

Unio Intellectualis? A Response to Beierwaltes on *Unio Magica*

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I am flattered that Professor Werner Beierwaltes—whose lifetime of scholarship on Neoplatonism I greatly admire—considered my two-part article on the ritual origins of Plotinian mysticism worthy of an entire postscript of critical comments in a recent publication.¹ However, I respectfully demur from both the general thrust and several details of his critique. Most importantly, many of his objections simply repeat without argument, and thus reinforce, the very dichotomies that I had originally intended to call into question. I would therefore like to respond to his objections.

1. To begin, Beierwaltes has apparently neglected my discussion of the historical semantics of the category of “theurgy”: an issue comprising one of the fundamental theoretical points of Part II. Thus he asks rhetorically whether, if my thesis is correct, Plotinus would have considered theurgy to be in competition with philosophy, or whether he would anticipate Iamblichus in elevating theurgy above “contemplation” (*theôria*); and, if the latter, how this might be reconciled with Plotinus’ explicit statement at IV.4[28].44.1–2 that “only *theôria* remains unenchantable (*agoêteutos*).”² Here Beierwaltes persists in anachronistically retrojecting the distinction between *theôria* and *theourgia* back onto Plotinus himself. In the original articles I went to great lengths to argue that (1) neither Plotinus nor subsequent theurgists would have confused *goêteia* (sorcery or black magic), which they universally rejected, with theurgy (or to be more precise, terminologically speaking, with the ritual practices that later came to be called *theourgia*, *hieratikê*, or *telestikê*);³ but also, more

1. W. Beierwaltes, “Plotins philosophische Mystik und ihre Bedeutung für das Christentum,” 81–95 in P. Schäfer (ed.), *Wege mystischer Gotteserfahrung / Mystical Approaches to God* [Schriften des Historischen Kollegs Kolloquien 65], (München: Oldenbourg, 2006) [=PPM], responding (in the Postscriptum, pp. 93–95) to Z. Mazur, “*Unio Magica*, Part I: On the Magical Origins of Plotinus’ Mysticism,” *Dionysius* 21 (2003): 23–52 [=UM1], and “*Unio Magica*, Part II: Plotinus, Theurgy, and the Question of Ritual,” *Dionysius* 22 (2004): 29–56 [=UM2].

2. PPM, 94.

3. UM2, 29–38.

importantly, that (2) any firm conceptual dichotomy between theurgy and “contemplative” philosophy only arose, historically speaking, after Plotinus’ time, in the debates between Plotinus’ immediate followers and among subsequent generations.⁴ In other words, Plotinus himself does not concern himself with theurgy explicitly (if in fact he does not) not so much because he disapproved of it as because “theurgy” had not yet emerged, at least in his own thought-world, as a category distinct from philosophy.⁵ My point was that the precise conceptual distinction between theurgy and theoretical philosophy was first delineated only in the debate between Porphyry and Iamblichus, who were in more or less tacit competition for the legitimate succession of Plotinus (and thence ultimately Plato). Porphyry attacked Iamblichus (in his *Letter to Anebo*) for what he perceived to be the latter’s un-Plotinian Achilles’ heel, namely, his emphasis upon exterior ritual practices. In his response, Iamblichus attempted to deflect the criticism—and also to subtly deprecate Porphyry—by making a rhetorical distinction between philosophical, theological, and theurgical modes of discourse, in ascending order of eminence, and thus the *theôria*—*theourgia* dichotomy was born.⁶ This division then persisted among Iamblichus’ successors (both those in favor of and those opposed to “theurgy”) over the course of several centuries, and was repeatedly but erroneously fathered onto Plotinus. As a case in point, Beierwaltes adduces the oft-cited passage of Olympiodorus to the effect that while Plotinus and Porphyry held “philosophy” in greater esteem, others, such as Iamblichus, Syrianus, Proclus, “and all the theurgists” preferred “theurgy” (*hiêratikê*).⁷ As I already argued in Part II, Olympiodorus—if he was in fact the author of the *In Platonis Phaedonem*—was writing at least two hundred years after Plotinus himself, and therefore this passage cannot be considered reliable evidence of anything except the longevity of Porphyrian propaganda. However, if this treatise is instead ascribed, as now seems to be the consensus,⁸ to Damascius (thus some three centuries after Plotinus), we know for

4. *UM2* 38–42.

