

Negation and Mystical Union in Plotinus

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Abstract: The Plotinian description of mystical union derives from his – philosophical and theological – view regarding the One. Firstly, the process of abstraction (*aphairesis*) implies the removal of all that has been an addition to the soul by its descent into a body. Secondly, it requires a rigorous intellectual purification of thought in relation to the One. The mechanism by which Plotinus imposes the “negation of negation” (*Enneads* 5.5.6.32) and “taking away everything” (*Enneads* 5.3.17.38) manifests itself by transposing the soul from the stage of discourse and cognition towards the noetic contemplation on the level of *Nous*, and, finally, towards the mystical union with the One.

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Negation (ἀπόφασις)

The Plotinian negative theology is extremely radical, especially if it is judged in the context of Plotinus’ view on the One. Thus negative theology is guaranteed – foremost, but not exclusively – by his views on the reality of the One. This foundation must be taken into consideration mostly when we try to understand the contents and the functions of the Plotinian negations whenever the One is brought into discussion. On this basis, it is necessary to perceive the Plotinian negative theology within the broader context of the soul’s ascension towards the mystical union with the One, which is in itself a way of return of all things back to the One:¹ therefore, even in the case of mystical union, the Plotinian understanding concerning the One shapes, in the last instance, and the other dimensions regarding the soul’s relation with the One in the state of union, but also the state of union itself.²

Among researchers,³ there is a well defined intention of making a distinction between the two forms of negation in Plotinus: *apophasis* and *aphairesis*, though both function generically as negation of some aspect or other in respect to the One.

¹ See Andrei Cornea, “Lămuriri preliminare” (Preliminary clarifications), in Plotinus, *Opere* (Works), vol. I (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2002), 108 and 124.

² Cf. Todd Ken Ohara, *The Internal Logic of Plotinian and Dionysian Apophasis*, Ph.D. Diss. (New Haven: Yale University, 2007), 144.

³ E.g., John Bussanich, *The One and its relation to Intellect in Plotinus* (Leiden: Brill, 1988); Pieter A. Meijer, *Plotinus on the Good or the One (Enneads VI, 9): An Analytical Commentary* (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1992); Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayng* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994).

If *apophasis* is applied in order to explain the fact that the One is not thus and such, *aphairesis* operates instead somehow differently, on the basis of three conceptual models. The first model¹ is the one of the sculptor which removes the addition of clay to arrive at the completely finalized figure.² The second one refers to the mathematical model of subtraction, through which Y is subtracted from X, having as residuum Z.³ The first model – and the last one – concerns abstraction, according to which *aphairesis* functions as a way of conceptualization of a hypothetical state of things: *i.e.* we abstract from what is factual to expound something about the reality, transcendence and independence of the One. In each model, something is definitively negated, though having as a result the fact that something else remains.⁴

In *Enneads* V.5.6., Plotinus argues explicitly for the fact that even negations (ἀποφάσεις) concerning the One must be, in the end, negated: “for perhaps this name [One] was given it in order that the seeker, beginning from this which is completely indicative of simplicity, may finally negate (ἀποφήση) this as well, because, though it was given as well as possible by its giver, not even this is worthy to manifest that nature;”⁵

Previous to this declaration, Plotinus had explained that the name of the One is best expressed in the form of “a suppression or negation of multiplicity (ἀποφάσει τῶν πολλῶν).”⁶ He goes further and teaches us that even the name of “One” itself – understood as “negation of multiplicity” – must be, in the end, denied or negated. Admitting this “negation (ἀποφήση) of negating multiplicity (ἀποφάσει τῶν πολλῶν),”⁷ Plotinus acknowledges implicitly the fact that negations or denials

¹ Most researchers tend to agree that Plotinus adopted the discursive practice of *aphairesis* from Pythagorean or Neopythagorean philosophies. Moreover, they pretend that Dionysius himself would have taken the method following the Plotinian use of *aphairesis* in relation to the first conceptual model brought into discussion. Cf. John N. Jones, “Sculpting God: The Logic of Dionysian Negative Theology,” *Harvard Theological Review* 89, no. 4 (1996): 357, n. 8.

² Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6.9.8 sq.: “Go back into yourself and look; and if you do not yet see yourself beautiful, then, just as someone making a statue which has to be beautiful cuts away (ἀφαίρει) here and polishes there and makes one part smooth and clears another till he has given his statue a beautiful face, so you too must cut away (ἀφαίρει) excess and straighten the crooked and clear the dark and make it bright, and never stop working on your statue till the divine glory of virtue shines out on you...” [trans. A.H. Armstrong, in Plotinus, vol. I (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 259].

³ Jones (“Sculpting God: The Logic of Dionysian Negative Theology”, 357, n. 8) defines the process of subtracting attributes from a subject in terms of the rejection of the logician. Ohara (*The Internal Logic of Plotinian and Dionysian Apophasis*, 95, n. 152) is rather tempted to associate the method of the rejection of the logician proposed by Jones with what results from an act of apophasis. Even though the second Plotinian model was often coupled with the one present in Pythagoreanism/ Neopythagoreanism, nonetheless, Ohara thinks that Plotinus also uses *aphairesis* in other ways.

