinus says that the sage (*spoudaios*) “has already finished reasoning when he declares what he has in himself to another, but in relation to himself he is vision.” The reasoning the sage had been engaged in, and has now finished, is the speaking forth of the world *in an attempt to* contemplate the intelligible, the process of gaining conviction and realization of how the Intellect contemplates itself. This activity is what is teaching the soul how the Intellect contemplates itself. This reasoning *is* the living here.

Plotinus is making a distinction between the outer and inner life of the sage. When the sage “declares what he has in himself to another,” he has already finished reasoning. This is what makes someone a sage—he or she has learned well the lessons found in earthly life and has finished this course of education. But the sage still manifests or displays the wisdom he or she has within to another. Since the sage has already finished the process of living out the Ideas and has gained conviction about the Intellect’s self-knowledge, it seems that this display or declaration doesn’t have self-knowledge as its goal. Rather it is directed toward the well-being of the person the sage is revealing him- or herself to. This outward activity, which for everyone below the level of a sage, has self-knowledge as its goal, for the sage is really a display of wisdom for others’ benefit. But lest we think that the sage is thereby directing attention outward, Plotinus reminds us that for the sage, all is within, and he or she rests in quiet, the outward act not disturbing the oneness because it is already included in it. So the sage is the double self-knower, knowing him- or herself as Intellect and as the reasoning soul that displays the intelligible world to others for their benefit.

¹⁷ V.3.7.19–20.

But, if the sage knows the world as not different from his or her being, then these others will also be known as not different from him- or herself, so perhaps the sage will continue to speak forth the logos indefinitely, and in a sense his or her self-knowledge will expand indefinitely.¹⁸ So then what has been finished? Perhaps it is the process that seeks to know Truth by externalizing what is within. The sage knows that the real source of knowing is always within, and so the outer life is lived as a display of wisdom rather than a seeking for it.¹⁹

¹⁸ It would be fruitful to compare this display of wisdom to the compassionate activity of a bodhisattva or a buddha, who is no longer deluded about how things exist but remains “here” out of the compassionate desire to teach other beings how to become enlightened as well.

¹⁹ I am grateful to my teacher Anthony Damiani for opening my mind to the vistas of Plotinus and for demonstrating in his own person that Plotinus is speaking of truths that are intimate and realizable. All the ideas in this paper, to the extent that they have not been distorted by my attempt to grasp them, are to be found in a much more elaborate form in transcripts of his classes on the double self-knower in Plotinus, and some of this material can also be found in *Living Wisdom* and *Astronoesis*. I also wish to thank Cathrene Connery, Herbert Shapiro, and David Gallagher for helpful written comments on an earlier draft and members of the Plotinus class at Wisdom’s Goldenrod for thoughtful discussion of the paper and useful comments.