5. A similar point concerning the subsequent century is made by Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Press, 1978), 60: “It is only too easy for the modern scholar to dismiss such [philosophical] circles as having blurred the boundaries between magic and philosophy. To do this is to import modern criteria into a peculiarly Late Antique debate, and so to miss its point. For the distinction between rational philosophy and irrational magic, while present, was never central to the debate. What was hotly debated was the difference between legitimate and illegitimate forms of supernatural power.”

6. Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* I.2 [7.3–5]. On Iamblichus’ role in the creation of this distinction, see D.P. Taormina, *Jamblique, critique de Plotin et Porphyre* (Paris: Vrin, 1999), 133–58.

7. *PPM*, 94, citing Olymp. *In Platonis Phaedonem*, ed. Norvin, 123.3–6. Perhaps he failed to notice my discussion of this text, *UM2*, 38–39?

8. See L.G. Westerink, *The Greek Commentaries on Plato’s Phaedo, vol. II: Damascius* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1977).

a fact that the Athenian philosopher himself considered “theurgy” inferior to “philosophy,”⁹ and would himself have been motivated to emphasize the putatively anti-theurgical reputation of the venerable Plotinus to justify his own position. This, then, says nothing whatsoever about Plotinus’ own attitude towards a category which did not exist (in any meaningful sense) during his time.

The crucial issue, therefore, is not Plotinus’ attitude towards “theurgy” vis-à-vis “philosophy” (since the dichotomy was not yet salient), but rather the precise nature of his own mystical praxis. Yet here, however, Beierwaltes exaggerates and dismissively caricaturizes my view of Plotinus (as that of a “*magicus sive theurgicus*”),¹⁰ apparently having failed to take note of the taxonomic discussion running throughout Part II. He therefore claims I have neglected the differences between religious ritual and philosophical praxis and minimized Plotinus’ “scepticism” with respect to the former. Yet as I have already argued at length, not only is the categorical dichotomy itself anachronistic, but more importantly, Plotinus’ putative scepticism is more apparent than real. To the extent that Plotinus does seem to reject ritual (though even this is doubtful),¹¹ it is not because he rejects ritual practice in itself—on account of its “unphilosophical” nature or its putative “irrationality”—but because of the exterior or material nature of the rites or theurgical tokens (*sumbola* or *sunthêmata*) in question.¹² Specifically, Plotinus’ own concentric henology implies that only inner, or noetic, *sumbola*, would be sufficiently unified—or “one-like”—to effect the ultimate conjunction with the One. What is more, even the distinction between inner and material *sunthêmata* fails to differentiate Plotinian praxis from theurgy, since both types also occur in those sources generally classified as theurgical.¹³

9. Damascius, *Philosophical History* fr. 4A Athanassiadi, apud *Suda* II.613, 14; Photius *Bibl. cod.* 242, 232.

10. *PPM*, 95.

11. Contrary to Porphyry’s apparently anti-theurgical views in the *Letter to Anebo*, his biography of Plotinus instead seems to emphasize the master’s acceptance of ritual praxis, e.g., in the well-known account of the (patently theurgical) evocation of Plotinus’ guardian *daimôn* (*VPlot.* 10). Even Porphyry’s anecdote about Plotinus’ refusal to accompany Amelius to the temples to make sacrifices at the New Moon, which has often been cited as evidence for Plotinus’ rejection of ritual, hints at the exact opposite; when Plotinus responds that those gods rather should come to him—perhaps, as I suggested in *UMI*, 46–47, a reference to magical rituals that summon the gods to the practitioner’s house—Porphyry is baffled by master’s “exalted utterance”: hardly a suggestion that Plotinus was dismissive of ritual praxis itself. On this see also R.M. van den Berg, “Plotinus’ Attitude to Traditional Cult: a Note on Porphyry VP 10,” *Ancient Philosophy* 19 (1999): 345–60.

12. Esp. *UM2*, 52–54.

13. Consider, for example, Iamblichus’ apparent acceptance of intrapsychic *sunthêmata* at *De mysteriis* VII.4 [255.13–256.2], trans. from E. Clarke, J. Dillon, and J. Hershbell, *Iamblichus: On the Mysteries* (Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 297: “And, moreover, we preserve in their entirety the