⁴ Cf. Ohara, *The Internal Logic of Plotinian and Dionysian Apophasis*, 95.

⁵ Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.5.6.30-34

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.5.6.28.

⁷ Cf. also Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God. Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition. Plato to Eriugena* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1995), 124.

themselves are, in the last instance, inadequate in the attempt to express the reality of the One alongside other things; and this is because they function by means of and in relation to the things “posterior” to the One. In other words, the One is treated by means of a reference which relates to the things that are not the One itself, things that are, from a metaphysical point of view, “under” the One or are inferior to the reality of the One.¹

Negations are improper when applied to the reality of the One for other reasons also. Firstly, negations are improper because, even when someone would have a mystical contact with the One, such negations do not contain, do not express and neither do they deliver a knowledge of the One.² This idea is crucial for the understanding of the limitations of any discourse, including the one belonging to negation. According to Plotinus, the act of negation or denial – no matter how it is practiced: on cognitive or verbal level – does not mean and neither does it constitute an apprehension or at least a thinking of the One. It is simply impossible to know the One by bringing it within the frame of the human mind, because the One is, metaphysically, too simple, and thus indeterminate.³ Strictly speaking, our concepts about the One fail to circumscribe the One.⁴ Even though to a certain extent it can direct its “gaze” towards the One, still even the Nous cannot know, think or understand the One.⁵

All discourse concerning the One – positive or negative – functions, lastly, in view of the soul’s ascension to the state of mystical contact with the One: “Raised up, then, towards that by what has been said one should take hold of that itself, and he will see also himself and will not be able to say all that he wishes.”⁶ In this broader sense, the apophatic discourse achieves its goal to finally indicate the direction of the ascension towards the mystical union of the soul with the One. The movement by which Plotinus imposes “*the negation of negation*” (ἀποφήση... ἀποφάσει τῶν πολλῶν) and “*the removal of all*” (Ἀφελε πάντα⁸) behaves in the sense of transposing the soul from the level of discourse and cognition to the level of

¹ Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.5.10.1 sq.: “But do not, I beg you, look at it through other things; otherwise you might see a trace of it, not itself; but consider what this might be which it is possible to grasp as existing by itself, pure, mixed with nothing, in which all things have a share, though nothing has it; for there is nothing else like this, but there must be something like this (trans. Armstrong, V, 185).

² Cf. Plotinus, *Ennead* 5.3.14.2-3: “we certainly do not speak it, and we have neither knowledge or thought of it” – οὐδὲ γνῶσιν οὐδὲ νόησιν ἔχομεν αὐτοῦ (trans. Armstrong, V, 121).

³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 6.8.13.1 sq.: “But if one must bring in these names of what we are looking for, let it be said again that it was not correct to use them, because one must not make it two even for the sake of forming and idea of it” [trans. A.H. Armstrong, in Plotinus, vol. VII (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 267].

⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 5.4.1.9 sq.: “there is no concept or knowledge of it” – μὴ λόγος μὴδὲ ἐπιστήμη (trans. Armstrong, V, 141).

⁵ Cf. Ohara, *The Internal Logic of Plotinian and Dionysian Apophasis*, 133–134.

⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.8.19.1 sq. (trans. Armstrong, VII, 291).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.5.6.32.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.3.17.38

Nous, of noetic contemplation and, finally, on the level of mystical union with the One: “Now if you want to grasp the *isolated and alone*¹, you will not think;” (Ἐρημον καὶ μόνον ἔαν ἐθελήσης λαβεῖν, οὐ νοήσεις).² It thus results that a necessary condition for the transposition of the soul to “the ascension towards the union with the One” is given by the ceasing of the noetic activity of the soul, and in this manner are emphasized the function, the status and the value of apophasis as a final instrument of preparation for the transposition of the soul in a state of mystical union with the One.³

Abstraction (ἀφαίρεσις) and purification (κάθαρσις)

The Plotinian description of mystical union results from his vision regarding the One. As the summit of our soul stays in an eternal union with *Nous*, the same the highest level of *Nous* – named “*Nous* in love” or “that in *Nous* that is not *Nous*” – remains in eternal union with the One. Thus, the One is not compelled to return towards us; it is permanently present at the core of our being. In order to achieve this, we must “take off everything” or “put away otherness.”⁴

Through “the process of abstraction” (*aphairesis*), the Soul is capable to rise to the contemplation of the *Nous* and then to what is beyond *Nous* – to the contemplation of the Good.⁵ In practical terms, this process implies, first of all, the removal of all that was added over the soul by his descent into a body – *i.e.* the removal of all that is extraneous to its true nature. Secondly, this process requires an intellectual rigorous purification of thinking in relation to the Good, purification which is necessary because our thinking is not simple.⁶

The Plotinian understanding of purification is categorically preoccupied foremost of moral purification: moral excellence⁷ is therefore an *a priori* for the

¹ Plato, *Philebos* 63b.

² Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.3.13.32-33 (trans. Armstrong, V, 121).

³ Cf. Ohara, *The Internal Logic of Plotinian and Dionysian Apophasis*, 137–138.

