Plotinus is one of the most important philosophers of all times, but one of the least studied in our own. Why? This neglect is largely an accident of the way knowledge has been divided by our university curricula. The period of late antiquity in which he wrote has traditionally fallen into the cracks between classical and medieval specialties—too late for the one, too early for the other. Scholars are now giving this period its due, just as historians of philosophy are coming to recognize the power of its pre-eminent thinker. Plotinus reasoned deeply about dozens of topics, and we shall consider at least the following: God and the effort to become divine; the intellect, forms, and their intimate relationship; knowledge, selfhood, and self-knowledge; the soul, embodiment, and matter; evil, purification, and virtue; logic, being, and the transcendence of both; imagination, memory, and love; freedom and necessity; unity and difference; time and eternity; oblivion.

Besides investigating his systematic views on these topics, we shall consider also some of his unrecognized innovations: he was the first phenomenologist, putting introspective psychology at the center of his philosophy; he was the first existentialist, privileging existence over essence, desire over reason; and he was the first philosopher of the unconscious. All of these novelties happened under the rubric of his “Platonism,” ostensibly a faithful interpretation of Plato, but arguably a creative synthesis of ancient philosophical insights from Heraclitus through Sextus Empiricus. Ultimately, Plotinus sought to champion Plato against the criticisms of Aristotle and the Stoics; along the way, though, he formulated a philosophy that deserves a spot in the ring with even modern contenders. With these rivals in mind, we shall consider who carves reality at the joints. More fundamentally, we shall ask whether it has any joints at all. For if it does, Plotinus seems the irresistible butcher.

We shall attend both to the philosophical history that influenced him, as well as the philosophical history he influenced. Without him, after all, Augustine might have remained a Manichean; without him, more generally, Christian philosophy would be unrecognizable. After his immense medieval influence, Plotinus next enjoyed the esteem of Renaissance thinkers, particularly Ficino in Italy and Cudworth in England. Most recently, echoes of his thought can be heard in Germany: both Hegel and Heidegger are deeply in his debt for content, even when they do not acknowledge it. As for style, the closest recent analogue is Lacan, whose similarly obscure lectures attracted the intelligentsia of his metropolis for decades. Plotinus likewise drew students from throughout Roman society, lecturing to senators and women alike. These difficult lectures, collected under the numerological title Enneads, were occasionally mystical and poetic, but more often dense with arguments metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological. All of them survive. We shall read and discuss most, striving to appreciate and evaluate the many facets of this ancient adamant.