2. Professor Beierwaltes also complains that I have not made a sufficient case that Plotinus' mysticism could not have been simply derived from Platonic source-texts such as the *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, *Republic*, and *7th Letter*.¹⁴ The issue of Plotinus' "sources" is, of course, a thorny one. A cursory glance at the *index fontium* of Henry-Schwyzler would suggest that one need look no further than a number of Platonic dialogues as well as Aristotelian or occasionally Stoic treatises. Yet I am not alone in thinking that Plotinus' allusive use of Platonic *language* in support of his own ideas is primarily a result of his professed scholastic "identity"—that of academic Platonist—and is no guarantee of the actual nature or origin of the ideas themselves.¹⁵ Nor am I alone in seeing his conception of mystical union as more or less unique in the academic-philosophical thought of his time¹⁶ (in his own work, Beierwaltes himself has emphasized the paradigmatic aspect of Plotinian union). Indeed, Plotinus' robust notion of union with the One is in no way compelled (or even suggested, really) by Plato or by the subsequent Academic tradition,¹⁷ although, of course, one may struggle to find ostensible Platonic antecedents for just about every aspect of Plotinian mysticism. This a-historical project of harmonization—one endemic to the entire Platonic tradition—is a task for the constructive philosopher and not the intellectual historian. Still, I should emphasize that I was not so much seeking the *Quellen*, strictly speaking, of Plotinus' mysticism (since he is undoubtedly a brilliantly original thinker, not merely a doxographer or *philologos*), as I was trying to discover the broader conceptual framework in which to place it.

mystical and arcane images (*eikona*) of the gods in our soul; and we raise our soul up through these towards the gods and, as far as is possible, when it has been elevated, we experience union with the gods."

14. *PPM*, 95.

15. Thus, for example, E.R. Dodds, "Tradition and Personal Achievement in the Philosophy of Plotinus," *Journal of Roman Studies* 50 (1960): 1–7, esp. p. 1: "Formally, but only formally, the philosophy of Plotinus is an interpretation of Plato; substantially, I should call it an attempt to solve the spiritual problems of his own day in terms of traditional Greek rationalism." Also, p. 2: "These Platonic texts are not the true starting points of his philosophy: he does not believe in the One because he has found it in the *Parmenides*; on the contrary, he finds it in the *Parmenides* because he already believes in it." See also A.H. Armstrong, "Tradition, Reason and Experience in the Thought of Plotinus," in *Plotino e il Neoplatonismo in Oriente e in Occidente* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1974), 171–219, and the conclusions of J. Trouillard, *La Purification Plotinienne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955), 204–05.

16. Thus A.H. Armstrong, in the *Cambridge History of Later Greek & Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1967), 236. More recently, in a detailed study of *Enn. VI.9[9]*, P. Meijer, *Plotinus on the Good or the One* (*Enneads VI,9: An Analytical Commentary*) (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1992), 332–33, has noted the novelty of Plotinus' conception of mystical union with the One, speculating (correctly, in my view) that he had derived it from contemporaneous Gnosticism.

17. See *UMI*, 27–30.

This framework would have given meaning to Plotinus' experiential quest for ultimate reality, a quest that he nevertheless expressed in terms of the academic Platonism with which he so strongly identified.

3. Underlying the entirety of Beierwaltes' critique lurks the fundamental anxiety that the admission of a ritual substrate beneath Plotinus' mystical praxis would somehow diminish the genuinely *philosophical* quality of his thought. Thus, for example, the mystical union that is actually attained, in his view, through "the transition of philosophical reflection, from discursive and intuitive, timeless thought, into the no-longer-thinking *Henosis*" would be simply *replaced*—according to his tendentious interpretation of my argument—with "theurgischen Immediatismus" and "rituellen Funktionalismus."¹⁸ He thus appears to have taken me to mean that "philosophical thought" ("philosophische Denken") and "ritual" are mutually exclusive, despite the entire section of Part II that I devoted to the problematization and eventual dissolution of this dichotomy.¹⁹ This oversimplification of my argument also seems to have been influenced by his tacit acceptance of the traditional Frazerian definition of magic as the "automatic" manipulation or *ex operatio operato* "coercion" of the gods, as opposed to the more reverent receptivity of "genuine" religion, or, more aptly in this case, as opposed to the more laborious cerebrations of "real" philosophy: in other words, he bases this particular criticism precisely upon the false distinction I was trying to deconstruct.²⁰ For there is nothing either facile or automatic about the kind of inner visualization technique I propose that Plotinus employed at the higher stages of the ascent—no more automatic, that is, than the remarkably intricate guided meditations of, for example, Tibetan Buddhism or Tantric yoga.