⁴ Cf. Rich T. Wallis, “The Spiritual Importance of Not Knowing”, in Arthur Hilary Armstrong, ed., *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 473.

⁵ The Soul becomes conscious of itself and realises that it depends on a divine superior Intellect which illuminates it and which allows it to think; it also realizes that it emanates from a transcendent Good which is superior to the Intellect and which constitutes the subject of its attraction. Cf. Pierre Hadot, “Neoplatonist Spirituality. Plotinus and Porphyry”, in Armstrong, ed., *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, 234.

⁶ Cf. Bussanich, *The One and its relation to Intellect in Plotinus. A commentary on selected texts*, 113: “This epistemological and ontological procedure of abstraction or subtraction deepens the moral and psychological κάθαρσις.”

⁷ Plotinus itself was a remarkable model of moral purification; Porphyry relates that Plotinus “was mild and kind, most gentle and attractive, and we knew ourselves that he was like this. It says too that he sleeplessly kept his soul pure and ever strove towards the divine which he loved with all his soul, and did everything to be delivered and escape from the bitter wave of blood-drinking life here” (See Porphyry, *The Life of Plotinus*, 23.1 sq., trans. Armstrong, I, 69). On the moral aspect of Plotinus’ thought see, *e.g.*, John M. Rist, “Plotinus and Moral

purification of the intellect.¹ *Aphairesis* implies the abandonment of multiplicity and of all human preoccupation, the soul being hence confronted with the task of becoming pure and unalloyed: *i.e.*, to become the same as the One, in its simplicity.² The other aspect of *aphairesis* imposes the purification of those concepts regarding the Good. We must “remove all” because the One is none of the things of which origin it is.³ Even though we cannot predicate anything about it: either Being, substance or life, we can still think it by the elimination of all that was added over the idea of Good; in this manner, we will be filled with wonder and will know through intuition the way it is in itself.⁴

This is one of the most radical consequences of negative theology, because it imposes imperatively grasping the Good through the absolute negation of all referential terms which we are familiarized with. We can know the One just through what comes after it – *i.e.* its “results” –, and the knowledge thus obtained is not the knowledge of its nature, but just the knowledge of the fact that the One constitutes the transcendental cause of all things.⁵ “We say *that* he is, but we cannot say *what* he is⁶ – a familiar idea in the writings of the early Christian Fathers. Yet, in the *Enneads*, the paradox is that the Good cannot be known truly through his sequents: he cannot be known through them in a way that will tell us of his nature but only in so far as they tell us what he is not”.⁷

Plotinus will be the one to also include in the equation of knowledge the purification, *κάθαρσις* being the element which accompanies virtue and implies

obligation”, in Idem, *The Significance of Neoplatonism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1976), 217–233.

¹ Having as a starting point Arnou’s interpretation [René Arnou, *Le désir de Dieu dans la philosophie de Plotin* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1921), 202, 217], which does not seem to decipher a negation of an intellectual order in Plotinus’ case, Trouillard emphasizes the importance of an asceticism of the spirit which is distinguished from the moral effort. It’s about the ascesis which consists in the annihilation of illusions, in the criticism of the mental limitative forms and in preferring night in the detriment of some obvious facts. On the distinction between intellectual negation and moral negation see Jean Trouillard, “La Négation”, in Idem, *La purification plotinienne* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1955), 137–139.

² Plotinus – the same as Plato, Dionysius and Meister Eckhart – makes appeal to the image of the sculptor which splinters a piece of rock in order to reveal the statue free of all obstacles and additions (*Enneads* 1.6.9). In this way, the soul becomes liberated of all that was added to its real nature and it is led towards the state of contemplating the Good. Cf. Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 132–133.

³ Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.3.17.38; 5.5.13.13.

⁴ Cf. Ibid. 3.8.10.31–32. The view that Plotinus voices here – *viz.* that we must look for the Good outside the created things – is one of the typical forms of negative theology in the manner illustrated by Philo of Alexandria, Dionysius, Eurigena, and Meister Eckhart. Before all things came into being, the One was and It is now as it was before bringing all things into existence. Therefore, we must not add to its existence anything that belongs to the realm of created being. Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.5.12.42–43 and 6.7.23.9–10.

⁵ Ibid. 6.8.11.1–3 and 3.8.10.32.35.

⁶ Ibid. 5.5.6.

⁷ Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 134–135.

asceticism – *i.e.* the detachment of the soul from the body:¹ “What then do we mean when we call these other virtues *purifications*, and how are we made really like by being purified? Since the soul is evil when it is thoroughly mixed with the body and shares its experiences and has all the same opinions, it will be good and possess virtue when it no longer has the same opinions but acts alone.”²

In this sense, it must be pointed out that Plotinus highlights moral purification and intellectual purification to an equal degree: “But what could the *purification* of the soul be, if it had not been stained at all, or what its *separation* from the body? The purification would be leaving it alone, and not with others, or not looking at something else or, again, having opinions which do not belong to it – whatever is the character of the opinions, or the affections, as has been said – and not seeing the images nor constructing affections out of them.”³