Furthermore, as much I would agree that the Plotinian ascent is in some sense a return towards the very origin of *Nous* itself, Plotinus' hypernoetic praxis cannot simply be reduced to the mere apex of discursive cognition or to some exceptional mode of philosophical dialectic. What Plotinus describes must be much more radical; thus, according to his repeated injunctions, one must entirely empty one's mind of the formal relations one had hitherto struggled to achieve, and reject any activity—or at least any *ordinary* activity—of *Nous* in order to attain even the penultimate stage of ascent,²¹

18. *PPM*, 94–95.

19. *UM2*, 42–44.

20. See esp. *UM2*, 40 n. 43.

21. E.g., Plot. V.3[49].13.33: "If you wish to grasp the solitary and alone, you will not think(!) (*ou noêsis*)"; see also VI.9[9].11.11: *oude logos oude tis noêsis*; V.5[32].6.20–22: *ho theasasthai thelôn to epekeina tou noêtou to noêtôn pan apeis theasetai*; 7.22–23: *boti esti nous, houtô blepei, hote blepei, tôi heautou mê nou*; VI.7[38].35.7: *epên d' ekeimon idéi ton theon, panta êdé [ta noêta]*

at which point one attains unity with a transcendental self possessing both positive (cataphatic) and negative (apophatic) qualities that are more akin to the One than to the hypostatic Intellect.²² It is only this transcendental modality of the self—a self beyond any kind of “thinking”—that can be dissolved in the ecstatic union with the One. Undoubtedly this process entails *at least* what Beierwaltes has described as an “aktiver Übersteig des Denkens über sich selbst”²³ or an “inneren Aufstiegs des Denken hin auf dessen Selbst-Überstieg in eine Henosis mit seinem eigenen Grund,”²⁴ but even if all this propaedeutic “Denken” is necessary, it is not sufficient. Beierwaltes’ emphatically cerebral language departs from that of Plotinus himself, who more typically describes the hypernoetic phase of contemplative ecstasy with photic, geometric, and haptic or even erotic metaphors—if these may indeed be described as metaphors—precisely in order to indicate, as Beierwaltes himself would undoubtedly concede, the transcendence of *noësis* itself. Whether one really should subsume the totality of this nondiscursive and aphairctic praxis within the curiously un-Plotinian category of “Denken” is primarily a question of semantics (unless, of course, the latter is understood as “cognition” in the broadest sense), but it is almost certainly a stretch to subsume the final stages of Plotinus’ mystical introversion unproblematically into the category of *rational* philosophy, as Beierwaltes repeatedly attempts throughout his works.²⁵ Indeed, it is intriguing to observe the discomfort of a scholar intent on keeping Plotinian mysticism demurely within the contours of rationality—thus as far as possible from any kind of “schamanenhafter Trance” or “rein irrationalen Gefühlsexzessen”²⁶—when confronted with Plotinus’ own insistence upon the transcendence and abdication of all rationality at the apex of the ascent.²⁷ As I tried to show in *Unio Magica*, the structure

aphiësin; 35.33: *hê de psuchê [horâi] hoion sugcheasa kai aphanisasa menonta ton en autêi noun*; 35.44: *oude nous, hoti mêde noei....noei de oud’ ekeino, hoti oude noei*; etc., etc.

22. Compare, for example, the formlessness of the transcendental self at the penultimate stage of ascent at I.6[1].9.16–25 with the apophatic description of the One at VI.7[38].32–34.

23. W. Beierwaltes, *Denken des Einen: Studien zur neuplatonischen Philosophie und ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Klostermann, 1985) [=DDE], 141.

24. *PPM*, 95.

25. E.g., *DDE*, 126–28, 140, ff., 141 n. 46; *PPM*, 86; idem, *Das wahre Selbst* (Frankfurt-am-Main, Klostermann, 2001), 86 and n. 5.

26. *DDE*, 140.

27. Compare Plotinus’ language of ecstasy (e.g. VI.9[9].11.23), insanity and drunkenness (e.g., VI.7[38].35.24–27), sexual intercourse (e.g., VI.9[9].4.18–19) and the abdication of intellection (examples in n. 22 *infra*) with Beierwaltes’ attempt to minimize Plotinus’ rejection of *noësis* at the final stages of ascent in his *Selbsterkenntnis und Erfahrung der Einheit. Plotins Enneade V.3: Texte, Übersetzung, Interpretation, Erläuterungen* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Klostermann, 1991), 149: “Negation des Denkens ist also nicht als ‘privatio’ zu verstehen, sondern im Sinne eines ‘nihil per excellentiam sive infinitatem’: ‘Über-Denken’ als Grund vom Denken.” He thus

of the final stages of Plotinus' ascent—precisely where ordinary intellection itself must be rejected—shares far more with contemporaneous ritual praxis than with conventional philosophical contemplation, and consequently this structure may best be understood with at least some reference to its religio-historical context.

Some resistance to my thesis is to be expected on the part of a philosopher steeped in the traditions of the discipline, and especially on the part of one who, like Beierwaltes, is as adept in modern thought as in that of antiquity. A common tendency among historians of philosophy has been to retroject a modern conception of philosophical practice onto ancient thought and then to construct a relatively pure lineage for this tradition in isolation from its broader cultural context. "Philosophy" is thus defined so that even when a suggestion of "extra-philosophical" influence—itself an anachronistic distinction, in my view—cannot be refuted on purely evidentiary grounds, such influence is dismissed categorically as irrelevant to the (now) artificially-bounded domain of study. Nevertheless, if one leaves aside the historical question, my conception of Plotinus' praxis does not differ from Beierwaltes' own view as much as he imagines. A central point of my argument was that the category of "inner ritual" could include a kind of deliberate control of consciousness that shares much, at least superficially, with philosophical reflection, although it follows a specific, pre-established (i.e., ritual) pattern that is often simply an interiorization of some exterior practice and is not dependent upon discursive ratiocination.²⁸ An explicit example of this kind of interiorized or inner ritual may be found among Renaissance Neoplatonists directly or indirectly influenced by Plotinus himself. Thus, for example, Giordano Bruno transformed the complex mnemotechnics of the so-called *ars memoriae* into phantasmic images of celestial and metaphysical entities—reminiscent of Plotinus' visualization and subsequent *aphairesis* of the cosmic spheres in V.8[31]9.1–16—that were intended to function as inner theurgical statues and thereby to induce union with God.²⁹ Yet this type of inner ritual may also include the method of inward self-reflection and return towards the very

shares with a number of scholars the tendency to overemphasize the merely intellectual aspect of Plotinian union despite Plotinus' own explicit statements to the contrary; thus also P. Hadot, "Les niveaux de conscience dans les états mystiques selon Plotin," *Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique* 2–3 (1980): "Ce que nous appelons l'expérience mystique selon Plotin est donc le mode de connaissance propre à la Pensée de la Pensée....". A more nuanced view is expressed by J.-M. Narbonne, "Le Savoir d'au-delà du savoir chez Plotin," *Metaphysik und Religion: zur Signatur des spätantiken Denkens*, T. Kobusch and M. Erler, eds. (München, Saur, 2002), 477–90.

28. *UM2*, 42–44, 45–52.

29. In *De Umbris idearum* (1582) and *De imaginum, signorum et idearum compositione* (1591), on which see F. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1966), and idem, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1964). The comparison merits further attention elsewhere.

“Grund” of thought itself that Beierwaltes correctly attributes to Plotinus.³⁰ Ironically, however, I would suggest that even this seemingly “respectable” form of reflexive contemplation has “extra-philosophical” origins as well. I have already suggested in Part II that Plotinus’ phantasmic construction of the transcendental self resembles the theurgical use of inner *sunthêmata*, but more importantly, as I will demonstrate in my forthcoming doctoral dissertation, Plotinus’ mystical self-reversion itself derived from a tradition of contemplative ascension techniques developed by contemporaneous Sethian Gnostics in his immediate milieu.³² Presumably Professor Beierwaltes will still object that even if I am right, Plotinus, like Plato, was adopting ritual language as a metaphor for more or less ordinary, if heightened, philosophical reflection. In response, I would amiably challenge him, or anyone sharing this view, to attempt what I confess I have been hitherto incapable of achieving: namely, a full-fledged union with the One through philosophical cogitation alone. If the experiment is successful, I will readily concede the point.

30. As Beierwaltes notes, *PPM*, 95, I never made this an “Oppositionsobjekte.” Interestingly, this too has a reflection in Bruno’s doctrine of noetic “contraction,” brilliantly described by L. Catana, *The Concept of Contraction in Giordano Bruno’s Philosophy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

31. I have presented a preliminary sketch of these ideas in an unpublished paper entitled “How Can One Attain the One-Beyond-Being? Reflections on the Ultimate Stage of Plotinian and Gnostic Mystical Ascent,” at the Platonism and Neoplatonism Section of the American Academy of Religion conference in San Antonio, November 2004. My dissertation proposal is available online at <http://home.uchicago.edu/~ajmazur/>.