In *Enneads* 4.7.10.40, Plotinus will speak of κάθαρσις as a maneuver which leads “in a state of knowledge of the best”⁴ (γνώσει τῶν ἀρίστων). In some other place, the Neoplatonic philosopher introduces a “hierarchy” of spiritual stages:⁵ at first, “moral purification” – which gives birth to “virtues” (ἀρεταί) and “adorning” (κοσμήσεις) –, and then a superior level of knowledge, achieved when the soul is “gaining footholds in the intelligible”.⁶

On the first level, the journey of the soul may follow two different routes. The first road consists in “contemplating the splendor of the sensible world” in order to rise to the World Soul which generates it and to discover thus the superiority of the soul in comparison with the body.⁷ Therefore, the first path will lead the human soul to self consciousness – as a force of transcending the body – and to receiving light from the divine Intellect. The second trajectory – which converges with the first – makes direct reference to inner experience: initially, ascetic experience and, subsequently, the experience of thinking.⁸

The union (ἔνωσις)

¹ In its first stage, the journey of the soul may follow two routes: one that consists in reflecting upon the existence of the sensible world; the other turns firmly back inside the soul. Both are destined to reach the same goal: the spiritual separation of the soul from the body and life in conformity with the Intellect. Cf. Hadot, “Neoplatonist Spirituality: Plotinus and Porphyry”, 234 *sq.*

² Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.2.3.10-14

³ *Ibid.*, 3.6.5.13-19

⁴ Trans. A.H. Armstrong, in Plotinus, vol. IV, 385.

⁵ Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.7.36.8-10: “but we are put on the way to it by purifications and virtues and adorning and by gaining footholds in the intelligible and settling ourselves firmly there and feasting on its contents” – πορεύουσι δὲ καθάρσεις πρὸς αὐτὸ καὶ ἀρεταὶ καὶ κοσμήσεις καὶ τοῦ νοητοῦ ἐπιβάσεις καὶ ἐπ’ αὐτοῦ ἰδρύσεις καὶ τῶν ἐκεῖ ἐστιάσεις

⁶ A certain support for the first level could be the fact that the only instance of κόσμησις seems to make reference to moral preparation: “the preparation (παρασκευὴ) and the adornment (κόσμησις) are clearly understood, I think, by those who are preparing themselves” (Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.7.34.11-12); Cf. Bussanich, *The One and its relation to intellect in Plotinus*, 195–196.

⁷ See Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.1.2.1-5.

⁸ Cf. Hadot, “Neoplatonist Spirituality – Plotinus and Porphyry”, 234.

To make the One the object of knowledge implies its transformation into a multiple, and, as the One is absolutely simple, it is clear that it cannot be any thought about it.¹ Nevertheless, the ascension towards the supreme entities is operated first by the movement towards the Nous and then beyond Nous. We first contemplate the intelligible and then – leaving behind the intelligible – we move beyond it. Only through the contemplation of the intelligible world the soul can rise to what it's beyond it.²

To describe the arrival of the soul in the intelligible realm, Plotinus uses the words of Platonic fashion ἐπιβάσεις (“ascension”) and ἐστιώσεις (“banquet”). The first belongs to a quote from Plato's *Republic*, where it is said that “hypotheses” (τὰς ὑποθέσεις³) are “stepping stones to take off from, enabling it to reach the unhypothetical first principle of everything”.⁴ For the second one, a plausible source could be *Phaidros*: “And when the soul has seen all the things that are as they are and feasted on them, it sinks back inside heaven and goes home”⁵ – which may very well be a parallel closely related to Plotinus' “intelligible banquet”.⁶

In order to become simple – the same as the One – we must abandon the process of thinking the One, which is, by its nature, multiple. When the soul becomes the same as the Intellect, it reaches the union with the Nous, by means of which we understand that the Good *is*.⁷ When the soul leaves behind all other things and becomes pure thinking, then it will attain – the same as the Nous – the contemplation of the One.⁸

The way of reaching the unity with the Good or the vision of the Good – simply implies the renunciation of all things, including knowledge:⁹ Plotinus' way goes beyond knowledge:¹⁰

¹ Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.3.14.2-3.

² Ibid., 3.8.11, 5.5.6 and 6.8.7. Cf. Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 140.

³ Plato, *Respublica* 511b5. [trans. G.M.A. Grube and rev. C.D.C. Reeve, in J.M. Cooper (ed.), Plato, *Complete Works* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 1132].

⁴ Ibid., 511b6-7: οἷον ἐπιβάσεις τε καὶ ὁρμάς, ἵνα μέχρι τοῦ ἀνυποθέτου ἐπὶ τὴν τοῦ παντὸς ἀρχὴν ἰών

⁵ Plato, *Phaidros* 247e2-4: καὶ τᾶλλα ὡσαύτως τὰ ὄντα ὄντως θεασαμένη καὶ ἐστιαθεῖσα, δῦσα πάλιν εἰς τὸ εἶσω τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, οἴκαδε ἦλθεν [trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in Cooper (ed.), Plato, *Complete Works*, 525].

⁶ Cf. Bussanich, *The One and its relation to intellect in Plotinus*, 196.

⁷ Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.3.8.45-48.

⁸ Ibid., 6.9.5 and 1.1.8. Cf. Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 140.

⁹ The whole doctrine of the unity of the intellects and souls is destined to explain the concrete experience of soul which, on concentrating on itself and by returning to its original source, abandons the body, surpasses its discursive activity, and experiences the union with the divine Intellect. It discovers itself as an intellect which, by self-knowledge, is a part, an element of the total Intellect. In discussing this stage from the journey of the soul, inside which, by surpassing rational and discursive activity, we experience the unity with the divine Intellect, we can speak of a mystical experience. Cf. Hadot, “Neoplatonist Spirituality – Plotinus and Porphyry”, 236.

¹⁰ Schomakers considers the treatise 6.9 from *Plotini Opera* as the first systematic philosophical description of mystical philosophy – i.e. of knowledge beyond knowledge,

“One must therefore run up above knowledge and in no way depart from being one, but one must depart from knowledge and things known, and from every other, even beautiful, object of vision. For every beautiful thing is posterior to that One, and comes from it, as all the light of day comes from the sun.”¹

Even though it could be found at least one fragment where Plotinus does not totally eliminate intellection when it comes to the Good, the most frequent way that is supported is the non-conceptual way.²

Silencing all intellectual activity and harmonizing with the simple nature of the Good – *i.e.* without being duality anymore – the soul cannot do anything else “but to wait quietly till it appears” (ἀλλ’ ἡσυχῇ μένειν, ἕως ἂν φανῇ).³ The experience of “*expectation* lacking thinking and concept” is not such an easy state to come to, but if someone persists, the soul can “wake another way of seeing,⁴ which everyone has but few use.⁵ This awakening towards another way of knowledge is a rouse to the presence of the Good, which it can neither come, nor go; it is permanently present, as without its presence, the universe cannot be.⁶

This perception of the Good cannot be named anymore knowledge, as the Good cannot even possess self knowledge:⁷ it is “presence superior to knowledge (κατὰ παρουσίαν ἐπιστήμης κρείττονα).”⁸ The Good offers something much more important and grand than the simple fact of knowing it: “he gives them rather to be in the same place with him and to lay hold on him” – ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ, καθόσον δύναται, ἐφάπτεσθαι ἐκείνου.⁹ The One is unknowable, and all the other things, even though they cannot know it, can still enter into contact with it – a contact that is beyond knowledge.¹⁰ Neither the Intellect, nor the thinking is the supreme Good, but they are suspended in each of us by a superior presence which is antecedent to the noetic order.¹¹

which is made possible because of a rigorous rejection of other types of knowledge, thus being constituted the first treatise of negative theology. See Ben Schomakers, “Knowing through Unknowing. Some Elements for a History of a Mystical Formula”, in Nancy van Deusen, ed., *Issues in Medieval Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Richard C. Dales* (Ottawa: The Institute of Mediaeval Music, 2001), 34.

¹ Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.9.4.7-11

² See Ibid., 6.7.40.32-36 and 6.7.35.44-45.

³ Ibid., 5.5.8.3-4

⁴ See also Ibid., 6.9.11.22-23. Cf. Schomakers, “Knowing through Unknowing...”, 35.

⁵ Ibid., 1.6.8.25-27 (trans. Armstrong, I, 259).

⁶ Cf. Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 140.

⁷ Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.9.4.3. Cf. Ibid. 5.6.6.31. On the fact that the One does not think – as a recurring theme in Plotinus, see Arthur Hilary Armstrong, “The Escape of the One. An investigation of some possibilities of apophatic theology imperfectly realized in the West”, *Studia Patristica* 13, Part. II (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1975), 81.

⁸ Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.9.4.3 (trans. Armstrong, VII, 315).

⁹ Ibid., 5.6.6.34-35.

¹⁰ We are all in the One (Good) and then we can enter into contact with It in a super-intellectual way. See Cornea, in Plotinus, *Opere* (Works), vol. II (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2006), 124-125, n. 28.

¹¹ Cf. Jean Trouillard, “Valeur critique de la mystique plotinienne”, *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 59 (1961), 431.

Nevertheless, Plotinus does not proclaim the abolition of reason, but he asserts that we must surpass the Nous: at the highest level of the Plotinian ascension, the vision of the Good is made through the power of the Intellect, but through a Nous emptied of content. The perception of the presence of the One is described by Plotinus as a kind of simple intuition, which is experienced just when the soul completely becomes one with the Nous.¹

While the state of being in the presence of the Good is a gift given by the Good, it is still a state that the human intellect can reach just under the impulse of aspiration, of longing towards the Good, but also by following the example of a wise mentor. Nonetheless, there are some situations when the soul may be raised from this state towards an experience of absolute unity with the One. Even though this type of experience can be understood as being different from the experience of the awaiting of the presence of the Good², the distinction is still not that obvious in the Plotinian texts. Plotinus specially underlines the passive state of the soul intrinsic to such a union, as the longing of the soul has ended. The veil of the Nous is the one which raises the soul united with it towards a different horizon of experience:³

“It is there that one lets all study go; up to a point one has been led along and settled firmly in beauty and as far as this one thinks that in which one is, but is carried out of it by the surge of the wave of Intellect itself and lifted on high by a kind of swell and sees suddenly (ἐξαίφνης), not seeing how, but the vision fills his eyes with light and does not make him see something else by it, but the light itself is what he sees.”⁴

The term ἐξαίφνης⁵ (“unexpectedly”) expresses a type of vision or of union which – as Armstrong⁶ takes note of – does not constitute a state which can be planned or called at any moment someone desires to do so. Moreover, the fact that the soul is raised from this state contradicts the position of those who seemed to pretend – in Plotinus’ case – that the soul attains the unity with the Good by its own effort.⁷

¹ Plotinus, *Enneads* 3.8.10.31-32: “But if you grasp it by taking away being from it, you will be filled with wonder” – Εἰ δὲ ἀφελὼν τὸ εἶναι λαμβάνοις, θαῦμα ἔξεις (trans. Armstrong, III, 397). In this way, Plotinus’ mystics can be considered a mystics of the *nous*. Cf. Philip Merlan, *Monopsychism, mysticism, metaconsciousness. Problems of the soul in the neoaristotelian and neoplatonic tradition* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1963), 2.

² Cf. Carabine, *The Unknwon God*, 141–142.

³ See Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.7.35.36-40.

⁴ Ibid., 6.7.36.15-21 (trans. Armstrong, VII, 201).

⁵ The references for this term also include Ibid. 5.3.17.28; 5.5.3.13; 5.5.7.23 and 6.7.34.13. Cf. also Plato, *Symposium* 210e.

⁶ See *Plotinus V*, trans. Arthur Hilary Armstrong (Cambridge Mass./London: Harvard University Press/William Heinemann, 1984), 135, n. 1.

⁷ Cf. Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 142.



Irina Dumitrașcu Măgurean, *Untitled*

10,8 cm x 8,5 cm, polaroid, 2015

The experience of the unity in terms of vision and light is one which presupposes the lack of a real object present in front of our eyes: the real terminus point of the wandering soul is the direct vision of that light in itself and not by means of any other thing: “the self glorified, full of intelligible light – but rather itself pure light – weightless, floating free.”¹

This type of vision excludes the very possibility of the soul of knowing the fact that it is united with the One, as it cannot be anymore a distinction between itself and the object of its intuition: “But one must transport what one sees into

¹ Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.9.9.57-59 (Armstrong, VII, 339).

oneself, and look at it as one and look at it as oneself.”¹ “This alone is the eye that sees the great beauty”.²

The ecstasy (ἔκστασις)

Plotinus also imagines the experience of being “outside-of-itself” or of ecstasy (ἔκστασις) in terms of another way of seeing. Jean Trouillard deems regrettable the fact that the mystical stage was rendered by the term ἔκστασις (“ecstasy”), which Plotinus used just once, and which would rather express a fleeting migration (*un exode passager*) towards pure transcendence; he favours instead the word ἁπλῶσις³ (“simplification”). Porphyry tells us that, for Plotinus, his aim and his goal were hiding the desire to be intimately united with the god who was beyond all.⁴ This union was attained by the master four times and by his biographer just one time.⁵ It is thus described as an event.⁶

The ecstatic moment does not do anything else but to actualize its eternal root and to recover its expressions.⁷ For Plotinus, “ecstasy is but the momentary revelation of an eternal datum”.⁸ It is the experience of thinking which exceeds itself and at the same time realizes its highest possibility (*seine höchste Möglichkeit*).⁹ In this “self-surpassing”, the thinking conscience will not go back just to its “foundation”; it will find in itself its own origin and it will not attain it by the means of thinking or of not-thinking, but, in fact, it is united with it, it is identifying with it beyond any concept of thinking (*den denkenden Begriff hinaus*).¹⁰

There is an intimate connection between the movement of thinking which surpasses itself in the tension towards the One and the discovery of its origin, the unification, or the fact of becoming one: in this event of “becoming simple and one with itself”, it is produced the overcoming of the spirit or of the Intellect towards the One. The unification or the simplification of the self is the condition of the union with That which is one and simple. The overcoming of the self, the simplification¹¹ – or the unification of the self – and the union with the *origin* coincide.¹²

¹ Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.8.10.40-42 (Armstrong, V, 273).

² Ibid., 1.6.9.24-25.

³ Ibid., 6.9.11.23.

⁴ Porfir, *Vita Plotini* 23.15-16: τὸ ἐνωθῆναι καὶ πελάσαι τῷ ἐπὶ πᾶσι θεῷ.

⁵ See Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 23.

⁶ Cf. Hadot, “Neoplatonist Spirituality – Plotinus and Porphyry”, 245: “This is why the mystical experience is presented as an exceptional phenomenon and as transitory.”

⁷ Cf. Trouillard, “Valeur critique de la mystique plotinienne”, 433.

⁸ Eric R. Dodds, “Tradition and Personal Achievement in the Philosophy of Plotinus”, *The Journal of Roman Studies* 50 (1960), 6.

⁹ Cf. Werner Beierwaltes, *Denken des Einen. Studien zur Neuplatonischen philosophie und ihrer wirkungsgeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klosterman, 1985), 123.

¹⁰ Ibid., 123.

¹¹ Cf. Pierre Hadot, *Plotin ou la simplicité du regard* (Paris: Pion, 1963).

¹² Cf. Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis. L'union Dieu chez Denys l'Aréopagite* (Leiden/Köln/New York: Brill, 1996), 6.

For Plotinus, this unification is accomplished in stages, beginning from the ascending movement of the Soul towards the Intellect and from the Intellect towards the One.¹

a) The man is placed at first in the multiple. The first moment of unity is ἀφαίρεσις, “the abstractive negation”, which Beierwaltes defines both as abstraction of the multiple and return to interiority:² ἀφαίρεσις – the abandonment of outer life and the return towards the inner one – does not mean just the overcoming of the multiple, but truly it recognizes itself in its position concerning the One.³ The soul searches in itself something more original, which – in comparison with discursive thinking which disperses itself in time – is more simple, more one.⁴ Thus proceeding, the Soul returns towards the Intellect.⁵

b) The movement of abstracting the world and of interiorizing extends through a process of transforming the Soul by means of virtue – by which it becomes intellectualized (νοωθῆναι⁶) – and through a conversion to Nous – which tends to unite with it.⁷

“When one contemplates, especially when the contemplation is clear, one does not turn to oneself in the act of intelligence, but one possesses oneself; one’s activity, however, is directed towards the object of contemplation (καθεῖνο γίνεται)”.⁸ The Soul in contemplation transforms itself in the contemplated object. Similarly, in its relation with the Intellect, the Soul transforms in it:⁹ “Must we say then that unchangeability belongs to Intellect, but that in the case of Soul, which lies, so to speak, on the frontier of the intelligible, this change can happen, since it can also advance further into Intellect.”¹⁰

Penetrating the intelligible realm, the Soul acquires its qualities and – from changing – becomes immutable:¹¹ “when it is purely and simply in the intelligible world it has itself too the characteristic of unchangeability. For it is really all the things it is: since when it is in that region, it must come to unity with Intellect, by the fact that it has turned to it, for when it is turned, it has nothing between, but comes to Intellect and accords itself to it, and by that accord is united to it without being destroyed, but both of them are one and also two”.¹²

c) Nonetheless, the union of the Soul with the Intellect does not constitute the final point of the anagogic movement towards the One, but just the fact of being united with the One.¹³ If the union of the Intellect with the Good is eternal,¹⁴ the

¹ See de Andia, *Henosis*, 6–7.

² Cf. de Andia, *Henosis*, 6.

³ Beierwaltes, *Denken des Einen*, 129.

⁴ Ibid., 131.

⁵ Cf. de Andia, *Henosis*, 6.

⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.8.5.35.

⁷ Cf. de Andia, *Henosis*, 6.

⁸ Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.4.2.4–7 (trans. Armstrong, IV, 141).

⁹ Cf. de Andia, *Henosis*, 7.

¹⁰ Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.4.2.15–18 (trans. Armstrong, IV, 142).

¹¹ Cf. de Andia, *Henosis*, 7.

¹² Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.4.2.24–29 (trans. Armstrong, IV, 143).

¹³ Cf. de Andia, *Henosis*, 7.

¹⁴ Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.7.35.29–30.

unifying experiences of the soul are exceptional. They appear unexpectedly and they cannot be self induced. The exercise of inner unification which prepares them is not sufficient to induce them; they also disappear unexpectedly.¹

Plotinus prefers the term ἕνωσις in order to illustrate the union of the Soul with the Intellect,² but, for the union with the Good, he appeals either to the word ἕνωθῆναι: to be united, to become united – as Porphyry does in *The Life of Plotinus* –, either to the expression ἐν ἁμῶν: “nor are there still two but both are one” (οὐδ’ ἔτι δύο, ἀλλ’ ἐν ἁμῶν).³

The experience of the Good, or of the One, is represented in Plotinus through the model of the loving union.⁴ The relation with the Good cannot be but one of love:⁵ the Good excites the desire and in this manner the Good is the one which will become the object of love. This love incites the soul to assimilate itself to the loved object and to withdraw from all that could separate it from the object.⁶ As the Good lacks form and thinking, anyone who loves it wishes to abandon all form and thinking. We cannot be attached to the Good and remain in the same time attached to something outside it. The detachment from all corresponds to a form of asceticism: the Soul must detach from the body, the passions, from all memory of external objects, and then from all ideas and from all intelligible forms.⁷ As is the case with lovers, so is the desire of the Soul to be alone with the loved one, all the more so as the loved one is the only One.⁸ The Soul refuses to stay in any form no matter how elevated, and it experiences thus the infinite love of the One.⁹

Knowing through Unknowing

In treatise 5.5.7, Plotinus uses a phrase which will be germinal for Dionysius the Areopagite’s negative theology: “Intellect, veiling itself from other things and drawing itself, when it is not looking at anything will see a light, not a distinct light in something different from itself, but suddenly appearing, alone by itself in independent purity”.¹⁰ So just by unseeing anything else the soul will reach to the vision of the Good. The soul, returning from all objects of knowledge and seeing, must learn to see and to know in another way. This idea is central for the “way of negation”: just by unknowing – i.e. by unknowing the creation – can someone reach to the knowledge of the transcendent.¹¹

Knowing by unknowing the One expresses the fact that this knowledge is in no way comparable or translatable with any form of knowledge which the common man

¹ Ibid., 6.7.34.13; 36.18; 5.3.17.29; 5.5.7.35; 6.9.9.60-10.2. Cf. Hadot, “Neoplatonist Spirituality – Plotinus and Porphyry”, 245.

² Ibid., 4.4.2.26.

³ Ibid., 6.7.34.13-14 Cf. de Andia, *Henosis*, 7.

⁴ Ibid., 6.9.9.39; cf. Ibid. 6.7.34.3 and 14.

⁵ Ibid., 6.7.22.1-36.

⁶ Ibid., 6.7.31.11.

⁷ Ibid., 6.7.34.1-8.

⁸ Ibid., 6.9.11.50.

⁹ Ibid., 6.7.32.24-28. Cf. Hadot, “Neoplatonist Spirituality – Plotinus and Porphyry”, 245–246.

¹⁰ Ibid., 5.5.7.31-34

¹¹ Cf. Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 145.

is accustomed in day to day life – whether it is practical or philosophical.¹ The idea of knowing through unknowing claims a pivotal place in the guidance of the mystic towards the One, and the fact that Plotinus emphasizes an essential unknowing, surely does not equal with the admission of “absolute ignorance” concerning the One, by which any hope for knowledge is abolished. B. Schomakers² outlines a double-faceted faceted typology of “knowing by unknowing” in Plotinus. In the first instance, it could be defined as ἀφαίρεσις – which does not ultimately presupposes ignorance or the unknowing of all things, but rather a certain type of unknowing – viz. that of rejecting all familiar concepts and all attempts to reach the One through them.³ Secondly, unknowing may symbolize also the final unification which follows ἀφαίρεσις: in this situation, the soul – “seeing by unseeing” – receives and totally experiences the One, giving itself to it and being confiscated by it.

Once the simplicity is created and the presence of the One is felt, the Soul feels an enormous tension, because it desires to come closer to the One, but, as Plotinus relates, from that moment we must not follow it, but we must stay calm and wait until the One turns up, as the sun does in the horizon.⁴ The subjective passivity which describes the experience of the One itself introduces a new type of unknowing – which is even higher than the unknowing of ἀφαίρεσις. For the soul gives itself to the One, it is filled by the amazement of its presence. Here he sees by unseeing; here at stake is another kind of vision: that of being the One – the only desire to be reached; here there are not two, but a fusion takes place.⁵ The favourite Plotinian metaphor – which also appears in many Dionysian instances – is that of illumination or rather that of the fact of being filled with light and of becoming identical with it. There isn't anything in the Soul but the shining One.⁶

In the unity of the soul with the Good, the soul is restored to the state that was before turning up from the Good. Nonetheless, the soul cannot stay for long in the experience of unity, “because one has not yet totally come out of this world”:⁷ “the self glorified, full of intelligible light – but rather itself pure light – weightless, floating free, having become – but rather being a god; act on fire then, but the fire seems to go out if one is weighed down again.”⁸ The human experience of the One is is one of absence and presence, for we are sometimes risen to the stage of experiencing the unity with the One, and we know it, while, other times, we are deprived of its presence and we don't know it. As Deirdre Carabine⁹ explains, in the *Enneades*, this dialectic has the tendency of operating on two levels.

Firstly, from a metaphysical perspective, the One is everywhere and nowhere; it is neither limited, nor unlimited; it is either in all things and still in none of them;

¹ Cf. Schomakers, “Knowing through Unknowing”, 41.

² See Ibid., 34–41.

³ See Ibid., 37–38.

⁴ Ibid., 5.5.8.1–7.

⁵ Cf. Ibid., 6.9.11.22–25 and 6.9.10.12–13.

⁶ Ibid., 6.9.4.17–21 and 6.7.36. Cf. Schomakers, “Knowing through Unknowing”, 39.

⁷ Ibid., 6.9.10.1–2

⁸ Ibid., 6.9.9.57–60

⁹ See Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 146–147.

it comprises everything without being itself comprised; it is simple and it is still not simple; it is the Shape without shape; and the unity without parts; the multiple but still beyond all multiplicity. On short: all the things are and aren't the One:¹ it may be affirmed that all things are One, as It is present in them as their source; on the other hand, they aren't the One, because the One cannot be any of the things into which its power is poured.²

On the second level of dialectic, operative in the *Enneades*, the One is both present and absent, not only through the metaphysical manifestation of itself, but also in terms of its presence, as It exists in the universe, as it exists in itself: It is neither far, nor close, neither here, nor there.³

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The tension produced by the dialectical understanding of the One, in the *Enneades*, was to become an important part of subsequent negative theology. By this, Plotinus positions itself at the beginning of a tradition that took over Plato's dialectic, as it was applied in *Parmenides*, bestowing to it a new meaning, one with strong theological connotations concerning the nature of the first principle – the One.⁴

¹ Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.5.2 and 5.3.12.

² Cf. *Ibid.*, 6.4.3.

³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 5.5.9; 6.4.2; 6.4.3 and 6.9.4.

⁴ E.g., in Dionysius the Areopagite, God is all things and still neither of things; It is both manifest and hidden. See *De divinis nominibus* II.11; V.10 and V.11.